GETTY IMAGES

THE NEED FOR
NATO

Soldiers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and the United States train together at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center near Hohenfels, Germany, in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan. NATO membership is a goal of most Western Balkan countries.

The Trans-Atlantic partnership can help build stability in the Western Balkans

By Marshall Center Macedonian Alumni Association

Since the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the countries of the Western Balkans have faced numerous challenges, from constitutional crises to building and reinforcing state institutions. As a result, they have been missing out on the economic momentum and benefits of the Euro-Atlantic partnership. The future of the Western Balkans depends on their successful use of the "smart power" approach to overcome challenges in cooperation with NATO and the European Union.

NATO and the EU have been involved in the region through crisis management in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. The political, economic and military power of NATO and the EU gives them significant influence because most countries in the region seek membership. But the global security environment poses new challenges for NATO and its partners. U.S.-European security relations are evolving while the small Western Balkan states are looking to find their place in international relations. Euro-Atlantic integration should contribute to the stability and development of the whole region.

NATO and the EU work together — NATO contributes to security, and the EU facilitates constitutional solutions through political reform and economic development. NATO's security role has meant an extended military presence in the region, while the EU uses the promise of future membership to assist in transforming the region.

In 2013, the Western Balkans saw positive movement toward integration into the European mainstream. Croatia became a member of the EU, and Montenegro is following its example in working toward EU accession. Serbia awaits the start of its association negotiations, and Albania and Kosovo look forward to improved status following successful elections and the Kosovo-Serbia agreement. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina struggles with the need to reshape its federal political structure, and the Republic of Macedonia faces a difficult compromise with Greece over "the name issue" as a precondition for NATO and EU membership.

GLOBAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

The global security environment poses new challenges for NATO and its partners. Perceptions of the propriety of and responsibility for intervening in any particular conflict have changed. NATO's additional tasks include counterterrorism, cyber attacks, energy security, maritime counterpiracy and protection of the global commons. These global challenges require a new concept defining the sort of issues NATO will engage in and fight for. More efficient and flexible partnerships remain one of the priorities of the Alliance; however, the impact of deep financial constraints and the influence of emerging powers require regular strategic recalculation.

U.S.-European relations are changing, but the need to deal with mutual security challenges remains. The U.S. is shifting its attention to Asia, making Europe a lower priority. Within the global security environment, small states face even bigger challenges. Membership in international organizations, coalitions and alliances help small countries take an active role. Cooperative procurement using "smart defense" strategies are becoming more prevalent. Global trends demand that Europe think more strategically.

NATO'S ROLE

NATO-EU engagement in the Western Balkans included two dimensions—a short-term dimension with military deployment to stop war and establish a stable security environment, and a long-term dimension in which the EU stabilization and association process offers a road map to a possible EU membership and a more stable and prosperous future. These two mechanisms, acting together as an incubator, have provided a climate that enabled the region to move forward.

Aspirants to NATO membership sign a Membership Action Plan. The procedure was originally adopted to manage the accession of the seven Vilnius countries, but remains "a practical manifestation of the open door policy" and an instrument for evaluating the progress of the rest of the candidate countries on their way to NATO membership. However, the Alliance seems to be losing interest in the region after the integration of Croatia and Albania in 2009.

NATO has encouraged Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities in the Balkans as a means of building confidence and cooperation, including multinational military exercises and training and defense-oriented education. Regional cooperation in the Balkans has been one of the main areas of discussion within the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council since it was created. NATO also launched the South East European Initiative in 1999 to promote "regional cooperation and lasting security and stability in the region." The objective of the initiative is "to ensure transparency in defense planning, crisis management and defense management." And the South East Europe Security Coordination Group was established to coordinate regional projects.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The presidents of eight Western Balkan nations and France meet in Slovenia in July 2013 to promote cooperation and EU enlargement in the region. From left are Tomislav Nikolić of Serbia, Atifete Jahjaga of Kosovo, Gjorge Ivanov of Macedonia, Ivo Josipović of Croatia, François Hollande of France, Borut Pahor of Slovenia, Željko Komšić of Bosnia and Herzegovina, FilipVujanović of Montenegro, and Bujar Nishani of Albania.

Five ways NATO and the EU could improve stability in the Western Balkans

1
Expand to include Macedonia and Montenegro. Allow Bosnia and Herzegovina to start implementation of a Membership Action Plan, and include Kosovo in the Partnership for Peace program.

2
Provide more financial support to regional cooperation activities and encourage dialogue on nonmilitary security topics such as economics and cross-border cooperation. Contribute more practical support to establish and implement bilateral and multilateral confidence-building measures and reinforcing regional cooperation.

3
Promote regional integration of the economies of small countries — assisted by good governance, transparency and accountability. Pooling, sharing and "smart defense" enable acquisition projects unaffordable by any single country.

4
Support harmonization of projects among countries in the region to reconcile diverse internal problems and repair broken relationships. NATO and its partners promote too many overlapping initiatives. Harmonization would build mutual trust.

5
Encourage regional governments to make improvements in key areas such as public administration, rule of law and media freedom, and invest in education and human capital.

Regional security involves a group of states whose primary security concerns are correlated closely enough that their security is intertwined. The Western Balkans, exhausted by a decade of conflict, are recovering stability and the capacity to cooperate. Countries from the region are repairing broken relationships. NATO is helping by establishing new relationships to help resolve issues, such as border and minority rights, which require a regional approach. The specific nature of the region's struggle to reconcile the apparently contradictory tasks of state building and Euro-Atlantic integration requires a regional smart power approach.

REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

Poverty, unemployment, corruption and property transfers are only some of the economic security challenges in the Western Balkans. Foreign direct investment and interregional trade has declined as a result of institutional weakness, political instability, organized crime and corruption, slowing the integration process. A regional smart development network could lead to new trade zones and regional economic cooperation. Instead of each nation going it alone, economic integration, aided by good governance, transparency and accountability, would better attract regional investment and productive capacity building.

NATO/EU membership ambitions are waning in some countries. Ethnic divisions remain rife. Military-security cooperation would improve regional stabilization. Pooling, sharing and smart defense allow for acquisition of defense projects that are unaffordable for a single country. Interethnic tension may inhibit security cooperation, but financial limitations encourage broader regional cooperation to address common challenges. In divided societies, reconciliation is necessary for transformation and healing. There is no formula for building relations between neighbors locked into long-lasting hostile interactions with deep-rooted animosities.

REGIONAL COOPERATION MECHANISMS

Some countries of the Western Balkans face internal problems that are an obstacle to foreign support and Euro-Atlantic integration. That means each country relates to NATO and the EU differently. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia are members of the PfP and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, while Kosovo is not. Five countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia,) are part of the EU Stability and Association Process (SAP). Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia are EU candidate countries, and Croatia is an EU member. Kosovo lacks both SAP and candidate status. Consequently, there is a different approach toward each, resulting in differing levels of economic and military assistance from NATO and EU institutions.

The differences lie in the level of progress each country has made in human rights, economic reform, protecting minority rights and developing friendly relations with neighbors. However, it's important to include even those countries

European Union mission police in Kosovo guard a polling station in Kosovska Mitrovica in November 2013. The EU has helped establish democracy and the rule of law in Balkan countries troubled by ethnic conflict.

that have yet to progress sufficiently. Excluding countries suffering from instability and conflict will limit regional cooperation. NATO and the EU must maintain a delicate balance between a gradual approach and requiring these countries to meet criteria for inclusion in the PfP and SAP processes.

CONCLUSION

Despite the committed presence of European and international organizations in the Western Balkans, results have been less than impressive. NATO and EU enlargement policies are based on the premise that countries can be accepted in a group, but membership decisions are based on the individual readiness of each applicant country. This approach has not encouraged regional cooperation, but has sometimes increased competition in relation to developing closer relations with the West.

NATO needs to do more to improve cooperation in the region, but progress cannot be separated from wider political and security development. Cooperation cannot develop if the region is characterized by deterioration of international and inter-ethnic relations. In this context, the West has not succeeded in developing an effective strategy for resolving regional problems caused by defects in the democratization process and violent nationalism.

Resolution of these problems and an increase of stability throughout Southeastern Europe will depend on the development of democracies that will respect human and minority rights and agree to the principle of permanent international borders. To achieve this goal, key NATO member countries will need to remain deeply engaged in the Western Balkans for years to come. □