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North Atlantic Treaty Organization towards the war in Syria 2011-2015

Organizacja Traktatu Północnoatlantyckiego wobec wojny w Syrii 2011-2015

Abstract: The conflict in Syria that started in 2011 has quickly evolved from a local uprising inspired by the events of the so-called “Arab Spring” into a multidimensional and complicated conflict of a civil war character, with many diverse participants and a very significant religious factor apart from political and socioeconomic reasons. Furthermore, the conflict has become internationalized: more and more external parties have gotten involved in it with a view to furthering or safeguarding their own interests. A vast majority of these actors were states (as far as legal entities are concerned). In the context of their activity, operations of non-state entities, such as international organizations, were rather limited and focused on social and humanitarian issues. This also pertains to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Evolving from a typical defensive alliance towards a security organization and, since the end of the Cold War, consistently operating outside the area covered by the Treaty (understood as the territories of member states), NATO as an autonomous entity has not taken any consistent, coordinated, or decisive actions during the first years of the Syrian conflict. This is due to both the specific features of this international organization and the determinants of the international environment with their dynamics.

Keywords: NATO, Syria, international organization, Middle East

Streszczenie: Trwający od 2011 r. konflikt w Syrii szybko zmienił się z lokalnego powstania, inspirowanego wydarzeniami tzw. „arabskiej wiosny”, w wielopłaszczyznowy i skomplikowany konflikt o charakterze wojny domowej, w której bierze udział wiele różnorodnych podmiotów, a obok przyczyn politycznych i społeczno-ekonomicznych pojawił się bardzo istotny czynnik religijny. Konflikt uległ też umiędzynarodowieniu – zaangażowały się w niego kolejne podmioty zewnętrzne, dążące do realizacji/zabezpieczenia własnych interesów. Większość tych podmiotów to państwa. Na tle ich aktywności działania podmiotów niepaństwowych (organizacji międzynarodowych) pozostawały dość ograniczone. Dotyczyło to także Organizacji Traktatu Północnoatlantyckiego. Ewoluując od typowego sojuszu obronnego w stronę organizacji bezpieczeństwa i od końca zimnej wojny konsekwentnie prowadząc działania

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poza obszarem traktatowym w przypadku konfliktu syryjskiego, NATO, jako autonomiczny podmiot, nie podjęło żadnych jednolitych, spójnych czy zdecydowanych działań. Powodem była zarówno specyfika funkcjonowania tej organizacji międzynarodowej, jak i uwarunkowania środowiska międzynarodowego i ich dynamika.

Słowa kluczowe: NATO, Syria, organizacja międzynarodowa, Bliski Wschód

1. Specific features of NATO as an actor of international relations

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization¹ is a classic (coordination) international organization. According to the postulates of realists, international organizations are merely instruments of states' policy towards other states, thus the end of the Cold War would also mark the end of NATO as a no longer necessary entity. Nevertheless, another postulate, typical of neoliberal institutionalism, proved correct: international organizations (and other international institutions) constitute an important element of international relations structures.² In the realities after the Cold War, the North Atlantic Alliance had to undergo transformation, redefine its identity, and find a new form of operation. This process is still ongoing, with varying degrees of success. However, the North Atlantic Alliance still remains the ultimate global military power: total military expenses of NATO member states are higher than these expenses of all other countries in the world (even though this is mostly due to the unquestionable dominant role of the United States).

For more than 70 years of its existence, the Alliance has evolved, changing its range, forms, and methods of operation, as well as its strategies. During the Cold War period it was successful as a classic defensive alliance whose aim was protection against a symmetric threat – no member state was attacked by another state. *Casus foederis* occurred, for the first and the only time so far, a decade after the downfall of the number one enemy of the Cold War period. It is worth noticing that the attack came from a qualitatively new, asymmetric opponent. In a sense, this summed up the period after the Cold War when NATO “was looking for an enemy” and for its own identity, trying to adapt

1 Further also referred to as: NATO, North Atlantic Alliance, Alliance.

2 P. J. Katzenstein, R. O. Keohane, S. D. Krasner, *International Organization and the Study of World Politics*, “International Organization”, 1998, vol. 52, no. 4, p. 673.

to the changed circumstances. It was the time of some success, such as ending of the war in Bosnia “instead of” the United Nations, but also failure, as exemplified by the *Operation Allied Force*, doubtful in terms of its legal and moral aspects. In another decade, the Alliance grew as new members joined, but new threats emerged, especially terrorism and dangers resulting from the development of information technologies—that is, threats not connected with a specific territory. Transnational organized crime (and piracy) became the major asymmetric threat apart from terrorism. Threats other than military, such as the problem of energy security, gained more significance than ever before. This forced the Alliance to change the scope and forms of its activity, to restructure its armed forces, and to undertake out-of-area actions – that is, outside the area covered by the Treaty. As a result of this evolution, during two decades after the end of the Cold War, NATO became a “crisis-management organisation” or, as J. Samuel Barkin put it, a kind of hybrid of a traditional alliance and a collective security organization.³ However, the main goal of the Alliance is still collective defence of its member states, which is confirmed by consecutive strategic concepts and which is consistent with the original purpose of the organization formulated in the North Atlantic Treaty. Furthermore, as Clive Archer noted, NATO is a system of “selective collective defence” – membership of this “club” gives privileges but also imposes far more serious obligations than being a member of a general system of collective security such as the United Nations.⁴ Nevertheless, the transformation process of the Alliance is still ongoing, triggered by quick changes in the international environment. This has been clearly proven by the aggressive policy of Russia towards Ukraine. The belief, prevalent in the West for many years, that a conventional, symmetric armed conflict in Europe is hardly probable turned out to be wrong. In this context, limitation of defence potential of the armed forces in favour of their expeditionary potential connected with out of area operations in many states, including Poland, turned out to be a hasty decision.

3 J. S. Barkin, *International Organization. Theories and Institution*, New York 2006, p. 73.

4 C. Archer, *International Organizations*, London-New York 2001, p. 98.

The Alliance's policy and the process of its transformation give rise to numerous sceptical opinions. Firstly, according to theoreticians who question the self-rule and usefulness of international organizations, the issue of security is precisely the area where international organizations play a minor role. This is due to their legal capacity, secondary in relation to the capacities of states having, after all, their particular interests, especially in the area of security, which leads to primacy of individual rationality over collective rationality.⁵ Secondly, in connection with 2014 Russia's operations in Ukraine and the resultant change of the security architecture in eastern Europe and in member states of the Alliance situated in close proximity to Russia (especially Poland and Baltic states), the credibility and efficiency of NATO as a guarantor of security are often questioned. There are doubts about both the ability of the Alliance to provide real, even limited, help in case of Russian aggression and about willingness to offer such help. These fears result from different strategic cultures and historical experiences of "old" and "new" NATO members, but also from divergent interests of particular member states. Lastly, NATO has internal difficulties of another character, to a certain extent resulting also from differences in strategic cultures – in this case between the United States and European countries. For many years, the USA has accused their European allies of neglecting the defence potential and excessive reliance on the American armed forces. These accusations are not groundless. NATO member states are obliged to allocate at least 2% of GDP to defences. However, in fact only a few of them followed this rule when the war in Syria started (see: Table 1).

Table 1. Expenditure of NATO member states on defences in 2013 (% of GDP)

Albania	1.4	Germany	1.3
Belgium	1.0	Norway	1.4
Bulgaria	1.4	Poland	1.8
Croatia	1.5	Portugal	1.5
Czech Republic	1.1	Romania	1.4
Denmark	1.4	Slovakia	1.0

5 J. S. Barkin, op. cit., p. 65; cf. M. N. Barnett, M. Finnemore, *The Politics, Power and Pathologies of International Organizations*, "International Organization", 1999, vol. 53, no. 4, p. 706.

Estonia	2.0	Slovenia	1.1
France	1.9	Turkey	1.8
Greece	2.3	Hungary	0.9
Spain	0.9	Great Britain	2.4
Netherlands	1.3	Italy	1.2
Lithuania	0.8	Canada	1.0
Luxembourg	0.4	USA	4.4
Latvia	0.9	Iceland – does not have armed forces	

Source: Compiled on the basis of: *Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence*, <http://www.nato.int>.

During the NATO summit in Newport in September 2014, in view of the events in Ukraine, member states reassumed the obligation to comply with the requirement of allocating 2% of GDP to their defence budget. However, real measures were taken by only a few states, especially those who face increased threat to their security in connection with Russia's policies.⁶ On the other hand, some NATO member states, especially from Western Europe, were unwilling to raise military expenditures, and certain countries, e.g. Belgium and Great Britain, were even reducing it.⁷ At the same time, the increased activity of Russian armed forces in 2014 revealed to the public some rather peculiar facts about the condition of NATO European armies: 60% of German Luftwaffe planes turned out to be unable to fly, and the British Royal Navy, formerly the greatest maritime power in the world, had to ask the allies for help in patrolling its own inshore waters after "an unidentified submarine" appeared near the Scottish coast (the reasons for this embarrassment were budgetary cuts).⁸

Finally, what is important in the context of NATO policy towards the conflict in Syria, *modus operandi* and strength of influence (power) of an organization are determined by its institutional structure and decision-making procedures. A classic definition by Wojciech

- 6 Besides, it could be observed that e.g. Poland which officially allocated 1.8% of GDP to defences (increased to 1.95% in 2014) in fact was able to allocate this sum to defence purposes in a year only occasionally. The real sum was usually much smaller: this is due to "creative accounting" of ministries, bureaucratic tardiness, inefficient procedures in the Ministry of National Defence, and other "traditional" problems.
- 7 In accordance with the plans of the Belgian government, military expenditure should be decreased to the level of 0.5% of GDP by 2019 – in fact Belgium spent about 1% of GDP in 2020.
- 8 In the United States this raises doubts about the operational abilities of the most credible and trustworthy military ally so far.

Morawiecki will be useful here: an international organization is “a system of cooperation among member states, whose basic feature is presence of regular bodies expressing the will of the whole organization through their decisions and appointed to carry out joint tasks, corresponding to convergent interests of these states.”⁹ It clearly follows from this definition that the key notions are “state” and “state interest”; however, the organization’s bodies, on which the organization’s functioning is based, make decisions on behalf of the organization and not member states – which is the essence of an international organization’s self-rule. Thus, an organization’s power of influence largely depends on the manner of making decisions. For instance, if decisions are made by a body consisting of international officers (and not representatives of states) who make decisions by a majority vote, such an organization has considerable power over member states. However, this is a rare situation because it would mean far-reaching renouncement of independence.

A characteristic feature of the North Atlantic Alliance is that the organization has only one political decision-making body, based on the Treaty: the North Atlantic Council consisting of member states’ representatives. Furthermore, the basic decision-making procedure is consensus, even if this is not explicitly specified in the Treaty. The principle of unanimity is binding only in the most important issues, such as acceptance of new members or application of Article 5. Moreover, declarations of the Council addressed to third countries and to the international environment in general are the official stance of NATO on a given matter – in fact, it is decided by the member states.

As a result of this decision-making procedure, NATO has little power over member states, the political decision-making process can be lengthy, and consensual decisions which *ex definitione* have the character of a compromise can be quite vague. It is also easy not to make any decision at all. For example, on 12 September 2001 NATO member states made a unanimous decision about application of Article 5. The effect, rather unexpected, was the exhausting intervention in Afghanistan, lasting for many years. Soon after that, before the invasion of Iraq, there was a split in NATO, caused by divergent views

9 W. Morawiecki, *Polska nauka o organizacjach międzynarodowych*, Warszawa 1993, p. 16.

on the situation and different interests of particular member states. A similar situation has happened with the conflict in Syria – NATO as a whole has not been able to take decisive actions, as member states did not want to get involved in another conflict of hardly predictable consequences.

2. NATO and the conflict in Syria

At the level of interstate institutions (primarily the United Nations), the conflict in Syria revealed the inefficiency of the Responsibility to Protect mechanism, even though this thesis is sometimes contested, for instance by representatives of NGOs. According to one of the main principles of R2P, in the case of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, it is the international community which is responsible for taking appropriate measures if a state in whose territory such a situation occurs is unable or unwilling to prevent it. This openly collides with the sovereignty rule; hence, pursuant to the resolutions adopted at the UN summit of 2005, all such actions require the consent of the United Nations Security Council and should be implemented in cooperation with competent international organizations. In the case of Syria, the sovereignty rule prevailed: the UNSC did not manage to enact suitable resolutions and the international community, including international organizations, did not “take responsibility” for the situation of Syrian citizens – divergent interests of states effectively prevented it.¹⁰

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization reacted to the conflict in Syria cautiously and on the political level. In the declaration comprising 113 items published after the last NATO summit in Wales (September 2014), Syria was mentioned in four items (and Iraq in three).¹¹ The document condemned the Islamic State (both in Syria and in Iraq) as a “transnational threat” to the region’s stability, denounced the Assad

10 See: M. Nuruzzaman, *The “Responsibility to Protect” Doctrine: Revived in Libya, Buried in Syria*, “Insight Turkey”, Spring 2013, pp. 57-66; cf. G. Evans, *The Consequences of Non-Intervention in Syria: Does The Responsibility to Protect Have a Future?*, [in:] *Into the Eleventh Hour. R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis*, R. W. Murray, A. McKay (eds.), Bristol 2014, pp. 18-24.

11 Text of the declaration: *Wales Summit Declaration*, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm [12.01.2021].

regime, called for a peaceful solution of the conflict, praised the advancement of the Syrian chemical weapons elimination process and recommended its continuation. The only practical, although indirect, act of NATO involvement in the Syrian conflict has been the support given to Turkey, in accordance with Treaty obligations. In December 2012 Turkey submitted to NATO a request for support in anti-aircraft defence of the country along the border with Syria. This was a consequence of shooting down a Turkish military aircraft by the Syrian government forces in June 2012 (two pilots were killed) and mortar fire in a border town, Akçakale, in October 2012 (five people died). Referring to the principle of “indivisibility of the Alliance security”, NATO decided to offer military support to Turkey. Since the beginning of 2013, six Patriot batteries have been deployed in the south of Turkey: two from Germany, two from the United States, and two from Spain (until January 2015 – from the Netherlands).¹²

It is worth mentioning that pursuant to Article 51, 52, and 54 of the United Nations Charter, NATO, similar to other international organizations, could use force in the territory of Syria in order to eliminate a threat to international peace and security at the request of, for example, Turkey. Such a threat could be chemical and/or biological weapons or possible seizure of these weapons by unauthorized entities such as terrorists. Use of force would also be lawful when such a request (to NATO or to another entity) were made by the internationally recognized government of Syria.¹³ However, such a situation did not take place, and the Alliance observed the Syrian conflict from a distance. Already by April 2012, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Secretary General of NATO at that time, declared that the Alliance would not send any armed forces to Syria (and he consistently repeated that later). Meanwhile, the conflict escalated, war crimes were committed in Syria, and the numbers of victims and refugees grew. International institutions, among them the European Union and, primarily, the United Nations, decided to apply sanctions against the Assad regime, simultaneously trying to solve the conflict through diplomatic relations. The Arab

12 *NATO Support to Turkey*, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_92140.htm?selectedLocale=en [04.02.2021].

13 See: J. J. Paust, *Use of Military Force in Syria by Turkey, NATO, and the United States*, “Journal of International Law”, 2013, vol. 34, issue 2, pp. 431-446.

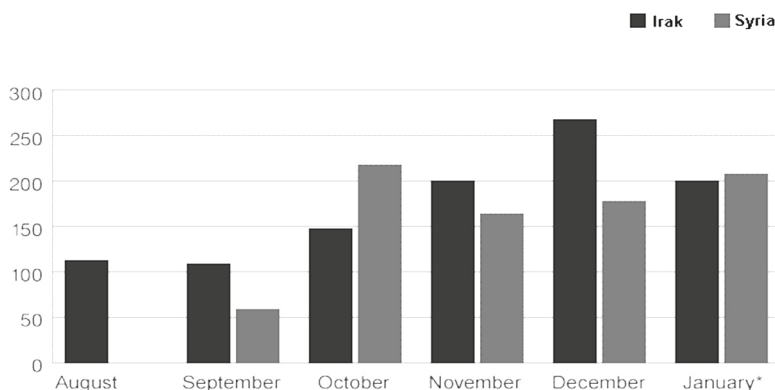
League also put forward its suggestions. However, the internal situation in Syria became increasingly complicated, turning into the object of conflict for many countries, including Western states (USA, Great Britain, France, Germany) and Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Russia and China. The latter two states, as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, vetoed four times the resolutions of the UNSC concerning the civil war in Syria. Diplomatic efforts, undertaken many times, failed mainly due to divergent views of particular states. Peace negotiations conducted under the aegis of the United Nations in Geneva did not produce any solution, either. Hence, the role of the UN in the Syrian conflict was *de facto* limited to the task of humanitarian aid provisions. The only considerable success of the organization was the adoption in September 2013 of a resolution concerning the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons.

The real external military involvement was not initiated by international institutions but by states. Nevertheless, it is difficult to talk here about involvement on any side of the conflict. The air operations undertaken in August 2014 were directed against the so-called Islamic State (until 29 June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and conducted at first only in northern Iraq. However, the Islamic State launched an offensive in the territory of Syria already in spring 2014, fighting against both the opposition forces and the government troops. As a result of the offensive, the Islamic State soon occupied a substantial part of Syria which the divided and dispersed rebels, involved in the fight against the government forces, were not able to control or maintain. Air raids on the positions of the Islamic State in Syria were launched on 23 September 2014. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, from 8 August 2014 when the operation against the Islamic State was started until January 2015, the costs of these actions reached 1.3 billion USD (over 8 million a day). These expenses pertain to operations conducted both in Syria and Iraq.¹⁴ According to the data revealed by the Department, by the end of 2014 the Air Forces of the coalition fighting against the Islamic State used weapons (that

14 U.S. Department of Defense, [http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/\[02.02.2021\]](http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/[02.02.2021]).

is fired and bombed Islamists' positions) almost 6000 times, making over 1400 combat flights.¹⁵

Graph 1. Air raids of the coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (*as at 26.01.2015)



Source: U.S. CENTCOM, <http://www.centcom.mil/>.

This operation, called *Inherent Resolve*, was carried out by a coalition of over sixty states, led by the USA. In practice, most of these states provided humanitarian aid, as well as intelligence and logistic support. Some Western states, e.g. Germany and Italy, also delivered weapons to Peshmerga, as Kurdish forces bore the major burden of land combat against the Islamic State. Even though all NATO member states belonged to the coalition and strictly military actions were carried out predominantly by air forces of the USA, other NATO states (mostly Great Britain, France, and Canada) and their allies (Australia), this was by no means a NATO operation.¹⁶ Air Forces of countries of the region also participated in air raids, e.g. of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Jordan. Operations against the Islamic State were also conducted by Iran, even though it was not a member of the coalition. Such a broad coalition against the Islamic State was possible only due to the fact that extremists were waging a brutal and ruthless war, harming practically all states which had interests in the

¹⁵ And further 400 flights in January 2015.

¹⁶ No large-scale land operations were planned, either. In Iraq (and perhaps in Syria) there were only small special forces units (American, British, Canadian, Australian, probably Iranian and possibly of other states) whose official tasks were consultation and training but it may be supposed that they also took an active part in the fight.

Middle East. Crucially, this was an unprecedented situation: never before were Islamic fundamentalists able to establish a territorial, para-state unit, providing them with a power base for action. Hence, the Islamic State became a qualitatively new threat, creating challenges of a geopolitical character, something unattainable for the dangerous, but dispersed and deterritorialized entities like Al-Qaeda.¹⁷

3. Reasons for NATO non-involvement

When the conflict in Syria escalated (in summer 2012) and it was reported that Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons, which was confirmed in 2013, there were predictions, also among political scientists, that “the West aims at an intervention.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, these predictions were groundless then – especially with reference to the North Atlantic Alliance. At the beginning of 2013 Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared again, clearly and concisely, the Alliance’s attitude to the conflict in Syria: “(...) it’s not NATO business. And I’m not going to interfere with the EU discussions. And I stick to that.”¹⁹ It should be recalled that strong reactions of the community took place no earlier than in summer 2014, *nota bene* not due to the dramatic humanitarian situation in Syria.²⁰ As it has already been mentioned, these reactions were triggered by the emergence of a new entity, the Islamic State, whose operations disturbed many states that regarded the growing potential of Islamic extremists in the Middle East as a threat to their own interests. Furthermore, the actions against the Islamic State were not initiated by the North Atlantic Alliance. Even though the Syrian conflict was a challenge to NATO, this was neither a major nor a strategic challenge. Many factors indicated that NATO would not be going to take any actions towards the civil war in Syria.

17 G. Friedman, *The Islamic State Reshapes the Middle East*, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/islamic-state-reshapes-middle-east> [02.02.2021].

18 See e.g. *Politolog nie ma wątpliwości: Zachód dąży do interwencji w Syrii*, <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/opinie/artykuly/436323,jan-bury-zachod-dazy-do-interwencji-w-syrii.html> [01.02.2021].

19 These words were uttered at a press conference of the Secretary General of NATO on 18 March 2013.

20 According to the estimates of the UN and UNHCR, in summer 2014 the number of fatalities in the conflict reached almost 200 thousand and the number of refugees (including internal) about 9 million.

Firstly, member states had divergent interests in this region, which made NATO unable to take a decision about joint actions. This was exemplified by the attitude of Turkey. In autumn 2014 Turkey joined the coalition against the Islamic State, provided Iraq and Syria with humanitarian aid worth over 300 million dollars, accepted almost 2 million of refugees from Syria, and the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan assured that Turkey would offer necessary support for the operation – “military or logistic”.²¹ Nevertheless, almost at the same time, the Turkish air forces made air raids on Kurds from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, considered by Turkey to be at least as dangerous as the Islamic State. Besides, Islamists’ actions will be accepted by Turkey as long as they are directed against the Kurds and al-As-sad. Moreover, Erdoğan did not hesitate to publicly criticise Western states for their involvement in the Middle East issues. Owing to the fact that Turkey was at the time an influential NATO member, there were no reactions on the part of the organization.

Secondly, “the Libyan lesson”. The civil war in Libya, similarly to the conflict in Syria, broke out at the beginning of 2011. However, unlike Syria, in the case of Libya it was soon possible to a) establish an international coalition ready for intervention; b) explicitly support rebels and oppose Muammar Gaddafi’s rule; c) receive UN mandate. Moreover, NATO quickly (on March 31st) took full responsibility for naval and air operations in Libya. Nevertheless, only some NATO states, which had their own interests in Libya, actually took military action (mostly Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States). Besides, they interpreted the UNSC Resolution of 1973 rather liberally. These actions were strongly condemned by Russia. Afterwards, having drawn a useful lesson, Russia consistently vetoed subsequent drafts of a resolution concerning Syria. The Gaddafi regime was overthrown with the help of NATO, but Libya was ravaged by tribal, ethnic, and religious fights, and the area became a power base for fundamentalist organizations and the most explosive place in North Africa. The civil war in Libya turned into a creeping, internationalized conflict beyond any

21 *Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition Against the Islamic State?*, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/12/who-has-contributed-what-in-the-coalition-against-the-islamic-state/> [28.09.2021].

control.²² Taking into account the fact that involvement in the Syrian conflict could possibly bring similar results and criticism for actions going beyond the goals specified by the Treaty, that is defence of own territories and populations, the North Atlantic Organization showed moderation in this case. The United States also drew a lesson – the European NATO members were not able to operate in Libya without the logistic help from the USA. It probably contributed to the decision to shift focus in the US security policy on Asia. One of the consequences was a reduction of the American military presence in Europe (and only Russia's activities changed this attitude some time later).²³

Thirdly, “the Afghan lesson”. The ISAF operation, carried out in 2001-2014, has been the most significant task and the most important test for NATO so far. It was the first operation of the Alliance outside Europe, the first one with involvement of considerable land forces, not only of member states, and the first one conducted on such a scale against an asymmetric enemy. Furthermore, this operation entailed other than military actions: rebuilding infrastructure, supporting local communities, and ensuring political stability of the state.²⁴ Thus, the concept of “collective defence” got a completely new meaning. However, the results of the mission in Afghanistan leave a lot to be desired. The mission goals set in 2001 were not achieved, especially in regards to the social and economic stability of Afghanistan, even if they were unrealistic from the beginning. On the other hand, tremendous human and material costs resulted in the weakened cohesion of the Alliance, delegitimation of its actions, and the need to redefine its own identity.²⁵ Official statements emphasize the democratization process in Afghanistan, the breaking up of Al-Qaeda, the unity of the Alliance, finding of allies in the fight against terrorism etc. Nevertheless, the picture of the Afghan mission, emerging from behind docu-

22 O. Romdhani, *North Africa: Beyond Jihadist Radicalization*, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/north-africa-beyond-jihadist-radicalization> [04.02.2021].

23 S. Kay, M. Petersson, *NATO's Transformation and Global Security*, [in:] *NATO's Post-Cold War Politics. The Changing Provision of Security*, ed. S. Mayer, Hampshire-New York 2014, pp. 295-296.

24 M. Agner, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation: An Alliance in Transition*, [in:] *International Organisations: Their Role in Conflict Management*, P. D. Thruelsen (ed.), Copenhagen 2009, pp. 115-116.

25 A. Gruszczak, *Is NATO still needed? An unorthodox perspective on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation on the example of the Afghan conflict*, [in:] *The Yearbook of International Security*, P. Mickiewicz (ed.), Wrocław 2011, pp. 23-30, 33-36.

ments and official declarations of politicians, is completely different. It is concisely described by veterans: “We don’t know why we are here, what we are fighting for and how we should learn whether we are winning”; “The Taliban want to fight forever. We don’t.”²⁶ The Americans also came to the conclusion that European NATO members, with few exceptions, were again rather symbolically involved in military action, shifting the major burden on the United States. Finishing the Afghan operation in 2014, NATO had no reason to celebrate victory. One of the effects was a growing conviction, especially in Europe, that the conflict in Syria was not “our” conflict and should be left to the states of the Middle East and the ones which have their important interests there (e.g. the United States).

Fourthly, after the end of the operation in Afghanistan, NATO needed to adapt to the changed circumstances and to specify its priorities in three key strategic regions. The first one was Asia, especially due to the growing status of China – which was especially important to the United States. The second region was the Middle East and North Africa, being the major sources of local conflicts spreading to the whole region. The third one was Russia, whose actions caused growing concern. An internal problem was decreasing capability and unwillingness to spend on defence, not only in Europe but also in the United States (so-called sequestration). The shape and character of transatlantic relations were uncertain. The United States tended to lean towards Asia, whereas the European states rather focused on regional priorities: the north-eastern (Poland, Baltic states), northern (Norway), and southern (France) directions.²⁷ Not only the hierarchy of priorities but also the level of globalization of actions gave rise to controversy within the Alliance. In consequence of these problems, along with effects of the economic crisis and exhaustion caused by the mission in Afghanistan, NATO had in 2015 quite limited capabilities and was less willing to

26 T.E. Ricks, *19 true things generals can't say in public about the Afghan war*, http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/09/19_true_things_generals_cant_say_in_public_about_the_afghan_war_a_helpful_primer [20.11.2021].

27 See: A. Michta, *NATO po 2014 roku – jakie priorytety?*, “Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe”, 2014, no. 1, pp. 117-130; cf. S.M. Walt, *A new kind of NATO*, http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/11/a_new_kind_of_nato [11.11.2021].

undertake complicated operations. Moreover, the United States was increasingly reluctant to take on the role of the leader.²⁸

Another problem and a growing challenge for NATO was Russia.²⁹ In spring 2014, after annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the Alliance suspended work of the NATO-Russia Council, a body established during the NATO-Russia summit in 2002 as a forum for cooperation and consultation. On the other hand, in its military doctrine announced in December 2014, Russia declared “NATO expansion” to be one of the major threats to interests of the Russian Federation.³⁰ This rhetoric was also clearly visible in an intensive propaganda campaign conducted by Russia in connection with the events in Ukraine. At the same time, the activity of Russian planes and ships near the frontiers of NATO member states has risen to an unprecedented level: this referred especially to airspace of the Baltic countries. Furthermore, escalation of the conflict in Ukraine was a cause for growing concern within the Alliance. NATO was also concerned about the possibilities for effective reacting in the event of a hybrid conflict in Europe. Russia was taken into account also in the context of the Syrian conflict: Bashar al-Assad was the last ally of Russia in the Middle East. Hence the continuous efforts of Russia that attempted to play the leading role in the diplomatic solution of the conflict and at the same time tried to safeguard its interests.³¹

Conclusions

Whose sides should NATO take? In 2012 Alain Juppe claimed that “the Syrian society is so divided that if we give weapons to any faction we will unleash a civil war among Christians, Alawites, Sunnis and Shias”.³² The situation in Syria resembled a bit *bellum omnium contra*

28 More in: M. Madej, *NATO po szczycie w Chicago: stan i perspektywy rozwoju*, [in:] *NATO wobec wyzwań współczesnego świata*, R. Czulda, R. Łoś, J. Regina-Zacharski (eds.), Łódź 2013, pp. 25-37.

29 J. Carden, *Welcome to Cold War 2.0: Russia's New and Improved Military Doctrine*, “National Interest”, 5.01.2015.

30 Text of the doctrine: http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/461 [17.11.2021].

31 B. Barabandi, *Moscow's Syria Talks: Diplomacy that Destroys Hopes for Peace*, <http://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/menasource/moscow-s-syria-talks-diplomacy-that-destroys-hopes-for-peace> [17.11.2021].

32 Quoted after: C. A. Buckley, *Learning from Libya, Acting in Syria*, “Journal of Strategic Security”, 2012, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 90.

omnes, where each party is additionally supported by external entities – in this case, economic and geopolitical interests were accompanied by deep religious antagonism between Sunnis and Shias. The United States, opposing the Assad regime right from the beginning of the conflict, fought alongside Iran against the Islamic State, and it should be suspected that, contrary to official announcements, they held secret talks about cooperation, which was confirmed for example by progress in negotiations over the Iranian nuclear programme. However, Iran backed up Bashar al-Assad, and potential US strong support for the rebels fighting against him would lead to worsening of Iranian-American relations, which was not welcome by any of the parties. There have also been numerous concerns that supporting (arming) rebels would *summa summarum* mean providing weapons to the Islamic State. Among al-Assad's allies was also Russia, whose relations with NATO were, as it has already been mentioned, increasingly tense. On the other hand, Turkey wished to remove al-Assad and to set up in Damascus the Sunni regime which was favourably inclined towards Turkey. This would require either strong support for opposition forces or decisive action against the government. Then again, Saudi Arabia would gladly accept deteriorated relations between the United States and Iran. The only solution in this complicated circumstance that was politically acceptable to all important parties was a continued fight against the Islamic State. Nevertheless, this was not an ideal solution, either: weakening Sunni extremists would mean reinforcement of al-Assad, which would not contribute to solving the conflict in Syria. Furthermore, a possible defeat of the Islamic State would largely be credited to the Kurds, who would certainly aim at declaring independence in the territories they have claimed their own for a long time. This would lead to an inevitable conflict between Kurds and Shias (Iran), Syria (no matter whether and who will hold power then), Iraq, Turkey, and the United States supporting the Kurds.³³

Consequently, the Alliance was aware of the fact that air raids would not solve the conflict (what has already been evidenced by the Libyan

33 More in: Analyses of W. Repetowicz published by Defenc24.pl; cf. F. Itani, *Losing Syria and Iraq to Jihadists*, Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Issue in Focus, June 2014. The USA finally stopped supporting Kurds in 2019.

lesson).³⁴ It would be necessary to involve considerable land forces, which did not guarantee success either, as has been confirmed by the Afghan lesson. However, assuming that the Alliance sends troops to combat the Islamic State and thus gets involved in the internal conflict in Syria, a number of questions would need to be answered. Which territories were controlled by particular sides of the conflict? Was this control permanent? How did the relations between various parties of the conflict differ and change in specific territories affected by fights? What were the real goals and priorities of particular participants of the conflict? Was there any chance to establish cooperation with local leaders who were trusted and had considerable standing? What would be the reaction of local people and Muslim states? How sure could we be that the long-term consequences of the intervention will not be the same as in Libya and Afghanistan?³⁵ Answering these questions was a challenge to a centralized (state) decision-making body and, even more so, to an international organization.

Lastly, open military involvement of NATO in Syria would paradoxically bring substantial benefits to the Islamic State and other Islamic extremists. It would facilitate recruitment of new fighters in the name of combating “crusaders”. Such a situation could even give a new dimension to the whole conflict, which at the moment is an intra-civilization conflict occurring between Islam followers. Hence, as has already been mentioned, there were opinions in the West that involvement in the Syrian conflict should be avoided because this is “not our war” and it is al-Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah on the one side and Sunni Jihadists on the other side who ought to shed blood there.³⁶

Similarly, particular NATO members did not take any extensive actions on their own, as they had neither the potential, capability, nor a clear political goal. The United States could be the exception, having both the capability and the political will. However, any USA decision to intervene would not be focused on Syria, but aimed at pushing the Islamic State out of Iraq because the political costs of a military inter-

34 S. J. Freedberg, *ISIS Adapts to US Airstrikes – Much Like Vietnamese*, <http://breakingdefense.com/2014/08/isis-adapts-to-us-airstrikes-much-lik-evietnamese/> [26.09.2021].

35 Cf. F. Itani, N. Rosenblatt, *Zooming in on Syria: Adapting US Policy to Local Realities*, Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Issue Brief, March 2014.

36 F. Itani, *Losing Syria...*, p. 4.

vention in Syria would be too high. In February 2015, then-President Barack Obama made a request to Congress for AUMF – Authorization for Use of Military Force against the Islamic State for the period of three years. However, as we know today, the scope of American actions was actually limited because the American elites and society showed a rather ambivalent attitude as a result of the experience of the Iraqi and Afghan wars. According to the Brookings Institute survey of January 2015, 70% of Americans regarded the Islamic State as the most serious threat in the Middle East, 57% claimed that the USA ought to take necessary actions to defeat Islamists, but 57% were in fact against sending American troops to Iraq/Syria.³⁷

In 1998 American researchers concluded in an article about international organizations that NATO was probably “the most successful alliance in history.”³⁸ Nevertheless, this was two strategic concepts ago, before the extension of the Alliance, before September 11th, before Kosovo, before Afghanistan, before Georgia, and before Crimea and Donbas. It is worth noting here again the theory of international organizations: states play the so-called double role in an organization.³⁹ They are the elements of the organization’s system and they participate in the decision-making process whose effect is expression of the organization’s will, but simultaneously they are elements of the organization’s environment, that is their interests and actions create decision-making situations for an organization. To put it simply, the interests of an international organization are not necessarily identical with the interests of member states – in fact, they rarely are.

Therefore, taking into account all the aforementioned circumstances, it is no wonder that in regards to NATO’s attitude to the Syrian conflict, there were opinions that NATO is “less than useless.”⁴⁰ It corresponds to views of realists who claim that NATO’s efforts undertaken after the end of the Cold War and aimed at becoming a military

37 *American Public Attitudes Towards ISIS and Syria*, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/01/08%20american%20opinion%20poll%20isis%20syria%20telhami/isis_report.pdf [1.11.2021].

38 K. W. Abbott, D. Snidal, *Why States Act through Formal International Organizations*, “The Journal of Conflict Resolution” 1998, vol. 42, no. 1, p. 15.

39 W. Morawiecki, *Procesy decyzyjne w organizacji międzynarodowej*, [in:] *Decyzje polityczne w systemach społecznych*, A. Bodnar, W. Szczepański (eds.), Warszawa 1987, pp. 383-384.

40 D. Bandow, *Will NATO Intervene in Syria?*, “National Interest”, 9.10.2012.

alliance and a political institution at the same time made it ineffective in both dimensions.⁴¹ Even if this conclusion is considered to be too far-reaching, it is difficult to deny that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization did not have effective military or political instruments for the conflict in Syria. Nevertheless, as Stephen M. Walt observed, even though Syria was an undisputable tragedy, it paled in comparison with the dramatic conflict in Congo, which was hardly noticed in the West. And if the West coped with the Assads' clique for 40 years, it can do so for another 40 years if need be.⁴²

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41 K-K.S. Pease, *International Organizations. Perspectives on Governance in the twenty-first century*, New York 2010, pp. 140-143.

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