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By Bernardo Pires de Lima and Erik Brattberg
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The coming end of the Afghanistan operation that has defined NATO for the past decade marks the end of an era for the alliance. Its mission in the next decade will look drastically different.

Gone is the political and public appetite for costly overseas state-building missions. To maintain its relevance, the alliance will have to refocus its commitments, partnerships and missions to make them more dynamic and more responsive to the evolving security landscape. One way to do so involves widening the definition of Atlanticism to include the South Atlantic and the Arctic, areas traditionally ignored by NATO but critical to addressing key emerging security challenges.

The impact of global warming has made the Arctic an area of growing geostrategic competition and significant economic potential in resource exploration, fishing and tourism.

The melting of the Arctic's sea ice also opens up prospects for commercial shipping. Northern shipping routes offer economic and strategic advantages by cutting distances and offering savings in fuel costs while bypassing the congested—and sometimes contested—choke points of the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca.

The Arctic's trade and economic resources have already attracted Russia and China, among others. Russia has already taken an aggressive stance on protecting its regional interests. For China, the northern route between Shanghai and Hamburg is 1,200 miles shorter and 35 percent cheaper than the Suez route. The extent to which China grows more dependent on the Arctic's resources and commercial sea lanes might well determine its future military presence in the region.

So far, NATO's role in the Arctic has been largely limited to air policing missions and a few military exercises. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recently rejected calls for NATO to do more. But the alliance may soon not have a choice. As economic activity intensifies in the region, so will geopolitical pressure.

NATO could play a vital role in providing services needed for securing commercial shipping in the area. Moreover, NATO should use joint military exercises and military-to-military dialogues as a method for enhancing regional cooperation. It must also engage nontraditional Arctic players such as China, a new observing member of the Arctic Council, on common issues in order to avoid conflicts of interest in the region. Here, setting up a separate NATO-China Council must be a priority.

To the south, NATO should replace the old framework of North-South divisions with a new sense of Atlantic unity, anticipating the need for a broader trans-Atlantic community to face regional security challenges affecting North and South America, Europe and West Africa.

Despite common regional interests, there are few obvious NATO mechanisms for engaging with Africa and South America today. A reluctant Brazil has so far been the biggest obstacle to unlocking the North-South Atlantic relationship. Still, emerging risks in the South Atlantic are becoming

more pressing.

These include threats like drug trafficking from South America to the Gulf of Guinea, which can serve as a source of financing for local terrorist networks in Colombia, Nigeria and Mali. Guinea-Bissau is already a de facto narco-state, and more failed states would further destabilize the already fragile region. Moreover, piracy and organized criminal networks targeting the offshore oil industry in the Gulf of Guinea threaten energy and trade routes in the Atlantic.

While NATO's Strategic Concept of 2010 mentions all these threats, it says nothing about the alliance's South Atlantic approach. Such an approach must consider three important trends shaping the area.

First is the growing influence of emerging actors like Brazil, Angola, Nigeria and South Africa. Their economic growth rates, global profile in oil and gas production, and military investments have already attracted the rapidly growing interest of China and India. To face this challenge, NATO should adopt an "open door" policy of strategic partnerships with South Atlantic powers, using the Atlantic Ocean as a natural geopolitical framework for action in the coming decades.

Second, increasingly linked networks of drug trafficking, organized crime and Islamic terrorism are spreading from the Sahel to sub-Saharan Africa, threatening countries where NATO allies are directly involved—such as Mali and Libya—or where the U.S. is increasing its military presence to confront al-Qaida in Africa, such as Niger and Burkina Faso. In constructing a security architecture to deal with these challenges, NATO must give priority to naval capacities and coordinated multinational ground forces, and to defining a comprehensive maritime strategy that includes regional organizations like the African Union, the Economic Community of West Africa States, the Community of Portuguese Language Countries and the Southern African Development Community.

Finally, though it achieved limited success in Afghanistan, NATO must not abandon its commitment to promoting democratic values. In adopting the South Atlantic as a strategic priority, NATO must emphasize to emerging powers the importance of embracing democratic values as the best path to defeat radicalism, poverty and insecurity in the long run.

Of course, shifting alliance priorities away from counterinsurgency and state-building tasks will also require different sets of capabilities. While Afghanistan forced many alliance members to reform their armed services to be more expeditionary, in the future NATO will need further investments in naval capabilities. Despite current spending constraints, Europe retains naval potential in the age of austerity; several European states, including the U.K., the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden and Portugal, have historically strong naval industries. Still, additional efforts to pool and share resources between NATO member states must also be a priority.

In sum, as NATO looks to the future, it should do so not as a worldwide expeditionary military alliance, but as a security community capable of engaging regional powers to deal with the most challenging security problems of our time. A core focus of this strategy should be to redirect the alliance toward the Atlantic Basin, an area that includes both the South Atlantic and the Arctic. This is how a realistic and smart NATO should deal with fiscal constraints, security threats and geopolitical challenges. There is no such thing as the end of the Atlantic age. □

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