II. Policy Notes

NATO’s Role in Counter-Terrorism

by Juliette Bird

Abstract

NATO's contribution to the global approach to Counter Terrorism was expressed publically in the NATO Policy Guidelines on Counter Terrorism endorsed at the 2012 NATO summit. The evolution of NATO's approach is described and NATO's current contribution is detailed, including recent examples of activities that reflect progress against the Counter Terrorism Policy Guidelines. Looking ahead, beyond agreed roles for NATO, the Alliance's relevance to work against Foreign Terrorist Fighters and to Countering Violent Extremism is examined. Finally, new ways are suggested to assist the UN and use NATO's existing assets more flexibly in the field of Counter Terrorism. Adoption of these would, however, require a change in Allies' ambition for the use of NATO in Counter Terrorism and hence a change in mandate.

Keywords: NATO, Counterterrorism, United Nations.

Introduction

In today's febrile climate where terrorism has become a topic of importance, not only for terrorism ‘experts’ but for the average citizens of many countries, there has been a huge amount of soul searching and summit summoning in search of an adequate response. Terrorism, in addition to being subject to what has been referred to as the ‘politics of labelling’[1], is not monolithic; it has no single trigger or context and its manifestations are many and varied. Thus, as the United Nations' Global Counter Terrorism Strategy[2] recognises, there are roles for a broad spectrum of actors in taking action against it. The perpetrators of terrorism and those that support terrorism as a legitimate strategy are the base level actors who must be countered. The responsibility to monitor, engage, deter or punish such individuals—as nationals of particular countries and members of specific communities, lies predominantly with nations—whether these actions are taken through governmental bodies or civil society. The range of counter terrorism relevant roles is wide and was well described in the 2011 U.S. National Strategy for Counter Terrorism which speaks of the need to harness ‘every tool’ of national power.[3] The idea is refined in the 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy which counsels use of the military, of diplomacy, development, science and technology and people-to-people relationships within a long term perspective.[4] The military are an asset to be used within a coherent, comprehensive approach whilst remaining conscious that, as President Obama underlined in 2013, “force alone cannot make us safe.”[5] In addition to tasks within all national fields, the UN strategy also sets out tasks for organisations at the regional, multinational and international level and here, as a political/military actor, NATO has a part to play within the global approach.

NATO's Historic Involvement in Counter Terrorism Activities

There is little residual public awareness that NATO, a brand memorable for its three Musketeer-like approach of ‘all for one and one for all’, has invoked its Collective Defence response under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty only once, in 2001, as a reaction to the ‘9/11’ terrorist attacks perpetrated against the United States. Allies clearly believed in this key instance that NATO could act usefully in the field of Counter Terrorism
Prior to 2001 NATO had generally considered terrorism as an issue of marginal relevance to the Alliance. In 1991 the Strategic Concept[6]—the in-depth review that Allies take every 10 years or so of the current security picture and the intended Allied response—mentioned terrorism as a valid threat but effectively placed it at the bottom of NATO's 'things-to-do' list.[7] By 1999, the time of the next review, terrorism had become a topic of generally higher profile, due to the activities of a variety of groups in Allied nations and beyond.[8] In the 1999 Strategic Concept[9] terrorism was placed at the top of the list of non-military threats of relevance to NATO[10] and the potential for terrorist use of non-conventional weapons was noted.[11] However, no move was made to put in place any guidance as to what NATO's own role might be in the face of such a challenge and neither civilian nor military staffs were organised to focus on the topic.

Thus, when the twin towers fell and an attack directed from abroad was officially deemed to have taken place, fulfilling the conditions necessary for an invocation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty[12], NATO had no official doctrine or expertise to call on. Article 5 calls for Allies to take 'action deemed necessary' in response to an attack upon one of their number. This does not equate to military action unless specifically called for. In this case the United States required back filling of its air surveillance capability having deployed its own assets to the Afghanistan/Pakistan border area. NATO's response was Operation Eagle Assist whereby AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System – i.e. surveillance planes) assets of other nations were made available to fill the more routine roles for the United States. In parallel, there was a need to ensure that terrorist groups did not obtain new and more lethal capabilities so Operation Active Endeavour, involving maritime patrols of the Mediterranean to prevent shipments of arms and non-conventional materials, was launched in 2002.[13]

The first NATO summit after the declaration of Article 5, held in Prague in 2002, officially put in place the Military Concept for Defence Against Terrorism[14], a document somewhat hurriedly drawn up after September 11, 2001. In Prague and at the next summit (held in Istanbul) Allies also took measures in other areas where NATO could contribute to the CT effort; these included enhanced intelligence sharing and CBRN efforts, new outreach to partners to cooperate on terrorism, establishment of a Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit and identification of a budget to promote capability building against asymmetric threats (the Defence Against Terrorism Programme of Work).[15] New initiatives in Civil Emergency Planning, crisis management and Special Forces followed.

If a search is conducted for references to 'terrorism' in NATO's internal documents from 2001-2005, it is difficult to tell which parts of the NATO structure led on the issue; it was the hot topic and most sections/divisions wrote on it, confident they had something relevant to offer. Thus it was that many of NATO's core activities were often labelled ‘CT’. NATO undoubtedly contributed useful activities to the international approach over a 10-year period but, when a review of NATO's CT posture was called for in 2011[16], it was clear that coherent action was needed to determine where NATO could add value.

**The Refocusing Process**

By 2011 the terrorism context had changed significantly from that of 2001. Even before Usama bin Laden was removed from the scene on May 2, 2011, Al Qaida was already viewed as a greatly reduced opponent. The Al Qaida ideology was rightly recognised as an ongoing threat but its manifestations had reduced in scale, particularly in Allied nations, and were increasingly seen to be tied to local situations and perhaps of somewhat less international concern. There was a feeling that terrorism might have been contained sufficiently to be lived with[17]; in Iraq, Zarqawi was dead and full-blown war was over so, despite continued
violence from a variety of terrorist groups many of whom took some inspiration from the AQ ideology, and there was a tendency to look with hope upon the evolving changes in the Middle East and North Africa.

Similarly on the international CT scene, whilst little progress had been made on a universal legal definition of terrorism, the UN had added to the range of individual instruments under the General Assembly and the Security Council addressing specific aspects of terrorism an overarching approach to be implemented by all. In 2006 the UN Global Counter Terrorism Strategy (UNGCTS) was agreed and set a framework for nations and organisations to work within. An April 2011 NATO Defense College paper usefully summarised NATO's need to move forward in the field of CT and discussed some options available.

Under the UNGCTS tasks are divided across four pillars. Two of these, ‘measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism’ and ‘measures to ensure respect for Human Rights for all and the Rule of Law as the fundamental basis of the fight against terrorism’ have little to do with NATO's mandate or ability but the other two, ‘measures to prevent and combat terrorism’ and ‘measures to build states’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism’, require actions that speak directly to NATO's strengths (such as aspects of CBRN response and protection, denial of safe havens, sharing of information and best practices and protection of vulnerable targets). Here NATO, with its unique combination of political and military strengths, can add significant value.

So it was within this context that in December 2011 Allies considered the first draft of a policy accompanied by a staff document providing a comparative analysis of how the European Union, Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe contributed to the UNGCTS and where NATO could add particular strengths and expertise. By early 2012 agreement had been reached on NATO's CT Policy Guidelines and these were endorsed by Heads of State and Government at the Chicago Summit in May 2012. Extensive comment on the Guidelines was published later in the year by the U.S. National Defence University.

Allies first put in place three principles for NATO action in the field of CT: whatever it does must be legal and within the UN framework; NATO should support Allies rather than lead CT efforts; and, particularly given the economic climate, NATO should seek to avoid duplication and promote complementarity with nations and with other international organisations. It is perhaps worth setting out the first two principles verbatim:

**Compliance with international law** – NATO continues to act in accordance with international law, the principles of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UN Global CT Strategy, international conventions and protocols against terrorism and relevant UN Resolutions provide the framework for all national and multilateral efforts to combat terrorism, including those conducted by the Alliance.

**NATO's support to Allies** – Individual NATO members have primary responsibility for the protection of their populations and territories against terrorism. Cooperation through NATO can enhance Allies' efforts to prevent, mitigate, respond to and recover from acts of terrorism. NATO, upon request may support these efforts.

The policy focuses Alliance efforts in three main areas:

**Awareness**: ensuring shared awareness of the terrorist threat and vulnerabilities (achieved through consultations (at NATO but also through outreach to experts), enhanced intelligence and information sharing, analysis and assessment).

**Capabilities**: striving for adequate Alliance capabilities to prevent, protect against and respond to
terrorist threats (in accordance with NATO’s level of ambition as defined in Political Guidance).

**Engagement:** continuing to engage with partner countries and other international actors to promote common understanding of the terrorist threat through enhanced consultations and practical cooperation through existing mechanisms. Emphasis is placed on raising awareness, capacity building, civil emergency planning and crisis management.

These pillars could be summarised as: ensuring that Allies (and where possible partners too) share a common view of the threat of terrorism and agree on how to address it – 69 nations (i.e. the 28 NATO Allies and their partners) constitute roughly one third of the world so a common approach can be immensely powerful; ensuring that NATO can continue to conduct its business despite the threat of terrorism (much work has been done in response to requirements derived from operations in theatre, particularly in Afghanistan where terrorist actions against ISAF forces were commonplace); and engaging with partners to push back the geographic boundary of the terrorist threat, beyond the Alliance territory of Europe and North America, by ensuring a common approach and, where possible, sharing NATO’s strengths to build the capacity of others.

Allies concluded the Guidelines with a paragraph on implications for potential future operations:

> NATO will maintain flexibility as to how to counter terrorism, playing a leading or supporting role as required. Allies’ capabilities represent an essential component of a potential response to terrorism. Collective defence remains subject to decision by the North Atlantic Council.

**The Outcome: NATO’s CT Contribution Today**

Since May 2014, NATO has an agreed Action Plan that lists and assigns the tasks flowing from the policy guidance.[23] Examples of actions undertaken regarding each of the pillars over the past two years include:

**Awareness**

Intelligence reporting based on contributions from Allies’ internal, external and military services; sharing of experiences and views with political and intelligence experts from partner countries affected by terrorism: discussions with EU, OSCE and UN CT experts and also with the Global CT Forum whose work in the field of Foreign Terrorist Fighters for the Iraq/Syria theatre is at the cutting edge of international cooperation.

**Capabilities**

Projects supported by the Defence Against Terrorism programme of work respond to requirements identified in theatre against asymmetric threats, e.g. hardening of aircraft against MANPADs[24], biometric identification systems, detection and destruction of Improvised Explosive Devices and associated route clearance procedures. Relevant work has also been done on better preparing military forces for new operational environments – one important aspect of CT for the military is to avoid, inadvertently, creating the next generation of terrorists by insensitive or culturally unaware behaviour. NATO’s Centres of Excellence have been important contributors to many projects, bringing their expertise to bear in areas as diverse as military engineering for route clearance, explosives disposal, cultural familiarisation, network analysis and education on terrorism and how to counter it. A new Centre dedicated to strategic communication should be able to contribute to future communication approaches during operations – this too can be an important aspect of CT for the military.[25]
Engagement

NATO’s links to its partners have grown stronger and more mature since the Partnership Action Plan on Terrorism was put in place in 2002 to promote an exchange on terrorism between NATO and its partners. It should be recalled that cooperation with partners is upon request only, it is not a unilateral outreach from NATO and most certainly is not imposed. With the advent of Individual Partnership Cooperation Programmes that list areas of mutual interest for NATO and each partner, the adoption of the CT Policy Guidelines that identify NATO’s areas of added value in CT and the transformation of partner cooperation mechanisms by the adoption of the Berlin partnership package in April 2011[26], counter terrorism has been mainstreamed into relations with partners. Evidence of this can be seen in the cooperation projects underway or recently completed under both the Science for Peace and Security Programme (SPS) and the Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP). With Egypt, Phase I of a land mine clearance project has recently been completed. This involved a technical review of available solutions, equipment trials, training of personnel and assisted procurement. Phase II, which will enable Egypt to locate deeper mines, is now underway. Iraq has been provided with training on IEDs and explosive disposal and a larger scale approach is currently under consideration. With Mauritania, NATO has a multi-year SPS project to set up a civilian Crisis Management Centre (with associated equipment, communications and training) which will enable effective handling of both natural and man-made disasters anywhere in the country.

On a slightly more academic basis, SPS is supporting a project to review transitions from military operations to civilian-run CT strategies and to draw from these suggestions for the future. Other projects look at radicalisation in the context of military operations (particularly those involving Special Forces’ activity), review developments in CT strategies across North Africa in the wake of transitions from dictatorships, research detection systems for explosives and chemical/biological agents and work with experts on resilience and crowd behaviour to improve crisis response.

Education, training and exercises – as an aspect of standardisation and improved interoperability – are fundamental activities for NATO and are relevant to both Allies and partners. Building partner capacity in defence education is a relatively new approach for NATO but, in addition to the courses provided at NATO School Oberammergau and elsewhere, the DEEP now works to improve teaching skills and curricula. This can include efforts in the field of CT and COIN if and when this is requested by partners. Uzbekistan and Mauritania have both shown interest in being able to educate their personnel in these topics. The first 3-year arrangement with Mauritania has just been completed and was commended both by the defence college (Ecole Nationale de l’Etat Major) and the Office of the Mauritanian Chief of Defence Staff.

NATO’s relationship with the United Nations on CT has become much closer over recent years; CT is now an element of the annual staff talks and the UN is kept abreast of developments in NATO’s Centres of Excellence and of courses available through NATO’s education and training facilities. Working with Allies and partners it is now possible to establish targeted cooperation activities contributing directly to evolving UN requirements. NATO’s expertise in explosive management, Civil Emergency planning, Small Arms and Light Weapons sequestration and destruction, etc., make relevant contributions to UN lines of effort. There is scope for more to be done with both the OSCE and the EU, particularly where NATO’s strengths are complementary. North Africa, the Sahel and Central Asia seem prime opportunities for NATO to offer its expertise, to be delivered through or with existing assets such as the OSCE Border College in Dushanbe or EU projects in the Sahel.[27]
Looking Ahead

The terrorism environment is far from static and major developments over the past two years have had an impact on the Alliance, even though NATO has no new mandate for action in theatres where terrorism is rife. At the Wales Summit in 2014, awareness of the threat from terrorism (given the situation in Syria, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere) pervaded most meetings, although no one session was exclusively focused on the issue. This was reflected in the Summit Declaration[28] which, in addition to condemning the situation in Iraq/Syria and calling for a coordinated international approach, recognised terrorist acts and trafficking across the Sahel-Sahara region as a threat to wider security interests and underlined NATO’s role in fighting terrorism including through military cooperation with partners to build their capacity to face terrorist threats. It noted that partners already work with NATO in combating terrorism and pointed to the inclusion of ‘response to terrorism’ in the Individual Partnership Cooperation Programme with Iraq. Counter terrorism related work (particularly information sharing, education and training, capacity building for crisis management and CBRN preparedness) is relevant to both the Defence Capability Building Initiative and the Readiness Action Plan which were elaborated at the summit.

One additional and important area reflected in the Wales Declaration was the Allies’ commitment to enhance their cooperation in exchanging information on returning foreign fighters. This is a difficult area for the Alliance as most of both the threat and the workload related to returning foreign terrorist fighters is faced by nations themselves. Not only is it predominantly a national role, but it involves the activities of domestic intelligence and law enforcement agencies and civil society mechanisms, none of which are within NATO’s purview. Thus, while nations remain extremely concerned about this terrorist phenomenon, NATO’s role at present falls firmly under the Awareness pillar of the NATO CT Policy Guidelines. Within the Alliance Turkey briefs often on the numbers of Allied (and other) nationals stopped and sent back from the Turkish border, many in response to bilateral intelligence inputs. However, subsequent action against those detained takes place on a national basis. Were NATO forces at any time to be mandated to act in Iraq, Syria or perhaps Libya they would be likely to find themselves facing fellow Alliance nationals who have joined the ranks of the jihadist groups. It seems reasonable to suppose that at that juncture NATO would take on a more precise and active role in the global effort against foreign terrorist fighters who would then be designated as enemy combatants. But this is not currently on NATO’s agenda.

At present the cutting edge work undertaken by the United Nations (UNSCR 2170(2014), 2178(2014) and 2199(2015)) and the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (through the Hague-Marrakech Memorandum and the work of the Foreign Fighters working group) is of intense interest at NATO and consideration is continuously given to potential future roles for NATO. Matters are complicated by NATO’s need to decide by consensus. Differing national positions and levels of involvement in the current threat picture mean that discussion of terrorism does not take place from a common baseline. For example, the Baltic states focus naturally on the neighbouring Ukraine/Russia situation, whereas Turkey, as a major transit country for those fighting in Iraq and Syria, has its attention firmly fixed on the need for a comprehensive solution to the threats from the South. Each Ally has its own optic, be it humanitarian issues, Libyan arms, the dynamics of the Sunni/Shia/Kurd relationship, developments in Sub-Saharan Africa or the need to remove Bashar al Assad. Without a unifying driver such as a UN mandate or a direct threat to the Alliance (rather than to individual members) and clear added-value for NATO involvement, overcoming such differing approaches to take large scale action at the Alliance level will remain difficult.

Although a recent paper from the NATO Defense College[29] spoke of a tentative role for NATO as a discussion forum for issues relating to the countering of violent extremism, Allies themselves have been reluctant to touch on this issue within the NATO context unless a substantive military relevance can be
demonstrated. To date the countering violent extremism and Foreign Fighter issues appear better suited to action within the European Union, where Ministers of Interior and Justice, Social Welfare and Education can meet (only Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs meet within the NATO framework) and tools such as Europol, Eurojust and the Commission’s Radicalisation Awareness Network are available. Much hope has been pinned on the sharing of lead information on suspected Foreign Fighters via Interpol whose computer system links all UN members’ law enforcement structures. Here too, NATO is poorly positioned as such data is predominantly national and NATO’s own data exchange with Interpol is, as yet, in its infancy within the context of Operation Ocean Shield and the potential transfer of biometric data.

**NATO CT into the Future**

Despite the high profile of terrorism at present and the commission of recent terrorist acts on the territory of NATO Allies (e.g., France, Denmark) with plots foiled in many others (e.g., Italy, UK, Spain) it is, to date, only Turkey that has turned to NATO for terrorism-related assistance. NATO has provided protection against missiles at the Turkish-Syrian border given the threat from ISIL and other groups as well as the capabilities of the Assad regime. NATO’s crisis response clearinghouse (the Euro Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre) is available to Allies and partners should a major attack occur and Articles 4 (Consultation) and 5 (Collective Defence) remain options for the Allies.

Cooperative projects to improve partner capacity are clearly the way forward from the Wales summit. These include more work with Iraq; joint efforts with Jordan and through other ‘Enhanced Operational Partnerships’; CT relevant support to Afghanistan under NATO’s Enduring Partnership; and progress in UN-agreed projects in Libya when conditions permit. But what else might NATO consider should Allies seek to raise their level of ambition for the Alliance in the field of CT?

**Could NATO offer more to the Global Effort on CT?**

The UN could use NATO more effectively if the Alliance’s cooperation activities were less geographically limited. The UN’s efforts on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), and explosive remnants of war and mine clearance, are worldwide; their drive to counter the Boko Haram message in Africa requires international support; and their work with the African Union to implement good CT legislation and appropriate security structures is slow and difficult. Can NATO’s resources be brought to bear on any of these issues in support of the UN? Or must the provision of such help remain a bilateral issue for Allies? Is there any appetite to use NATO as the vehicle to feed national assistance into the UN CT effort? Would any more resources be made available if so?

**Could NATO use its existing assets better?**

Is there any more flexibility (or capacity) to be found in NATO’s Centres of Excellence, NATO School or Partnership Training and Education Centres (PTECs) all of which can wear both national and NATO colours? Likewise NATO’s Special Forces Headquarters (another Memorandum of Understanding body rather than a part of NATO’s core structure) can field CT trainers and advisors but are they as yet being used to maximum effect in cooperative security with partners?
...or should NATO remain content with its role as an information sharing platform?

In contrast to the EU, intelligence services can meet within the NATO framework (Article 4 of the Lisbon Treaty puts the intelligence agencies, together with National Security, beyond the mandate of the EU). Bringing together the North American and EU military and civilian intelligence picture on terrorism (and observations on the effect of recent CT measures) is a powerful asset but, in this particular field, perhaps serves more to inform Allies than to prepare the Alliance as a whole for action. Nevertheless, such a wide and strategic overview can offer some value in addition to the much more in-depth and focussed one-to-one intelligence exchanges that exist between Allies and between Allies and partners. Input from partners, especially from those nations where some Allies may not have an extensive diplomatic or intelligence presence, can add usefully to the general strategic picture as well as increasing the size of the community which views the threat through the same lens.

**Conclusions**

As an Alliance, NATO necessarily exists for the benefit of its members. However engagement with partners, both individual nations and international organisations, has become more important over time and is a key way to ensure mutual benefit. NATO’s 2012 CT Policy Guidelines focus on a shared threat awareness and possession of relevant capabilities for Allies, but also focuses equally on engagement with partners to push back the threat boundary and enlarge the like-minded community facing it jointly. Progress over the past two years on the tasks cascading from the Policy Guidelines has been satisfactory but more remains to be done in adjusting policy (crucially the Military Concept for Defence Against Terrorism) so that the NATO CT approach is coherent. It is also important to work on improving CT education and training in line with the new Education, Training, Exercises and Evaluation overarching policy.[32] Beyond this the focus should be on ever-improving cooperation projects and defence capacity-building with partners.

But the situation has evolved since NATO put its CT Policy Guidelines in place. Allies have yet to express any increased ambition for NATO in the CT field, but there are areas where NATO might be able to add to the global CT approach, particularly in support of the UN. The current hot topic in CT is Foreign Terrorist Fighters who are leaving many nations to fight (or to offer themselves as wives) in Iraq and Syria, predominantly in the service of ISIL/Daesh. Groups pledging support to ISIL/Daesh (e.g., in Sinai, Libya, Nigeria and Afghanistan) are also of concern but to date NATO has no formal role, military or otherwise, in countering ISIL/Daesh or any of its offshoots. NATO continues to reflect on how best to contribute to the evolving global CT effort in the absence of an official mandate. This Policy Note points to the seemingly unique strategic information-sharing role of NATO at 28 and wonders whether existing assets such as multinational Special Forces and Centres of Excellence might be able to contribute more. Answers to the questions must await Allied discussion but at present indications of willingness to go beyond the current mandate and level of ambition are slight. NATO has untapped potential which, given the scope of the terrorist threat, it would be wise of Allies to use better, and more often.

**About the Author:** Dr Juliette Bird has, for the past four years, held the post of head of NATO HQ’s Counter Terrorism section within the International Staff. This Policy Note reflects the author’s own views and opinions which do not necessarily correspond to the official position of NATO on the topic.

**Notes**


[7] ‘Alliance security interests can be affected by other risks of a wider nature, including proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, disruption of the flow of vital resources and actions of terrorism and sabotage’

[8] The 1990s saw terrorist attacks by the LTTE, Irish Republican Army, Red Army Fraction, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Sikh Babbar Khalsa group and Chechens as well as in Algeria, Colombia, Serbia and Jammu/Kashmir etc.


[10] ‘Alliance security interests can be affected by other risks of a wider nature, including acts of terrorism, sabotage and organised crime, and by the disruption of the flow of vital resources. The uncontrolled movement of large numbers of people, particularly as a consequence of armed conflicts, can also pose problems …’

[11] ‘The proliferation of NBC (nuclear, chemical and biological) weapons and their means of delivery remains a matter of serious concern. … Non-state actors have shown the potential to create and use some of these weapons.’


[23] This document is classified and hence not available for public consultation

[24] Man portable air defence system


[30] As in the SPS projects cited in paras 18 and 19


[32] MC 0458/3 whilst unclassified is not a public document