Abstract: For decades, NATO has been an active player in the international fight against terrorism, including through its Operations worldwide. In May 2017, the Alliance approved an ambitious counter terrorism Action Plan, seeking to boost its efforts in this field. The approval of the Action Plan reflected a changed mindset in Allied nations, who had previously been reluctant to increase NATO’s CT footprint. This article provides an overview of the progress achieved since May 2017 and details how NATO has established itself as a relevant player in the international fight against terrorism.

An update of the Action Plan was approved by Allied Foreign Ministers in December 2018, and the article explores possible areas where NATO’s implementation work should be prioritized, concluding that the current security environment requires momentum behind an enhanced NATO CT role to be maintained.

Keywords: NATO, United Nations, Counter Terrorism, Action Plan, Capacity Building

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Introduction

Seventeen years after the events of 9/11, terrorism remains a pressing global concern and a widespread threat\(^2\). In the last two decades, much progress has been made, not only in the consolidation of national strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism, but also in the structuring of a global framework to address this threat. In support of the effort led first and foremost by the United Nations (UN), international organizations have striven to find their place and relevance in a way that does not duplicate the work of national governments but provides added value and results in an overall coherent approach.

As a political-military organization with extensive experience in crisis management, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) should be considered an obvious player in the counterterrorism (CT) field. Whilst repeated in-depth discussions within NATO are essential to ensure the right mandate for the Organization, they may to some extent have slowed the creation of a robust framework to outline NATO’s CT role. In the last few years, following the approval in 2012 of NATO CT Policy Guidelines and in 2017 of an ambitious Action Plan, the Alliance has, however, made considerable progress in this direction, carving out a role for itself in the global fight against terrorism, which it now looks to consolidate.

This paper will analyze progress made since the approval of the 2017 Action Plan\(^3\), examine NATO’s current CT strategy, and present recommendations for possible future action.

Background

The impact of the terrorist threat is well known to NATO, whose member nations decided to trigger Article 5 of its founding treaty – enshrining the principle of collective defense, i.e. an attack on one is an attack on all – only once in the history of the Alliance, in response to the 9/11 terror attacks against the United States. In 2002, a year after the attacks, the Alliance’s Military Committee approved its first Military Concept for Defence against Terrorism, detailing NATO’s role in the full spectrum of operations for defence against terrorism. The Military Concept was undoubtedly a solid document, but it suffered from having been “somewhat hurriedly drawn up”\(^4\) in response to the unexpected triggering of Article 5, and lacked a corresponding policy document to complement it.

In 2012, the Alliance put in place Policy Guidelines setting out a more comprehensive approach to CT, and focusing NATO’s efforts on its areas of expertise: maintaining ‘awareness’ of the terrorist threat; building Allies’ ‘capabilities’ to counter it; and strengthening ‘engagement’ with

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\(^4\) Bird, “NATO’s role in Counter-Terrorism”, p. 62.
partners and international organizations\(^5\). An Action Plan detailing concrete measures to implement these guidelines followed in 2014.

The Action Plan was a relatively modest document, looking to achieve as much as possible within existing human and financial resources. Its limited scope can be attributed to the fact that, despite a fast-growing threat from terrorism\(^6\), NATO “Allies [had] yet to express any increased ambition for NATO in the CT field”, as was argued in a comprehensive assessment of the Alliance’s role in CT in 2015\(^7\). Many member states appeared reluctant to relinquish control over an area traditionally seen as a national responsibility, concerned that the Alliance would overstep its boundaries. Allies at that time did not seek to inject additional resources into the CT effort at NATO.

The Military Concept for Defense against Terrorism was thoroughly reviewed at the end of 2015. The update of this crucial document\(^8\), which now lists measures stemming directly from both the 2012 Policy Guidelines and the 2006 UN Global Counter Terrorism Strategy, meant that NATO was slowly starting to work towards building a framework that would enable the Alliance to provide its contribution to the global fight against terrorism more coherently, effectively and efficiently.

**Recent History**

As work on the tasks stemming from the Policy Guidelines and the initial Action Plan continued to progress throughout 2016, NATO Heads of State and Government began to show signs of readiness to step up the Alliance’s efforts in this area. In response to the evolving threat landscape, at their Warsaw Summit in July 2016, they publicly declared that:

> “Terrorism […] has risen to an unprecedented level of intensity, reaches into all of Allied territory, and now represents an immediate and direct threat to our nations and the international community. […] We are ready to do more to counter this threat, including by helping our partners provide for their own security, defend against terrorism, and build resilience against attack.”\(^9\)

The concrete result of this political push was the approval, in May 2017, of a lengthy Action Plan to enhance NATO’s role in the international community’s fight against terrorism.

The negotiating process behind the agreement of the document was a long and difficult one, as many nations remained wary of increasing NATO’s CT footprint. It was imperative to strike the right balance in order to produce a document that would, on the one hand, truly upgrade NATO’s

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\(^6\) In 2014-2015 the so-called Islamic State (IS), one the world’s deadliest terrorist group of the past decade, was at the height of its power. Source: Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem, “The Rise and Fall of ISIS”, (Hague Center for Strategic Studies, 2017). Available at [https://hcss.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/The%20Rise%20and%20Fall%20of%20ISIS.pdf](https://hcss.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/The%20Rise%20and%20Fall%20of%20ISIS.pdf) (accessed 10 January 2019).

\(^7\) Bird, “NATO’s role in Counter-Terrorism”, p. 68.


efforts in CT and, on the other, fit with different national approaches. As a result, the Action Plan clearly states that nations retain primary responsibility for their domestic security and their own resilience, and sets out a number of detailed measures through which NATO could support Allies (but also partners) in a way that would provide added value and not duplicate either national or international efforts.

These measures were grouped in five different domains (Awareness and analysis; Preparedness and responsiveness; Capabilities; Capacity building and partnerships; and Operations), were in line with the three core areas of the Policy Guidelines and built on those lines of effort already identified in the 2014 Action Plan for Implementation. Attention was also given in the 2017 Action Plan to how the issue was to be handled internally and communicated to a broader external audience.

**Achievements to Date**

The 2017 Action Plan provides a formal framework through which to address all CT-related matters with both Allied and partner countries. By filling this framework with fresh and ambitious proposals, NATO showed itself to be a modern and adaptable Alliance – evolving in response to changes in the international security environment – and confirmed its position as a credible and relevant actor in the global effort against terrorism.

Since May 2017, there have been elements of progress across all five domains that are worthy of highlighting, including:

**a. Awareness and Analysis**

A Terrorism Intelligence Cell (TIC) was set up within the newly established Joint Intelligence and Security Division (JISD), reinforcing the ‘awareness’ pillar of NATO’s CT approach by providing enhanced monitoring and strategic assessments on the evolution of terrorist threats.

The creation of a Regional Hub for the South, while not a CT initiative *per se*, also feeds into the ‘awareness’ pillar. Strategically located at Joint Force Command Naples, the Hub is expected to contribute to the collection and sharing of information on threats and opportunities coming from the South, and help coordinate NATO’s activities in the area and its outreach to partners. Full capability of the Hub was reached only in July 2018, making it too early to fully assess its contribution. However, from a CT standpoint, it is clear that the Hub has the potential to enhance the Alliance’s understanding of the terrorist threat and better inform its decision making.

In response to the tasks stemming from the Action Plan, NATO Allies agreed in 2018 a landmark biometric data policy, which – abiding by the relevant national and international laws and requirements – would increase their “ability to identify returning foreign terrorist fighters and other threat actors, and to comply with UNSCR 2396 [on foreign terrorist fighters]”\(^{10}\). With recent research estimating that at least 40,000 people travelled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS since 2013\(^{11}\), the approval of the policy represents a major success not only for bringing together Allies on the particularly sensitive

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\(^{11}\) “Global Terrorism Report 2018: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism”, p. 5.
subject of data sharing, but also for stepping up efforts to curb the flow of foreign fighters, one of the main current challenges in the fight against terrorism.

b. Preparedness and Responsiveness

Relevant work was conducted to contribute to Allies’ efforts to enhance their resilience and consequence management measures in the event of a terrorist attack. In particular, in consultation with national subject matter experts, NATO has been working towards the development of non-binding guidelines for increased civil-military cooperation in response to large scale Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) terrorist attacks. Initiatives undertaken within the framework of the Action Plan have also ensured that CT elements are taken into account when conducting exercises.

c. Capabilities

The Defense against Terrorism Program of Work (DAT POW) continued to support projects to improve Allied nations’ capabilities to respond to terrorist threats. In light of the evolving trend of terrorist misuse of technology, in particular Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS, i.e. drones), DAT POW supported work exploring non-lethal capabilities to counter terrorist use of drones with minimum collateral damage. Capabilities to increase interoperability and help Allies implement the new biometric data policy are currently being developed under this framework, along with other initiatives related to terrorist use of CBRN material, Countering Improvised Explosive Devices (C-IED), Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), route clearance and harbor protection.

d. Capacity Building and Partnerships

Helping partners build their own capacity to fight terrorism themselves is an integral part of NATO’s approach to CT, and the Action Plan placed emphasis on improving delivery of training and advice to partners, and providing support in CT-related areas. Such support was offered to requesting partner countries through existing partnership frameworks such as the Defense and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative (DCBI). Examples include the work taken forward under the DCBI in Jordan in the areas of C-IED, border security and military exercises, or that conducted in Iraq on C-IED and Security Sector Reform (SSR) through the NATO Training and Capacity Building Activity in Iraq (NTCB-I).

Under the umbrella of the Science for Peace and Security Program (SPS), NATO is also delivering concrete assistance to partner countries in CT-relevant areas such as C-IED and CBRN defense, in particular through follow-on work on its flagship Stand-off Detection of Explosives (STANDEX) project. A special SPS Call for Proposals to provide technological solutions but also ideas to address the human and social aspects of terrorism was issued in 2017, with selected projects commencing in mid-2018.

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The Action Plan also prioritized cooperation efforts with relevant international and regional organizations. Coordination with the UN continued to progress steadily, in particular after the Organization restructured its approach to CT with the establishment in June 2017 of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism. A number of joint initiatives are ongoing. Cooperation with the European Union (EU) also received fresh impetus in the Action Plan. On the occasion of the NATO Warsaw Summit in July 2016, the Alliance’s Secretary General and the Presidents of the EU Commission and the EU Council signed a Joint Declaration to enhance cooperation between the two organizations14, and a common set of proposals for implementation followed five months later15. Building on these elements, 34 new measures were added by the two Councils in December 2017, among which CT was identified as an area where the relationship between the two organizations should be enhanced16. Since then, staff to staff dialogue on CT-related matters has increased significantly, as has coordination when conducting capacity building activities in partner countries. The Action Plan also recognized the importance of interacting with regional organizations. With the African Union (AU), in particular through the African Centre for the Study & Research on Terrorism in Algiers, NATO is successfully boosting cooperation under the framework of the SPS Program on C-IED and other CT-related areas.

e. Operations

The Action Plan also reflected NATO’s visible commitment to the fight against terrorism on the ground, beginning with the work the Alliance does in Afghanistan through its Resolute Support Mission (RSM). Established in 2015 as a follow-on from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), RSM is a non-combat mission which seeks to train and advise the country’s security forces and strengthen its security institutions so as to ensure that Afghanistan does not again become “a safe haven for terrorists”17. Through the 2017 Action Plan, NATO committed to continue exploring possible ways to build further capacity of Afghan security forces in CT-relevant areas, based on periodic reviews of the mission.

Last but not least, the Action Plan marked the beginning of NATO’s official participation in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS/Da’esh. To some extent, participation was a mere formality because all NATO members were already part of the Coalition, and the Alliance itself had been providing input from surveillance aircraft (Airborne Warning and Control System, i.e. AWACS) since 2016. Nevertheless, this was not an easy decision as a number of nations needed reassurance

that NATO would not take on a combat role. Participation in the Coalition provided visible confirmation of a solid Alliance, united against the terrorist threat, and gave NATO a seat at the decision table, alongside other relevant international players. The Coalition provided a platform for information-sharing on counter-terrorism related matters, and ensured increased awareness of the situation in Iraq and Syria. Under its various working groups, it also offered an opportunity for increased consultation and de-confliction of activities with other international organizations, including in particular the EU.

The Brussels Summit and an Updated Action Plan

The momentum of political support behind an enhanced NATO role in CT persisted as the Action Plan started to be implemented, and the tangible progress achieved in a relatively short time prompted nations to push for an update of the document, to capitalize on the results obtained and continue to adapt to the changing threat landscape.

In July 2018, NATO Heads of State and Government gathered in Brussels for their first Summit in the Alliance’s new Headquarters. The Summit offered an opportunity to voice continued commitment to the global counter terrorism effort and announce a decision to update the Action Plan.

The updated Action Plan was negotiated throughout November 2018, and endorsed in December by NATO’s Foreign Ministers. The relative ease with which Allied nations negotiated and approved the second iteration of the Action Plan is testament to NATO’s accepted place in the international fight against terrorism. Nations have acknowledged the added value that stems from the Alliance’s unique civil-military structure, its assets and capabilities, and were able to act by consensus to put in place new CT measures.

In the 2018 document, core elements of NATO’s CT approach, such as intelligence sharing and awareness, the DAT POW, education and training of Allies and partners, and capacity building in partner nations, are all given fresh impetus with proposals that build on the results achieved from 2017 and seek to consolidate NATO’s contribution to the global fight against terrorism.

Seeking to stay on top of a fast changing security environment, new measures were also added to look at how to integrate relevant technological contributions in CT capabilities, and how to find adequate ways to counter terrorist misuse of technology.

What is Next?

Considering it took a decade after the events of 9/11 to put in place the first NATO Policy Guidelines on CT, the speed of progress and the results achieved in the past couple of years are significant. With overall agreement amongst NATO Allies that CT represents a long term effort and investment for the Alliance, there is an opportunity to consider which are the key initiatives NATO should prioritize whilst implementing the 2018 Action Plan.

**Supporting a broader CT approach**

While all NATO Allies acknowledge the “need to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism”\(^{20}\), countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) are areas traditionally considered outside the Alliance’s mandate. There is, however, an element which NATO can contribute to these efforts and provide added value.

Research shows that high levels of political terror (including abuse by the military and the police), poor governance structures and lack of trust in government institutions are among the most significant drivers of terrorism\(^{21}\). This is why the promotion of good governance (i.e. accountable, transparent institutions, respectful of human rights and the rule of law), including in security and defense institutions, is a fundamental aspect of combatting terrorism.

Within frameworks such as Building Integrity (BI) and the DCBI, NATO provides support to partner countries in defense institution building and security sector reform. The Alliance’s work in this area can help address structural issues in the security sector that not only hamper national governments in their efforts to counter terrorism, but also create a fertile ground for the emergence of conditions that are conducive to its spread.

As part of its efforts to build capacity in partner nations, NATO should continue to promote this broader approach to CT, as it can help partner countries tackle the underlying causes conducive to terrorism without overstepping the Alliance’s mandate and whilst making use of its existing strengths. All cooperation with partner nations will continue to be dependent on their requests for support and tailored to them.

As an example, NATO is already taking forward this approach with work in Iraq. The new NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) launched in July 2018 at the request of the Iraqi Prime Minister, should support Iraq by training and advising relevant officials and professional military instructors, with the final goal of reinforcing the country’s security institutions. This effort will capitalize on the work on SSR previously conducted under the DCBI framework and the previous NTCB-I mission.

**Keeping pace with emerging trends**

The initiatives outlined in the December Action Plan portray a forward-thinking Alliance that adapts its strategies to a changing threat landscape. The particular focus placed on linking new technologies and CT reflects an emerging trend also identifiable in the national CT strategies of individual Allies\(^{22}\). There is increased concern about potential terrorist misuse of technology – be

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it the exploitation of commercial drones in combat\textsuperscript{23} or the use of cyber for terrorist purposes, ranging from recruitment to financial support\textsuperscript{24}. The new items in the Action Plan represent a step in the right direction in terms of keeping on top of these challenges. However, if the Alliance wants to remain on this path, it might usefully enhance its engagement with industry and technology think tanks, to ensure its CT effort fully incorporates their expertise as well.

Furthermore, over the next year, NATO will implement a recent internal Functional Review which will see the Alliance devote, among other things, increased focus to cyber defense and the reinforcement of its counter-hybrid warfare posture. Linking these elements to NATO’s CT should ensure that the Alliance has a comprehensive threat picture and is well prepared to respond to emerging challenges.

\textit{Maintaining high standards}

NATO should strive for continuous improvement in areas where it already has solid expertise. One of these areas is military education and training. There is room to enhance the delivery of CT-related training, education and advice to partner nations. NATO must ensure that a clear, coherent, training offer is provided to partners, so that they can be best equipped to address and combat the terrorist threat themselves. This could include reinforced cooperation with relevant Centers of Excellence (COE) as the updated Action Plan directs. COEs such as the Defense against Terrorism COE in Ankara, the C-IED COE in Madrid and the Joint CBRN Defense COE in Vyskov, among others, have for years strengthened NATO’s CT effort by providing valued subject matter expertise. NATO’s approach to COEs should ensure optimized use of their contributions, in particular on education and training.

There is also room to do more with NATO Special Operation Forces (SOF), leveraging their expertise to train and assist their equivalents in partner countries.

The Alliance should also ensure that its capacity building activities do not overlap with assistance already provided either on a bilateral basis or by other international players. At the Brussels Summit, Heads of State and Government stated that “Mapping of counter-terrorism capacity building activities in partner countries, in cooperation with the partner country concerned, would help NATO to better determine where it can best add value.”\textsuperscript{25} This is a field where further NATO work should be explored. Mapping exercises can be valuable tools to ensure NATO does not duplicate effort or waste its resources, and may also provide an opportunity for increased cooperation with regional and international organizations on the ground. Selected partner countries in NATO’s South – where the Regional Hub would also have a role to play – might have particular value as first recipients of such an approach.


Finally, the global counter terrorism effort will become ever more efficient if the strategies of the international organizations involved can be linked together in a coherent framework, to ensure that action is coordinated and there is no duplication of effort. For this reason, it is imperative to continue to improve cooperation and interaction with the UN, the EU but also the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Interpol and Europol, and, importantly, regional stakeholders. With practice, consultation with relevant counterparts should become an automatic reflex.

Conclusion

Since the 2012 Policy Guidelines, through the 2017 Action Plan and now with the 2018 update, NATO has successfully carved out a role for itself in the international community’s fight against terrorism in a way that does not duplicate existing efforts, overstretch the Alliance beyond its competences or trespass on national responsibilities. Milestones achieved in the past two years include: formal participation in the Global Coalition; establishment of the Terrorism Intelligence Cell; setting up of a Regional Hub for the South; approval of a biometric data policy; and a number of ongoing successful capacity building activities within partner countries including Jordan, Tunisia and Iraq. NATO has recognized CT as a valuable contribution to the Alliance’s ‘deterrence and defense’ and ‘projecting stability’ approaches. Efforts continue to be made to bring together related work strands and operate in this field in full coherence and respect of other relevant internal frameworks.

Full implementation of the updated Action Plan is now the main priority, and there is much to look forward to, both in terms of challenges and opportunities. The full potential of the Regional Hub for the South has yet to be achieved, but a positive trajectory is expected as it starts to deliver on its key functions. More can be done in the way education and training is structured for partner countries, and NATO SOF may yet take a greater role in CT. Momentum behind increased data sharing must be maintained: the approval of a biometric data policy was a landmark moment for data sharing within the Alliance, but needs to be followed up with concrete activities. Lastly, cooperation with international and regional organizations should continue to be cultivated through systematic dialogue and joint activities.

The results of the past two years show that nations have recognized that NATO can provide added value in the global fight against terrorism, and acknowledge its rightful role. This may be regarded as an important change in Allies’ approach to the international CT field and a major shift from the views of the 1990s.

NATO’s approach to countering terrorism must remain focused on the added value it can provide and on those areas where its strengths lie – awareness, capabilities, engagement – but, in the current security environment, Allies cannot afford to reduce their level of ambition. As the threat landscape continues to evolve, NATO must rise to the challenge, and continue pursuing an enhanced counter terrorism effort.
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