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# STRATCOM IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE SAHEL

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# Background

Seas and deserts are uniting and dividing elements of human life on this planet. The Mediterranean region, North Africa, and the Sahel have witnessed a long history of historical cycles of cooperation and conflict. Since the Arab Spring and the fall of Qaddafi in Libya in 2011, the region has received increasing international attention given the combination of violent conflict and unprecedented migration flows at Europe's doorstep. This paper aims to analyse the scope and nature of the impact of security challenges in this region upon strategic communications, mainly for NATO and its member states. This study is based on the analysis of global and regional open sources regarding four key issues: terrorism, migration, illicit trafficking, and great power competition. These have been identified as macro areas that affect the entire region and are deeply influenced by information. The conclusions provide succinct recommendations on how to conduct an informed and successful STRATCOM campaign in the region.

Despite sharing common fundamental challenges, the political situation of each country in the region is different. An important dynamic in this part of the world is that the political forces which perpetuate stability and instability in the region are different

for every state. Consequently, a nuanced regional analysis must reflect an embedded understanding of these differences and similarities, rather than relying on a 'regional stereotype' of security issues. The French military intervention in Mali in 2012, which





aimed at countering jihadist activity in the North of the country has thrown a spotlight on the security dynamics of the region<sup>1</sup>. The deteriorating security landscape in Libya continues to be one of the sources of concern for the future of political stability in the region. The key political challenge for these countries is to maintain security and socio-economic stability. This is not an easy task as national priorities have to accommodate international pressure, mainly European, to substantially reduce migration flows and fight terrorism. The recent *coup d'état* in Bamako on 18 August 2020 further demonstrated how fragile the political situation is in the region, and how incremental political advancements can be reverted in a matter of hours. The political situation is therefore precarious, if not critical.

international organisations operating in this region. The understanding and perception of the previously listed threats are not universal, featuring notable differences across both sides of the Mediterranean and between different countries. A regional approach to STRATCOM may exacerbate tensions and delay ongoing stabilisation efforts. Recognising that public diplomacy campaigns face the challenge of fostering cooperation in a competitive international context, it should be acknowledged that NATO member states operating in the area may struggle to effectively communicate the aims of their policies in the region. Strategic rivals may exploit the confusion and fallout from foreign interventions in the region to reduce public support for NATO's activities.

The challenges outlined require a careful and sensitive approach to strategic communications by both states and



# Terrorism

Terrorism is a form of organised violence aimed at achieving a political objective through instilling fear. Most of the violent groups present in the region seek to undermine secular states and their sovereignty. Although they deploy different strategies to achieve this aim, they share a common enemy. Framing the problem of terrorism as “regional” is problematic and can lead to a misinformed approach to the problem. Irregular warfare, such as counterterrorism, requires an understanding of the enemy and the population that it is attempting to influence. This study focuses on AQMI and Boko Haram as the main sources of terrorism threats in the region. The following section strives to outline the role of strategic communications in the fight against extremist actors.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a terrorist ‘splinter group’ of Al Qaeda in North Africa. This terrorist organisation has declared the goals of expelling foreigners from the region, replacing secular political leadership, and establishing sharia law. In strategic terms, the group can only claim to have succeeded if its violent actions lead to foreign military and political disengagement from the region or cause a major change in incumbent governments. The structure and identity of this terrorist organisation have undergone several changes with Al Mourabitoun (the Sentinels)<sup>2</sup> led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Ansar al Dine<sup>3</sup>. In March of 2017, the three groups were formally merged into Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), while maintaining AQIM core leadership. This terrorist network is deeply rooted in Algeria and linked with its history and political landscape<sup>4</sup>. However, the group has expanded its operations to Sahara for recruitment and kidnapping<sup>5</sup>. The expansion of AQIM activities peaked at the start of the conflict in Mali in 2012, leading the French

military to concentrate its counterterrorism operations toward the neutralisation of its leadership<sup>6</sup>. AQIM succeeded in becoming strategically relevant and increasingly dangerous by the virtue of its alliance with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad – a Tuareg violent group that has sought the independence of a vast territory in the region. Since then, although the group has been in steady decline, there are no signs of its resurgence nor of lasting defeat. AQIM has demonstrated that terrorist organisations can operate regionally with competence in criminal activities and logistics. Kidnapping has been the main source of financing for the group, which raises questions regarding its stature and prestige in the jihadist world<sup>7</sup>. Currently, AQIM and JNIM are mostly involved in IED attacks in Mali against national and international security forces.

Boko Haram is a Salafist terrorist organisation active since 2002, whose goal is to establish an Islamic State or Caliphate in Nigeria<sup>8</sup>. In



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strategic terms, the group can only claim to have succeeded if it can demonstrate the establishment of a functioning Islamic state under its absolute control and rule. Boko Haram has been operating mainly in Nigeria, although it has also conducted operations in the Sahel (mainly in the Diffa region of Niger) and in the Lake Chad region (bordering Cameroon and Chad)<sup>9</sup>. Thus far, the group has not succeeded in fulfilling its primary objective, in large part due to the decisive action of the Nigerian and MJTF (Multinational Joint Task Force) military offensive in 2015<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, the group has attracted media attention for high profile kidnappings and for pledging its allegiance to ISIS in March 2015<sup>11</sup>. This relationship has sparked a leadership crisis within Boko Haram, where the historical leader Shekau and the new leader Al Barnawi contend for the leadership of the group and its affiliation to ISIS<sup>12</sup>. While Boko Haram has the potential to be a leading exporter of violence in the region, it has not been able to reach its political goal thus far. There is a general lack of a long-term political strategy, and the troubled affiliation to ISIS has been a sign of strategic confusion rather than an astute

political manoeuvre. In 2017, Niger promoted a judiciary programme to convert former Boko Haram fighters into collaborators<sup>13</sup>. Since the inception of this programme, the group has been largely confined to North-West Nigeria and reduced to a lesser threat, as evidenced by its declining media profile. The last high-profile attack from the group was in January of 2019, when Boko Haram terrorists attacked a military base and torched aid facilities in Rann<sup>14</sup>.

The Liptako-Gourma (a cross-border area on the tripartite border between Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali) has been the theatre of growing violence since 2017<sup>15</sup>. This situation has led to many significant attacks against government and international forces as well as the local population. The most notable attack has been the Tongo-Tongo attack in September 2017 during which 4 American special forces operators lost their lives<sup>16</sup>. This area is characterised by a crisis in the local pastoral economy for groups like the *Peul* that have been relatively marginalised from the rest of the population<sup>17</sup>. The attacks have different features, but among the most recurring ones are hit-and-



runs or sudden attacks against police and military forces. The deterioration at the border has led to the declaration of a state of emergency<sup>18</sup>. The most troublesome aspect of the violence in this region is that many attacks are carried out by unknown networks and organisations, rendering potential solutions more difficult. The Malian Islamic State of the Grand Sahara (another splinter group of Al-Mourabitoun) has claimed responsibility for some of the attacks, signalling the importance of this geographical area for both terrorists from Mali and local criminals<sup>19</sup>.

Terrorism in this region is complex, sectarian, and widespread in geographical scope. The three main geographical areas in which terrorists recruit and organise attacks are Mali, Liptako-Gourma, and Lake Chad. AQIM and its network organisations pursue the objective of driving out the foreign presence from the region, while Boko Haram strives toward the establishment of a Caliphate. There is no sign of political convergence between these groups, but given the fractured nature of terrorist activity in the region, risks must be accounted for. One of

the critical aspects of the fight against the terrorist narrative is the presence of UN-led stabilisation efforts, such as MINUSMA and parallel French counter-terrorism operations. Local populations may not distinguish between the two, potentially causing negative long-term reverberations. Strategic communications can be employed to great advantage to mitigate the psychological impact that terrorist organisations seek to generate. A united diplomatic front with a clear message of support to the countries fighting terrorism is integral in conjunction with local efforts to combat radicalisation. Any military operation must be unambiguously understood as support to local authorities instead of direct external engagement. Moreover, the military efforts carried out in the Sahel must turn the page from previous operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and from the culture of “interventionism” broadly conceived. Terrorist organisations have a track record of exploiting overt and direct foreign intervention to their advantage.





# The Migrant Crisis

In recent years, the Mediterranean and the Sahel have become almost inextricably linked with the migrant crisis. The flow of migrants from the central and western Mediterranean routes has captured media attention and polarised the political debate in almost every European country. We refer to the migrant crisis as the growing flow of migrants, mainly from Africa and the Middle East in the period following the collapse of regimes in Libya and Syria. This flow was in part caused by violent conflicts and by socio-economic reasons. Thousands of people who could only reach Europe via illegal means have died along the way, causing an even greater humanitarian crisis. The migrant crisis is a delicate issue because it represents the intersection between issues pertaining to security, human rights, the global economy, and sovereignty. Addressing the issue in solely one of these areas may spark political problems at the national or international levels, rendering strategic communications even more important to managing the migrant crisis than to the previously described counter-terrorism operations. This paragraph analyses the key issues of this complex problem and focuses on the role of strategic communications in supporting the efforts of the international community in addressing the migration crisis.

While illegal migration in the Mediterranean has been a recurring problem for the last thirty years, it has escalated to become a visible strategic issue in the last fifteen. Prior to 2011, illegal migration, although politicised in European countries, was treated as a growing transnational issue with broader political consequences. In particular, the Italian government sought an agreement with Libya in 2008, which established joint maritime patrols between the two countries and a programme to monitor the southern border of Libya using satellites.<sup>20</sup> However, the deterioration of the problem after the fall of Qaddafi is an indicator that the prolonged political stability in the north African nation has contributed to transforming a problem into a crisis. Therefore, the narrative of the migrant crisis generated by the collapse of

Libya has strong traction, making it extremely difficult to counter.

The current migrant crisis in the Mediterranean has several dimensions to it. The first dimension is understanding the crisis as a rational system made up of country of origin, transit, and departure. This requires an understanding of the migration routes, means of transportation, legislation, law enforcement, and geography. Like every stream, migration follows the path of least resistance, and it can carry human beings as well as commodities (licit or illicit). The Sahel is a significant crossroads of trafficking and illegal migration mainly because it is the gateway between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahara Desert. The second dimension is the balance between European states'



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national security and international norms and obligations on human rights. Illegal border-crossing is a severe national security threat, but nation-states also have the responsibility to protect human lives in their territory. Both the Sahara and the Mediterranean have witnessed severe loss of life along the migration route to Europe. International media have also focused their attention on “detention centres” in Libya, which were reported to be profoundly incompatible with the principles of safeguarding human rights<sup>21</sup>. These two dimensions have been problematic, and to this point, have not been addressed through coherent political strategy at European, African, or international levels.

What is security? What constitutes a security threat? These fundamental questions are at the heart of the field of security studies. Migration per se is not a security threat, however, it has become increasingly securitised<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, control over borders represents one of the fundamental duties and lynchpins of the sovereignty of states. These two contrasting imperatives have proven difficult to reconcile, resonating in different ways in local and international

media, both in Africa and Europe. After all, fleeing a country to escape persecution is different from seeking a better life in another country. International organisations and national authorities alike have set up systems to identify these different categories and grant rights accordingly<sup>23</sup>. However, the sudden spikes in crossings may challenge and undermine even the most sophisticated systems of border security.

The migrant crisis and strategic communications have gone hand in hand. The images of people drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, NGO boats transporting migrants to Italian ports, and the chaotic crowds of Agadez have become visual symbols of the crisis. Political parties like *the Lega* in Italy and *Front National* in France have gained more popularity by offering a political platform based firmly on opposing migration<sup>24</sup>. However, the issue is not merely a battle between two narratives, but also a global phenomenon that, as indicated in the previous paragraphs, has structural aspects which cannot be quickly remedied by short-term measures. States have, above all other actors, the responsibility to provide



security and to safeguard human rights. Strategic communications must therefore perform the function of constantly engaging with stakeholders and the public, ensuring that national political preferences align with human rights standards. The fundamental duty is navigating between the two extremes of “open borders” and “closed borders,” thereby facilitating a measured and intelligent solution. Strategic communications can also shape how migrants are informed about the dangers of illegal journeys from Africa to Europe. This crisis does not seem to require military solutions, however, the stability of the security situation in the region

and the integrity of borders are issues of great concern to a military alliance, such as NATO. Consequently, the Alliance’s strategic communications capabilities could be directed toward a better understanding of the communication environment and assisting African countries in managing problems as they arise.



# Illicit Trafficking

Illicit trafficking is a problem that affects every state in terms of either the production, transit or entry of illegal goods. In effect, it is the 'dark side' of globalisation that accounts for a substantial percentage of global economy<sup>25</sup>. The Mediterranean and the Sahel are important crossroads of this global system<sup>26</sup>. The role of geographic regions in global trafficking is determined by the availability of products, a potential market, or its positioning between the two. This is undoubtedly the case for the Sahel and West Africa. This region is in a strategic position for global trafficking, located between the Atlantic Ocean, Europe's doorstep, and the Middle East. A trafficking route, especially if managed by established criminal networks, can serve as a stream of multiple illegal activities. Moreover, there are two main conflict areas in this region: Libya and Mali, which attract illicit activities and flows<sup>27</sup>. In this section, we will consider the trafficking of two main categories of goods: narcotics and weapons. The reader will appreciate how the challenges that affect migration are reflected in the dynamics of illicit trafficking.

Drug trafficking is a global security issue that affects numerous aspects of national and international security. Western Africa and the Sahel are the main crossing point of cocaine drug trafficking between South America (the main region of production) and Europe (the leading region of consumption)<sup>28</sup>. Criminal organisations exploit important ports like Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire, illegal exports cross the Sahel and leave North Africa mainly by boat. There is no sign of this activity stopping anytime soon. The 2020 World Drug Report by UNODC states: "Overall recorded seizures of cocaine for the whole of Africa in 2018 were the highest reported for that region over the past two decades, at 5.6 tons, an increase of 65 percent compared with a year earlier"<sup>29</sup>. There has been a persistent effort by the international community to support west African countries with capacity-building

training of local police forces in countering drug trafficking.

The Sahel is one of the main hubs of global arms trafficking, which makes it a strategic issue given its relative proximity to NATO's southern flank. As explained prior, this is due to its proximity to the Middle East and the presence of two conflict areas: Mali and Libya. A report released in 2016 by Conflict Armament Research highlights Libya's role as the main hotbed for this type of illicit trafficking. The availability of weapons stockpiled in Libya and made available in the market after the fall of Qaddafi has "fuelled the 2012 Tuareg and Islamist insurgencies in Mali"<sup>30</sup> and has made MANPADS available in countries like Chad and Niger<sup>31</sup>. The inflow of weapons is dominated by arms produced in Russia and China.



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Both drug and arms trafficking demonstrate the strategic relevance of this region for defence planners and security analysts for years to come. However, the strategic communications dimension of responding to these pressing issues seems to be lacking or inefficient. There is little media coverage on both sides of the Mediterranean regarding the strategic dimensions of trafficking and

how it has shaped the political and economic situation in the region. An information campaign could facilitate an understanding of how migration is significantly affected by criminal networks and how the flow of arms contributes to the persistence of conflicts in the region.





# Great Power Politics

The unipolarity of international relations has either ended or evolved significantly<sup>32</sup>. This is due to the rise of China and its ability to project power as well as due to the resurgence of Russia<sup>33</sup>. Hence, the strategic developments in this region must be evaluated against a changing global context oriented more towards competition than intervention and cooperation. As stated in previous paragraphs, the Sahel is at the doorstep of Europe, and gaining access to it is an strategic priority in a competitive international environment. There are great powers who perceive the Sahel as a opportunity; others consider it as a vital area for national interests. Through this lens, strategic communications can assume a rather defensive form, seeking to protect NATO members from propaganda and other activities carried out by competitors. This paragraph underlines the most important strategic challenges that NATO could engage with strategic communications.

The rise of militant Islamism and the intensity of migration flows have led Europe to consider the area in a more strategic and long-term conception than before. France has been the leading European player in the region due to its historical colonial ties and enduring civilian and military presence<sup>34</sup>. The region's West African Franc is structurally linked to France's treasury and pegged to the euro<sup>35</sup>. After its military intervention in 2013, France launched the regional military operation "Barkhane" to support counter-terrorism efforts in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad<sup>36</sup>. This military effort was coupled with a local, regional structure called G5 Sahel, which has become the strategic hub that directs regional operations against terrorism and other security threats<sup>37</sup>. French interests in the region span wider than the issue of illegal migration – its role in the region is a critical test of its weight as a medium power. Italy and Spain have adopted a far more limited approach, since they are

the two main points of arrival for migrants from both the west Mediterranean and central Mediterranean routes. Italy has opened embassies in Niger in 2017 and Burkina Faso and launched a bilateral military operation in Niger in 2018 to assist its security forces<sup>38</sup>. The European Union has been mobilised to assist security forces in the region with EUCAP Sahel Niger in Niamey, EUTM Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Mali in Bamako<sup>39</sup>. EUCAP Sahel Niger in particular, has been tasked with assisting local security forces in the fight against human trafficking<sup>40</sup>. In 2016, the mission opened an 'antenna' in Agadez, one of the main crossroads of illegal migration. European objectives in terms of strategic communications are complex, balancing between the imperatives of influencing the security situation of the region and losing ground to its competitors.

The United States, Europe's main ally, has adopted a more limited engagement in



the region. In 2007, the US Department of Defence created the AFRICOM command structure to direct all military efforts in the region, signalling a growing strategic interest in Africa<sup>41</sup>. A military airbase has been set up in Agadez in Niger, where drones can execute missions in the region<sup>42</sup>. In 2012, the White House launched the Security Governance Initiative to support the security sector of a group of countries in the region, including Niger, Mali, and Tunisia<sup>43</sup>. Both its military presence and programmes signal that the US is concerned with countering terrorism in region, but also interested in establishing long-term engagement with local security forces. The Tongo-Tongo attack in 2017 that led to the loss of four green berets has spiked US attention in the region<sup>44</sup>.

There is a vast amount of literature on China's growing role in Africa and its ambitious economic plans related to the One Belt and Road Initiative. The Sahel is a strategic area which sits between the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Guinea. From an infrastructure development perspective, influence in this region could have pivotal ramifications for China's global economic projection by linking key roads to ports.<sup>45</sup> A critical review of the articles published by leading Chinese state-owned media outlet Xinhua suggests that China is interested in economic and infrastructure development projects, such as the new bridge in Niamey<sup>46</sup>. CCTV in Nairobi is also an important tool for influencing political events on the continent. China has been involved in supporting security forces bilaterally in the region without publicising

these efforts<sup>47</sup>. There is limited knowledge of China's political and military assistance in the region. The focus on economic projects to boost its political status in the world appears to be one of the main themes of China's global engagement. Moreover, its status as a great power without a colonial past and without military involvement in past wars, is the main narrative granting China's efforts a great advantage and appeal. The recent *coup d'état* in Mali has presented a valuable opportunity for China to demonstrate that it stands in favour of civilian rather than authoritarian rule. China's diplomatic efforts have been very clearly aligned with the positions of the regional and sub-regional organisations, such as the African Union and ECOWAS, which have condemned the mutiny<sup>48</sup>.

The resurgence of Russia on the world stage is also reflected in the current events in sub-Saharan Africa. The foreign and security policy of Vladimir Putin has been dominated by the desire to challenge US unipolarity and the idea of the liberal international order<sup>49</sup>. Ever since the Cold War, Africa has been a contested space between the East and West. Russia's resurgence in Africa has manifested itself in the form of diplomatic trips conducted by Sergei Lavrov and the organisation of the 2019 Russia-Africa summit in Sochi<sup>50</sup>. From an African perspective, a renewed international competition for Africa may translate into opportunities for national leaders to exploit great power rivalries for better diplomatic deals. Thus far, Russia has no official military footprint in the region, however, there are news reports about the



involvement of the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic<sup>51</sup>. Russia has media assets that could serve as information operations tools, such as RT, Sputnik and TASS, which cover news from the African continent, some of them in French. These diplomatic, information, and military actions, matched with a less credible global power projection, are aimed at exploiting the weaknesses of the West rather than employing an independent strategy. The Daily Beast has reported that two of the high-ranking military officers who staged the coup in Mali in 2020 were trained by the Russian Federation in the months prior to the mutiny in Bamako<sup>52</sup>. Oleg Morozov, a Russian senator, has denied the involvement of his country by saying “We have never denied cooperation with Mali in the military-technical sphere [...] But talk about Russia’s involvement in the coup is ridiculous. Firstly, this basically does not correspond to our approaches to international politics. Secondly, we do not have any significant interests in this country, in which the military periodically seizes power - the last time in 2012”<sup>53</sup>.

## Recommendations

The previous sections have analysed the key strategic challenges in the Sahel and the Mediterranean. These respective regions are at Europe’s doorstep, facing a migration crisis, illicit trafficking, and terrorism in an evolving international context that is increasingly characterised by great power antagonism. Strategic communications that are informed by realistic and context-sensitive

assessments of narratives on the ground, are an indispensable instrument for achieving political objectives. This paper has sought to reflect on the challenge of offering informed advice on strategic communications, while providing a grounded outlook of the situation and a structured analytical framework for future action. As defined by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the main components of strategic communications are: public diplomacy, public affairs, information operations and psychological operations. Therefore, this paper’s recommendations on strategic communications in the respective region will be structured along these points.

## Public Diplomacy

Terrorism in the Sahel requires the unambiguous message that there is a vast international coalition seeking to neutralise all terrorist organisations in the region and that there shall be no safe place where terrorists can hide, regroup, and strike. Moreover, the role of NATO and activities of its member states should be coordinated in their messaging. These operations must be synchronised with the message that international security is achieved by resilient states that wish to cooperate against threats and issues of common concern, and that no activity or operation is aimed at interference in the domestic affairs of states. If this message fails to resonate, the strategic competitors of NATO and other violent groups may exploit it to foment instability and harm the coalition’s interests. The *coup d’etat* in



” Ultimately, the challenge of strategic communications in this region demands a prudent utilisation of the instruments of statecraft in the pursuit of national security and international stability.

Mali must be addressed with an unambiguous message of support for civilian rule and regional cooperation.

### Public Affairs

Active engagement with local and international media should be aimed at providing accurate information to prevent confusion. Uncertainty over the role of military forces in the region has wide political ramifications for both local governments and international stakeholders. Military forces cannot be perceived to carry out missions outside of their traditional scope, such as countering illegal migration or other policing activities. A coherent narrative to the media could have beneficial effects.

### Information Operations

Terrorism, illicit trafficking, and strategic competition remain top priorities for NATO member states with interests in the region. While terrorist organisations may appear to be deeply rooted and resilient, both AQIM and Boko Haram are very far from a political victory, reflecting the integral role and

support of NATO members. Further effort is required to explain the role of illicit trafficking in fuelling conflicts in the region and what action, including military options, could be taken to stop the flow of weapons and drugs in the region. The troubled security situation in the area of the Liptako-Gourma demands a deeper investigation of why there is recurring violence and what efforts are undertaken with local police authorities to end it.

### Psychological Operations

NATO member states should be aware that the Sahel and Mediterranean are strategic nexuses in the world and that competitors like China and Russia may seek to undermine their interests by promoting a counter-narrative through their media outlets. This narrative might be aimed at political justifications behind the military and security presence in the region without a proper economic investment in the region's economic growth. Moreover, the troubled leadership of terrorist organisations, such as AQIM and Boko Haram, provide the unique opportunity to strike at the recruitment capabilities of these groups by pointing at



their lack of a clear objective and recurring criminal activities.

Ultimately, the challenge of strategic communications in this region demands a prudent utilisation of the instruments of statecraft in the pursuit of national security and international stability. The narrative of intervention into “crisis areas” no longer works because the political and cultural landscape has changed since

NATO’s recent engagements in the Western Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Strategic communications can provide added value to both NATO and its member states operating in the region.









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