

The North Atlantic-Russian Conflict: Impact on Regional Security?



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As the current regional crises continue, the Atlantic-Russian conflict intensifies. While Russia seeks to strengthen its presence in the region, in North Africa in particular, NATO sees the Russian policy as a challenge, especially in view of its strategic partnerships in the region. The NATO's partnerships include the Mediterranean Dialogue Initiative 1994 with seven Middle Eastern countries and the Istanbul Initiative 2004 which was joined by four Gulf states. Both of NATO and Russia have strategic, economic and political interests in these regions.

There are many signs that give an indication of the intensity of the Atlantic-Russian conflict. The former commander of the UK Royal Navy Admiral Alan West said that "the tensions with Russia now are similar to the situation that preceded the outbreak of the First World War". In my opinion, the conflict between the two sides continues to be "controlled". Keeping conflicts under control is a characteristic of the policies of defense organizations and states even during the Cold War era. This argument is confirmed by some assessments of the Atlantic Council, a prominent US think tank and research center, which stressed that "in the Western-Russian conflict in general, war is not an effective deterrent". Russia has seven armies near the borders of European countries and more military hardware than the NATO forces. This invariably requires modernization of the latter's forces. Nevertheless, although Russia has the ability to launch decisive and rapid strikes to European countries for a period not expected to exceed a few days - according to the same report - the NATO still has the ability to conduct long-term combat operations.

Notwithstanding the importance of the above, the Atlantic-Russian conflict will not reach the level of direct military confrontation for three reasons. First: the availability of a mechanism for dialogue between the two sides, the NATO - Russia Council (NRC) which was established in 2002 and holds regular meetings despite the tense relations between the two sides. Kay Bailey Hutchison, US NATO envoy to NATO, said on January 16, 2019 that "NATO hopes to hold a new meeting of the Russia-NATO Council soon." Even in times of severe tension in relations, the work of NRC may be suspended, but the Council itself remained intact. Second, despite the virtual war scenarios that usually highlight the relative strengths of each side, one should not forget the fact that the military expenditure of all NATO countries combined is ten times that of the Russians, and third, the possibility of a nuclear confrontation between the two sides remains very unlikely. Despite the fact that the Russian 2000 Military Doctrine does not rule out the possibility of the use of its nuclear arsenal if the Russian Federation or its armed forces were to face a major serious threat, past experience indicates that reciprocal nuclear deterrence will prevent the scenario of entering into a disastrous war that will assure the mutual destruction of both sides.

Mutual deterrence is very important in understanding the context and future implications of this conflict. However, there are two factors that fuel such conflict: the first is what can be seen as a relative decline in the influence of the United States in certain areas of conflict as a result of reducing the US military presence in such places. This means that NATO may feel compelled to be more involved in those areas, which in turn could possibly lead to the return of the cold war with Russia. The second factor is the arising of tension in US-Turkish relations from time to time at a time when the Turkish-Russian relations witness remarkable improvements. This may be exploited by Russia to weaken the NATO.

Based on the above, the question that follows is "is there any implications of that conflict on our region?". I think that the answer to this question depends on three factors:

First, the developments in regional security issues in general, and the Syrian crisis in particular in light of the decision of the United States to withdraw its forces from Syria. Furthermore, Turkey's attempt to establish a buffer zone in Syria requires it to coordinate its moves with Russia especially after the Russian decision to provide Syria with the S-300 missile defense system. Russia also supplied Turkey, a NATO member, with the advanced S-400 missile system. All these developments represent a challenge to NATO.

The second factor, the security threats, especially the danger of the resurgence of terrorist organizations in the region and the support that NATO can provide to its partners, whether in terms of providing information and intelligence or the continuing of its participation in the Global Coalition Against ISIS after President Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria.

The third: the new arrangements for regional security in the Middle East in general. Details of such arrangements are not clear yet, except for announced proposals, including the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). Though it may offer opportunities to develop collective frameworks to counter threats to the region's security, MESA will represent a challenge to both Russia and NATO, both of which have significant partnerships in the Middle East, the Arab region and the Gulf. Therefore, if the MESA proposal is translated into concrete ideas and structures, it will lead

to increased Russian-Atlantic competition in the Middle East region in general and the Arab region and the Gulf in particular.

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