

# How Can NATO Effectively Counter Terrorism and Hybrid Threats? Analyzing the Benefits and Pitfalls of Joint Synergies

Giray SADIK \*

### Abstract

*When it comes to hybrid threats, there are a number of gaps to be addressed to keep NATO strategically relevant for the Allies' security. As many experts have observed, despite the potential for terrorist violence as a part of hybrid warfare, counter-terrorism as a response or preventive measure has an unexpectedly low profile in NATO's policy on hybrid threats. The more NATO addresses these critical issues for Allies' security through intra-alliance cooperation, the more strategically relevant the Alliance will be for its members. Hence, Alliance cohesion is a key starting point, but perhaps only the first step. The next steps are likely to be built together by working on venues for strategic cooperation and hybrid capacity-building. The security atmosphere of Europe and its neighborhood is becoming increasingly hybrid, and therefore requires the Allies to act accordingly. To what extent NATO can deliver under these circumstances will be the litmus test for the Alliance's credibility and strategic relevance in the years to come. This article aims to explore how NATO can expand its strategic cooperation and develop effective countermeasures against terrorism and hybrid threats, while paving the way for hybrid capacity-building starting with NATO allies and potentially growing with regional partners.*

\* Professor, Director of European Studies Research Center, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: gsadik@ybu.edu.tr. ORCID: 0000-0002-4099-7840. The author would like to thank the Research Division of NATO Defense College (NDC), where he conducted part of this research as an Eisenhower Fellow. The views expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author and do not reflect the opinions of the NDC or NATO.

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Euro-Atlantic security, hybrid warfare, hybrid threats, terrorism, NATO, new strategic concept

## Introduction

The malaise that the U.S. and the West have experienced in recent military campaigns stems in large part from *unclear thinking about war, its political essence, and the strategies needed to join the two*. Analysis and response are predicated on entrenched theoretical concepts with limited practical utility, and this inadequacy of understanding has spawned new and not-so-new terms to capture unanticipated trends, starting with the rediscovery of ‘insurgency’ and ‘counterinsurgency’ and leading to a discussion of ‘hybrid threats’ and ‘gray-zone’ operations. New terminology can help, but the change must go deeper.<sup>1</sup>

Recent NATO summits have illustrated how the Allies can keep talking about issues of substantial relevance with each other without adequately contemplating the potential of their interrelationship. Since 2014, all NATO Summit Declarations have pointed to terrorism and hybrid warfare as the main and most immediate threats to the security of the North Atlantic Alliance and its members. Surprisingly, however, these two threats are largely addressed separately—the fact that terrorism happens to be an important element of hybrid warfare is not mentioned at all.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the research carried out on NATO’s counter-terrorism efforts focus on theoretical debates such as the divergent views among the Allies on how to respond the terrorist threat or on whether NATO has become a collective security organization in the Transatlantic area or remains committed to collective defence. However, little, if any, research has been carried out which examines to what extent can NATO provide practical content to its vision on countering terrorism in addition to the Transatlantic counter-terrorism cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to hybrid threats, a number of areas must be addressed to keep NATO strategically relevant to the Allies’ security. Above all, as Andrew Mumford warned in 2016, “despite the potential of terrorist violence as part of hybrid warfare, counter-terrorism as a response or preventive measure has an unexpectedly low profile in NATO’s policy on hybrid threats.”<sup>4</sup> This critical point remains relevant today in terms of NATO’s doctrines and practices.

The present article addresses the following core question: Should NATO tackle terrorism and hybrid threats together? Analyzing relevant NATO strategies and operations in countering terrorism and hybrid threats will help to identify the critical, common characteristics of and constraints posed to the Transatlantic political and military communities. Building on this analysis, the article explores NATO's venues for cooperation and strategic learning when developing effective countermeasures against terrorism and hybrid threats. Finally, the article details the policy implications of the hybrid security environment for the development of a comprehensive NATO strategy.

The article is based on analyses of up-to-date NATO documents, such as strategic and military concepts, summit communiqués and declarations, as primary sources. To complement these sources with experts' insights, the author conducted phone interviews with NATO officials and with non-NATO experts with relevant expertise, such as those from the EU-NATO joint Centre of Excellence to Counter Hybrid Threats. In addition, NATO Defense College (NDC) publications and related articles were used as secondary sources.

### Growing Importance of Hybrid Threats for Euro-Atlantic Security

The EU has recently found itself facing various crises, from intergovernmental squabbles over the EU constitution to economic hardships, from refugees on its borders to rising concerns over emboldened Russian maneuvers in Ukraine and Syria and the strategic consequences of Brexit for Euro-Atlantic relations. Evidently, these interrelated challenges are of a transnational and hybrid nature, involving state and non-state actors alike. As these challenges affect the European sphere inside and out, the EU needs to devise political strategies to deal with them. In light of these challenging developments, the need for comprehensive analyses and timely solutions has raised research interest in hybrid threats among practitioners and scholars alike.

Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor's edited 2012 volume, *Hybrid Warfare*, is a flagship example of recent studies on the topic, providing historical background with the aim of tracing continuity and change in devising hybrid strategies.<sup>5</sup> However, as Bernhard Hoffmann notes in his recent review of the book, perhaps in part due to the military background of the editors, "a traditional focus on the battlefield makes me wonder whether the editors were thinking hybrid enough."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, although the

editors' background in military history and strategic studies can be an advantage for detailed battleground analysis, it can also hamper the development of the comprehensive outlook necessary to grasp the nature of contemporary hybrid threats. Other, more recent books tend to overemphasize a single dimension of hybrid warfare above all other factors, such as terrorism and regime change. Evidently, these studies also risk not being comprehensive enough to grasp the true complexity of contemporary hybrid strategies.<sup>7</sup>

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### Definition: Hybrid War or Hybrid Threat?

As NATO is the core institution organizing Euro-Atlantic cooperation against hybrid threats, its definitions present a meaningful starting point. In a 2011 report, NATO describes 'hybrid threat' as follows:

Hybrid threat is an umbrella term, encompassing a wide variety of existing adverse circumstances and actions, such as terrorism, migration, piracy, corruption, ethnic conflict... What is new, however, is the possibility of NATO facing the adaptive and systematic use of such means singularly and in combination by adversaries in pursuit of long-term political objectives, as opposed to their more random occurrence, driven by coincidental factors.<sup>8</sup>

This comprehensive definition of hybrid threats enables researchers to grasp the term's multi-faceted nature, while also presenting examples of hybrid threats such as terrorism and migration. The same report underlines that "hybrid threats are not exclusively a tool of asymmetric or non-state actors, but can be applied by state and non-state actors alike. Their principal attraction from the point of view of a state actor is that they can be largely non-attributable, and therefore applied in situations where more overt action is ruled out for any number of reasons."<sup>9</sup>

This point in the report is of particular importance for the present research, as it highlights the fact that 'hybrid' does not necessarily mean 'non-state.' In this regard, this 'hybrid threat' conceptualization opens the door for the

consideration of ‘hybrid war’ in the formulation and development of hybrid threats. Accordingly,

Hybrid war encompasses a set of hostile actions whereby, instead of a classical large-scale military invasion, an attacking power seeks to undermine its opponent through a variety of acts including subversive intelligence operations, sabotage, hacking, and the empowering of proxy insurgent groups. It may also spread disinformation (in target and third countries), exert economic pressure and threaten energy supplies.<sup>10</sup>

In view of the above definition, hybrid war necessitates an orchestrating state actor, which can weave state capabilities such as military and intelligence operations in support of proxy insurgent groups. The most recent examples of such operations can be observed in Russian maneuvers in Ukraine and Syria, involving both conventional military assets such as fighter jets and air defenses, along with local insurgent groups acting as proxy land forces. Although important, hybrid war is only part of the story when the Allies are faced with ever-growing hybrid threats ranging from refugees to terrorism. NATO’s “Bi-Strategic Command Capstone Concept” describes hybrid threats as “those posed by conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives.”<sup>11</sup> The same concept includes “low intensity asymmetric conflict scenarios, global terrorism, piracy, transnational organized crime, demographic challenges, resources security, which have also been identified by NATO as so-called hybrid threats.”<sup>12</sup> Similar to the earlier hybrid threat definition, this one

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also includes terrorism and the demographic challenges growing out of a combination of state and non-state actors via conventional and non-conventional means. This constitutes another reason for this article’s choice of the term ‘hybrid threat’ to capture the complexity of the threat environment in which NATO needs to operate. Under

these circumstances, it can be observed that Euro-Atlantic relations have been evolving in a constant trial period in which even their rare successes are bound to be repeatedly tested. Still, “European countries are vulnerable to threats from war and political instability in Syria and Iraq. Terrorist groups exploit fragile environment for unleashing violence and attacks in European countries.”<sup>13</sup> For this reason, effective Euro-Atlantic cooperation against hybrid threats has become more a question of “how” than of “if.”

## Terrorism & Hybrid Threats: Common Characteristics in Theory and Practice

As hybrid threats to international security have evolved, their analysis in scholarly and policy debates have become a source of ongoing confusion. However, it is important to refer to NATO definitions from official reports as primary sources, as these reflect a consensus view among member states about their understanding of these key terms. Definitions present a meaningful starting point, and this article uses the updated NATO glossary for the basics as follows: *a hybrid threat* is defined as a type of threat that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, experts underline that “hybrid threats are not exclusively a tool of asymmetric or non-state actors, but can be applied by state and non-state actors alike. In accordance with NATO definitions, ‘terrorism’ has already been placed under the umbrella of hybrid threats. This constitutes a meaningful starting point for considering them together. NATO has defined terrorism and counterterrorism as follows:

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*Terrorism*: the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.

*Counterterrorism*: all preventive, defensive and offensive measures taken to reduce the vulnerability of forces, individuals and property against terrorist threats and/or acts, and to respond to terrorist acts.<sup>15</sup>

As highlighted in the above definitions, there is at least an acknowledgement on paper that terrorism and hybrid threats are interrelated. However, so far, only a few experts such as Andrew Mumford and Peter Braun have advocated this point. Still, their observation is relevant today, given the increasing likelihood of growing complexity and threat levels as terrorists acquire capabilities and deploy their tactics in theatres from Libya to Yemen and from Ukraine to Syria. For this reason, instead of dealing with extensive conceptual debates on the use of terms, this section focuses on the fundamental commonalities that could be considered in tandem.

To begin with, on a strategic landscape, acts of terror function as components of hybrid threats. Therefore, terrorism has the potential to become a key part of hybrid strategy in the grey zone where lines between state and non-state, domestic and international, civilian and military, physical and cyber domains are deliberately blurred. At times, terrorist attacks have been used to further complicate the relationship between these domains, so as to have a greater asymmetric impact against an adversary with superior conventional forces. Therefore, in the grey zone it is not practically feasible to isolate terrorism from hybrid threats. Braun highlights this end-means link on the role of terrorism in hybrid strategy as follows:

The main objective of terrorist activity in a hybrid environment is to spread fear and terror, to intimidate populations and degrade the will of an adversary. When multiple terrorist activities follow a central strategy, they can destabilize a state or a society to a considerable degree, even if an individual acting alone may cause relatively little harm.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the critical role of terrorism as a key component of hybrid threats, there is also a growing trend that can be coined as the ‘hybridization of terrorism,’ referring to the rising threat of terrorist organizations that have acquired hybrid capabilities. Ongoing clashes in Syria demonstrate how hybrid strategies can be violently pushed to the limits and pave the way for a number of unintended consequences. For example, “all factions are benefiting from material support from external actors, besides the plundering of pre-existent Syrian army depots. As relations between the factions are fluid, weapons often do not end up in the hands of the users for which they were intended.”<sup>17</sup> The growing hybrid capacity of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, DAESH, the PKK and their regional variants are only the tip of the iceberg of this rising trend. Furthermore, “nation states may empower terrorists by making heavy weapons (e.g., anti-tank weapons or drones) available to them.”<sup>18</sup> These interrelated trends reduce

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the technological edge states typically have against terrorists, and thus decrease the risk terrorists face when attacking state forces. These parallel trends—the increasing use of terrorism in hybrid warfare and the hybridization of terrorism—can be viewed as the ying-and-yang of each other, paving the way for protracted conflicts (e.g., Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, etc.), increasing civilian casualties and

resulting in mass refugee outflows with no end in sight. These common characteristics of conflict in the grey zone give rise to a number of shared problems for NATO and the Allies when dealing with terrorism and hybrid threats, all of which need to be analyzed together.

In recent years, NATO has put forward strategies addressing both terrorism and hybrid warfare. At the Chicago Summit in 2012, Policy Guidelines on counter-terrorism were approved. In 2015, these guidelines were supplemented by a military-strategic concept for counter-terrorism endorsed by the Military Committee. The concept, however, simply re-states the overarching political principles and provides only limited additional content. Lastly, in 2015, the North Atlantic Council agreed to a strategy on NATO's role in countering hybrid threats.<sup>19</sup>

The joint consideration of terrorism and hybrid threats can be seen as a first step in the right direction. Still, this acknowledgement on paper has yet to materialize into effective countermeasures. So far, the role of NATO has remained one of support to national efforts in countering terrorism and hybrid threats, rather than one of leadership. This backseat approach can be attributed to the underlying perception among many Allies that both terrorism and hybrid threats must first be countered at the national level. Therefore, despite the recognition of the transnational nature of the threats, there is a tendency among many Allies to consider the fight against them as the primary responsibility of the respective Allied governments, not of NATO per se. In short, common threats have failed to trigger common perceptions for many Allies.

NATO has made efforts to adapt to the new security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including international terrorism, by developing broader definitions of threats, restructuring its forces and refining common operational doctrines, which are the constituent parts of NATO's broader transformation process. In describing NATO's transformation, E. V. Buckley, NATO's previous Assistant Secretary General for Defence Planning and Operations, in a speech to the George C. Marshall Centre Conference, stated that the transformation goes beyond military transformation, and "involves the adaptation of NATO's structures, capabilities,

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policies, doctrines, and relationships to better suit current and perceived security challenges.”<sup>20</sup> With so many blurred lines among the threats themselves, NATO’s role in countering them is far from clear. This lack of clarity need not mean that NATO has no important role to play in countering terrorism and hybrid threats for the Allies and their partners, but rather that limiting its engagement in the hybrid landscape may put NATO’s strategic relevance against these threats at risk.

## Benefits for NATO in Dealing with Terrorism and Hybrid Threats Together

The current strategic landscape has become increasingly fluid, and thus needs to be analyzed beyond fixations on hybrid threats only from the East (i.e., Russia) and terrorism only from the South (i.e., MENA). Although NATO’s recent 360-degree approach to security acknowledges that threats can emerge from all directions, the more focused we are on the East-South divide, the more strategically blind we become to threats from other areas. As Lasconjarias and Jacobs point out:

NATO has started to adapt to the hybrid challenge, particularly in reaction to Russia’s hybrid war in Ukraine. But the Alliance is still far from a comprehensive strategy against hybrid threats, with particular regard to those emerging in the South. In order to develop such a comprehensive strategy, NATO needs to balance the course it is following to the East and South, as well as further develop its instruments, resources and approaches.<sup>21</sup>

This observation is becoming increasingly relevant today. Now, the real question has become *how* rather than *if*. To this end, the key benefits to NATO of addressing terrorism and hybrid threats together should be highlighted:

### *1) Avoid stove-piping and duplication of the Allies’ efforts*

If we keep adding new terms to an already exhaustive alphabet soup, we risk further complicating our limited understanding of these threats. In addition to conceptual limitations, “using different wording for identical content carries the risk of duplication and stove-piping.”<sup>22</sup> These are real risks, and if not addressed in a timely fashion they are likely to proliferate, and be exploited by adversaries and terrorists seeking asymmetric advantages. In a report prepared for the NATO’s Centre of Excellence for Defence against Terrorism in August 2016, for instance, Andrew Mumford concludes that “NATO counter-terrorism planning [...] needs to be fully integrated with-

in the Alliance's overarching military planning as an acknowledgment of the centrality of terrorism to the waging of hybrid warfare."<sup>23</sup> Although progress has been made in various areas since, Mumford's critical assessment still holds true today. Moreover, this assessment needs to be considered by other international organizations such as the EU (i.e., in ongoing joint NATO-EU counter-hybrid cooperation) and by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), given its important role in European security, when complementing NATO's military role with political mechanisms to enhance physical (infrastructure, energy security) and informational (cyber, AI/AR, media) resilience against hybrid threats. As a first step, these organizations can begin by "formulating a better-integrated strategy covering both threats, including an all-embracing threat description, followed by a comprehensive response across the full range of different modes of warfare."<sup>24</sup> Allied "capacity and willingness to impose costs (both reputational and material) on attackers should also be part of the policy toolbox."<sup>25</sup>

## *2) Similar threats require corresponding joint NATO capabilities & countermeasures*

If avoidance of stove-piping and duplication is about what not to do, developing joint complementary capabilities is about what to do. In this regard, NATO strategies can be summarized as follows:

Comparing the 2012 Counter-Terrorism Guidelines with the 2015 Strategy on NATO's role in countering hybrid threats, the lack of coordination and integration becomes particularly evident. While the message of the Alliance's counter-terrorism strategy is 'aware, capable and engaged', the strategy on countering hybrid threats is labelled 'prepare, deter, defend'. It is obvious, however, that several elements subsumed under the different keywords are more or less identical.<sup>26</sup>

Quanten explains that NATO's Military Concept for Defence against Terrorism [established at the NATO Prague Summit in 2002] "foresaw a number of new initiatives, such as intelligence sharing, CBRN measures, the establishment of a Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit, and Civil Emergency planning, as a priority. Yet all these separate initiatives lacked coordination and an overarching vision."<sup>27</sup> NATO's counterterrorism capabilities can be effective when countering emerging hybrid threats. Yet the problem, echoed by an increasing number of experts like Quanten, is not lack of resources (which is another challenge—burden-sharing), but the lack of an overarching strategic mindset. One way to address this problem could be to offer strategies on how to effectively combine Allied efforts in counter-

ing terrorism and hybrid threats. For instance, as Lasconjarias and Larsen suggest, “structurally, the respective forces should be organized around *Special Forces*, assuming that these would better understand and better mirror the adversary’s deployment.”<sup>28</sup> Such efforts can also contribute to NATO’s transformation by paving the way for the creation of more flexible, interoperable Special Forces units deployable against hybrid threats and terrorism, especially in light-footprint operations from the Balkans to MENA, where they can be trained and equipped to address challenges from the Eastern and Southern flanks.

### *3) Strategic learning & inter-departmental cooperation between transatlantic communities countering terrorism and hybrid threats*

Threats from terrorist and hybrid attacks continue to rise. Perhaps even more important than the number of attacks and casualties is their increasing complexity and growing transnational character. This risk of spill-over remains high today, and has become more of a two-way street, especially where hybrid strategies have been projected from East to South, as with

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Russia’s increasing assertiveness in MENA countries such as Syria and Libya. Therefore, the narratives that hybrid threats only threaten NATO’s Eastern flank, and terrorism comes only from the South are no longer valid; lessons from the field must be considered for our strategic learning.

When it comes to countermeasures, strategic learning can lead to improved resilience against both terrorism and hybrid threats. Terrorists learn from each other in a hybrid strategic landscape, so our strategies to counter terrorism and hybrid threats must adapt to this constant need for updating. Despite all constraints, “there is ample room for strengthening our collective resilience (at both the state and societal level) vis-à-vis the growing ‘hybridization’ of threats—wherever they may come from.”<sup>29</sup> A closer look at the nature of counter-terrorism measures in the societal, state, military, infrastructure and informational resilience domains reveals that they are essential in assuring preparedness and post-attack crisis management against terrorist attacks as well as hybrid threats. Accordingly, our counterterrorism and hybrid threats communities need to start looking to build venues for strategic learning and interdepartmental cooperation.

## Constraints on Joining Efforts in Countering Terrorism and Hybrid Threats

Although, as discussed above, there are numerous key merits for joining Allied efforts in countering terrorism and hybrid threats, the fact that they have been addressed independently from each other raises questions about potential obstacles. What are the political and military constraints that hamper the fusion of the efforts in NATO policy-making and implementation? Are some reasons better than others and what can be learned in order to overcome these obstacles? In response, this article identifies two sets of interrelated constraints: the first is *political*, referring to constraints in policymaking, and the second is *military*, referring to constraints related to the implementation of Alliance strategies.

### *1) Political: Allies' divergences and risk of intra-alliance rivalry among NATO agencies*

One of the key issues that various authorities and experts agree upon is the fact that terrorism is politically loaded, and thus combining it with hybrid threats could further complicate countermeasures. Accordingly, political issues emerge as the most critical constraint in Allied efforts in countering terrorism and hybrid threats together. In addressing political divergences among Allied member states on counter-terrorism, the recent assessments of Kris Quanten remain relevant for contemporary hybrid threats as well; for example, his recent overview provides a detailed discussion of the “fault lines” and “transatlantic divide” in counter-terrorism among NATO Allies.<sup>30</sup>

On the one hand, this is among the top – if not the most critical constraint in Allied policy-making, and thus need to be addressed, considering Alliance cohesion and the strategic relevance of NATO for the security needs of all its Allies. On the other hand, allied consensus can be beneficial in overcoming potential intra-Alliance rivalries among different NATO structures responsible for counter-terrorism and countering hybrid threats. So far, “the way NATO operates at the policy-making level seems to remain stove-piped, and inadequate to the diffuse nature of the threat. Extensive discussions with various leading authorities have revealed structural and budgetary inefficiencies.”<sup>31</sup> Evidently, this assessment remains relevant today and has become perhaps even more critical in the context of countering terrorism and hybrid threats. While it is understandable that the Allies have different priorities, in times of budget-crunching and ongoing burden-sharing debates, the argument *for* cooperation becomes ever stronger.

## 2) *Military: Responses to challenges emanating from the difficulty of attribution*

Another feature that terrorist and hybrid threats have in common is their elusive character, making the attribution of responsibility an intelligence challenge that can complicate the implementation of countermeasures.

One can even argue that the camouflage of the attacker is an important part of hybrid strategy aiming to paralyze national and Allied defenders. As General Breedlove warned after Ukraine, “Russian adventurism and terrorists to the South seek to exploit gaps when they arise.”<sup>32</sup> Difficulties in attribution that delay timely military responses remain among the critical gaps to be addressed when countering hybrid threats; consequently, this has been pushing Allies to make tough trade-offs:

The concurrency, having to deal with complex instability in the East and the South simultaneously, means that NATO governments are not always well-aligned when it comes to priorities. The RAP agreed in Wales prioritizes the East over the South and *collective defence* over *NATO’s other core tasks*, but this set of choices has already been challenged.<sup>33</sup>

These hard choices are likely to remain critical. The more the Allies broaden their divergences, the easier their adversaries—state and non-state—can exploit these cracks and render NATO strategically irrelevant for its members. Therefore, despite all the constraints—some more critical than others—there are compelling reasons for NATO to focus on joining efforts against the interrelated challenges emanating from terrorism and hybrid threats.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

Threats in the grey-zone are designed to have an asymmetrical political impact; therefore, by definition, any research on terrorism and hybrid threats is bound to address common policy implications. The strategic landscape will only become more ‘hybrid’, where even so-called ‘domestic terrorism’ will have a *global footprint* cross-cutting the physical, informational (cyber) and transnational domains. In the current strategic landscape of global terrorism and hybrid threats, challenging mindsets of fixed conceptualizations is a good first step for policymakers. As Braun points out:

Developing an integrated strategy for countering both threats would have two main advantages. First, the Alliance could widen its deterrence and defence posture by addressing a broader range of often interrelated threats.

Second, at the same time, such an approach could help to overcome current differences regarding threat perceptions in the eastern and southern member states. These efforts would contribute to strengthening unity among Allies and hence protecting the Alliance's centre of gravity.<sup>34</sup>

In light of the benefits of and constraints against joining efforts in countering terrorism and hybrid threats, this article recommends the following steps to develop effective NATO countermeasures:

*1) Improving inter-agency collaboration, CIMIC and resilience lead to a stronger NATO*

Most of those interviewed for this study highlighted the need for member states to have effectively functioning inter-agency cooperation to counter these threats, e.g., among the military, police, intelligence and other public and private agencies whose role it is to respond to civilian emergencies. These assessments are also in line with NATO's 360-degree approach to security and related declarations that it is primarily the responsibility of national governments to counter these threats at home. Here, NATO's self-proclaimed role of support does not render it less important, but rather conditional on the preparedness and resilience of the Allied member states.

*2) Resolve allied differences to improve Alliance cohesion against concurrent threats*

Terrorism and hybrid threats are likely to remain concurrent challenges for NATO in the foreseeable future. Therefore, NATO could benefit from countering them simultaneously. In this regard, most of those interviewed identified political divergences as the most critical constraint on joining efforts in countering hybrid threats and terrorism. Even with the current sectional divisions, there is a role NATO can play to reduce Allied differences and assure that Alliance cohesion remains intact. Recently, the creation of a Joint Strategic Direction South Hub based at Joint Forces Command in Naples, Italy can serve as an important example for how Allied cooperation on the Southern flank can lead to improved coordination of efforts in hybrid security.

*3) Join efforts to streamline NATO decision-making and policy implementation*

Given the persistent political differ-

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ences among Allies, some of those interviewed expressed that although a merger of existing NATO structures is unlikely to be beneficial, the sections on counter-terrorism and countering hybrid threats can benefit from each other's complementary capabilities. If steps are taken in coordination, they can also contribute to avoiding duplication and stove-piping of the Allied efforts. In this regard, as a result of the January 2019 functional review, NATO put the Counter-terrorism and Hybrid Threats (CT/HT) sections under the Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD). This is a step in the right direction that is also in line with the recommendations of this article.

*4) Improve CT/HT synergies by sharing intelligence & lessons learned; enhanced personnel mobility*

When it comes to implementation, the joining of efforts to counter hybrid threats and terrorism has become more a question of 'how' rather than 'if'. A number of those interviewed used the same key term— synergy—when elaborating on the answers to this question. Thus, despite the fact that NATO's counter-terrorism and hybrid threats sections are likely to remain separate, synergy can still be accomplished by streamlining the sharing of intelligence and lessons learned, and encouraging personnel mobility between the two sections.

*5) Foster strategic learning between CT/HT communities at NATO and among Allies*

Building on these synergies, NATO international staff can contribute to strategic learning between these sections, and eventually in their respective communities in Allied and partner nations. As these concurrent threats are likely to become even more hybrid in nature, our responses as Allies can mutually benefit each other through the strategic learning of best practices and related countermeasures.

*6) Special operations mindset and Counter Hybrid Support Teams (CHST) to identify vulnerabilities and support targeted Allies*

There is a growing consensus among experts that hybrid threats can be better understood and countered through a special operations mindset. A number of those interviewed expressed strong support for the Allied development of such a special operations mindset for identifying vulnerabilities against hybrid threats and terrorism. In this respect, it is important to note that the recent addition of *Counter Hybrid Support Teams (CHST)* to NATO's toolbox to support preparation, deterrence, and defense against hybrid threats is a critical step in the right direction.

In light of this comprehensive strategy, we need to act together to this end, and not only among these organizations and their members, but also in tandem with the private sector and civil society, whose roles have become critical in sustaining resilience against hybrid threats in the long term. Recently, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stressed the importance of unified efforts against hybrid threats and terrorism during a meeting with the Allied National Security Advisers (NSAs): “many of our countries have suffered from different types of hybrid attacks. In isolation we may not always see the pattern, but together we can connect the dots to see the full picture.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, we all need to connect the dots to find the meaning, and work together for this meaning to be translated into effective countermeasures.

Threats in the gray zone are designed to have asymmetrical political impact; therefore, by definition, any research on terrorism and hybrid threats is bound to address policy implications. This exploratory study puts forward two sets of interrelated implications: one for policymakers, and the other for researchers. Starting with the implications for policymakers, who have been under pressure to function in this grey zone in recent years, the strategic landscape will only get more ‘hybrid,’ and even so-called ‘domestic terrorism’ are likely to have various ripple effects from their audiences to recruits and logistics.

In this strategic landscape of global terrorism and hybrid threats, challenging mindsets with fixed targets can be good for policymakers determined to avoid false assumptions. False assumptions lead to misjudgments and policies that do more harm than good. It is time for a sober assessment of recent interventions in terms of their ‘contributions’ to global terrorism and its increasingly hybrid character. From Afghanistan to Libya from Syria to Ukraine, risks of overreaction versus underreaction remain. Two lessons of relevance are that conflicts are likely to last even longer and potentially with ever more backlash to the homeland, from foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) returning home, to home-grown terrorist attacks perpetrated by sleeping-cells, to cyber formations... the list goes on.

The abovementioned considerations are of immediate concern for policymakers, who need adapt their decisions to the emerging strategic landscape. For scholars, the need for a comprehensive research agenda remains, not only for policy-relevant research but also to keep up with the changing character of war, while engaging with key stakeholders, including policymakers, the military, the private sector and civil society. Therefore, we must practice what we preach when talking about the unity of efforts. UI-

timately, it is this practice in academia and in policymaking that is going to make a meaningful difference toward making societies more resilient against hybrid threats.

## Endnotes

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