6. European security

Overview

In 2014 the escalating political crisis in Ukraine was followed by a rapid descent into a major conflict that drew in a wide range of external actors—in roles such as combatant, armourer and mediator. The political relationship between Russia and a spectrum of Western countries deteriorated rapidly, and some institutional relationships may have been damaged irrevocably—such as between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia, and between the European Union and Russia.

The speed with which a relatively new and previously unknown armed actor—the Islamic State—could establish military and administrative control over a large territory in Western Iraq and Eastern Syria was a further shock. Murders in European cities carried out by individuals with connections to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria also highlighted the erosion of the lines between internal and external security for states in Europe.

These dramatic events contributed to a sense that Europe, which has become accustomed to a relatively benign security environment, had underestimated the need to prepare for military threats. The decisions taken by leaders at the NATO Summit in Wales, the United Kingdom, towards the end of 2014 suggest that some rebalancing of security policy instruments can be expected. The full results of the decisions taken at the Wales Summit cannot yet be seen, but they could include the regeneration of larger military forces configured for territorial defence and a concerted attempt to restore deterrence as a central element in the security policy of European NATO allies.

Aside from decisions related to military security, these events put further strain on the cooperative security approach that European leaders have promoted since the end of the cold war—a model that has been subject to increasing pressures. The decisions taken in 2014 may be signalling that states will once again see the capabilities of their national armed forces as the most important factor in promoting their security.

The active participation of citizens from European countries in armed conflicts inside Europe and at its periphery was the catalyst for a discussion about the permeability of borders, the security implications of migration and whether or not the benefits derived from the high mobility of people outweigh the potential risks.

While these tendencies were seen in 2014, it would be premature to draw far-reaching conclusions about the future development of European security. It remains to be seen whether states progressively re-emphasize a balanced

approach that pays equal respect to the various tools of cooperative security—military defence, arms control, crisis management, conflict prevention and conflict resolution.

IAN ANTHONY