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The Atlantic alliance will never be a "global policeman", says Italy's defence minister ***Giampaolo Di Paola***, but it needs to do more to promote stability around the world. And that means building new links with other regional players

The system of international relations has entered what will very probably be a protracted phase of uncertainty thanks to the enduring difficulties of a number of western economies, the rise of new regional and global powers and the destabilising effects created by rogue-states and both criminal and terrorist networks. As a result, the Atlantic alliance will remain a pillar of international security for the Euro-Atlantic region and beyond. But its future pivotal role in providing security and stability cannot be taken for granted.

After more than 40 years of the cold war, NATO and its members were strategically far-sighted in the way they reacted to the attacks of 9/11 and quickly identified the risks of decoupling American and European interests. Instead, they acted collectively to counter the new threat of macro-terrorism.

And just as NATO welcomed new members and re-adjusted its structure to meet the emerging threats and changing operational needs, the alliance also sustained an unprecedented level of operational commitments that went substantially beyond NATO's traditional range of core tasks and far beyond its original geographical area of responsibility.

The Atlantic alliance is today approaching a new phase in its modernisation and development. We cannot discount the possibility that major new military commitments may materialise in the future. However, with the end of combat operations in Afghanistan scheduled for 2015, it is now time to conceptualise the role and the bearing of our alliance during the next decade.

The idea of being able to "re-trench" ourselves and focus on the territorial defence of our collective motherlands by waiting for some hypothetical enemy to emerge would be a pretty easy choice, but a very short-sighted one that would run counter to the lessons of history. To do that would be to cast the last 20 years of political change and military effort as no more than a

sterile interlude. In other words, we would be choosing an option that would simply lead to the strategic irrelevance of the alliance in the new global order.

Instead, we must be able to look squarely at the changing realities of world politics. Just as with the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the terror attacks of 9/11, we must remain fully connected with the way the strategic environment is being altered and adjust our political and military tools accordingly.

The emphasis on challenges in the Asia–Pacific region, that are contained in the U.S. Defense Strategic Review, as well as in outgoing U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates' farewell speech last year on the future of NATO, should not be interpreted as alarm bells that signal a reduced American commitment to NATO. But they are clearly wake-up calls for all of us who seek ways to ensure the alliance will be of enduring relevance in the future.

So far as any American shift toward the Pacific is concerned, we must acknowledge that the rising importance of Asia has been the outcome of fast and steady economic growth there over the last decade. Asia's economic weight has now yielded strategic consequences in a variety of political domains, of which military dimension is no exception. Defence spending is increasing faster in Asia than in any other region of the world, so much so that this year Asian countries' combined defence budgets have overtaken those of Europe.

And that's not the only element that justifies the United States' strategic pivoting eastwards. The Asian region is at the same time more dynamic and less stable than the Euro-Atlantic area. The balance of power among Asian nations is in a state of flux because of the rapidly expanding economies of a number of major players there. Possible over-reactions there to national security threat perceptions have the potential to lead to unexpected uses of force. It's worth stressing that co-operative security and confidence-building measures in Asia are much less developed than in the western hemisphere.

Many Asian states are making the transition towards more open and democratic societies and new political architectures. But in their early stages of development, democracies risk being more fragile and more prone to the accentuation of domestic grievances.

The outcome of these changes, and inherent challenges, are already clearly visible: several Asian countries are now inclined to be more assertive than before, claiming that they need "wider spaces" physically - notably maritime control for the exploitation of natural resources - and in global politics to give them a greater say on global governance issues.

It seems more than likely that this geo-strategic transformation will lead to the increasing relevance to us all of Asian security challenges. But it's also misleading to talk in terms of an "Asian century". That's because it isn't proper to talk about world politics and security without using the term globalisation. Today, nor to speak of tomorrow, we will not just be "connected" but heavily inter-dependent and reliant on one another to guarantee our own welfare and to exploit the technological and cultural opportunities on offer.

The extraordinary success of Asian countries over recent decades is based precisely on the

smart exploitation of opportunities inherent in information technology and the communications revolution, and also on all the opportunities made possible by looking at the entire world as a single market. To a very large extent, the rise of Asia and the advent of the global economy are the two faces of a single coin, for we cannot separate one from the other.

The consequence is that we need to imagine a new and non-regional international security architecture. We all face global issues that affect our own security and pose threats to our common future. Global issues will increasingly be common issues, whether they materialise in Europe, Asia or even in the virtual domain of cyberspace.

This is the essence of today's strategic environment and that of the foreseeable future. The Atlantic alliance needs to evolve further and adapt to these changing realities. NATO shouldn't expect to act as a sort of "global policeman", nor be perceived as such, as we have no mandate for doing that, and certainly shouldn't have any intention to over-extend our reach. The members of the alliance should instead concentrate on improving NATO's ability to play a stabilising role globally and to act responsibly in the interests of global security. NATO should become a networked security provider, acting together with others.

The alliance should therefore be intensifying its dialogue with other regional players and be developing its network with so-called "core partners" so as to be ready to launch new partnerships with all those who genuinely have an interest in a shared approach to common security.

We must not, though, forget to strengthen our own cohesion, especially across the Atlantic. There is a clear need to rebalance burden-sharing in NATO between the United States and others; we need more Europe in security and defence, not to compete, but on the contrary to build a stronger, more cohesive and equitable Atlantic alliance.

This isn't going to be an easy task. The financial austerity that now faces most European nations is already leading to further squeezes of defence budgets, and this could have serious effects on burden-sharing and therefore on transatlantic solidarity. The quest for a more secure and stable world nevertheless has to continue as does that for sustainable solutions even under today's financial difficulties. It's not just the world economy that's at stake, but world order too.

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