GCSP Policy Brief Series
The GCSP policy brief series publishes papers in order to assess policy challenges, dilemmas, and policy recommendations in all aspects of transnational security and globalization. The series was created and is edited by Dr. Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, Senior Scholar in Geostrategy and Director of the Program on the Geopolitical Implications of Globalization and Transnational Security.

GCSP Policy Brief No. 14
Is NATO Going Global?

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Abstract

The major policy challenge for NATO is to find a legitimate and credible role as security provider in a globalized security environment. Thus, the question arises whether NATO will have to go global in order to remain relevant as an international security institution in the 21st century. NATO is unique in its ability to conduct robust military operations in an interoperable framework that could serve as a global force generator. In order to become a global security provider, NATO has to overcome antagonism with the EU as well as its transatlantic mindset. For this purpose, NATO needs a new strategic concept based on a common vision.
Policy Challenges

Why does the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) still exist and why did it not disappear with the end of the Cold War? Established as a Western shield against the Soviet bloc at the outset of the Cold War, critics charge that it now struggles to remain relevant. Having transformed itself from a collective defense organization to a collective security agent, NATO currently assumes not only multiple roles, but also multiple identities. The major policy challenge for NATO is to find a legitimate and credible role as a security provider in a globalized security environment where military power is of only limited value. Globalization has made societies more vulnerable to cross-cutting challenges and threats, such as infectious diseases, internal conflicts, terrorism, international organized crime, energy resource scarcity, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and migration. NATO has only very limited capabilities to address such challenges and threats.

NATO is unique in its ability to conduct robust military operations in an interoperable framework that can generate multinational coalition forces. In the last years, NATO has also become a champion in developing soft power and military-to-military partnerships with the objectives of assisting member states with transformation and post-conflict countries with the reform of their defense and security sectors.

However, the once privileged position of NATO as a security actor is fading quickly. Nowadays, it has to compete and position itself with regards to the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the G8, the United Nations (UN), and even regional organizations in Africa. For a global role, NATO will need the political empowerment of all its member states (most of which are also EU member states), whose societies will have to accept the significant costs entailed by NATO’s structural adjustments and capability improvement.

Responses

NATO has begun to work with countries outside the broad Euro-Atlantic area through multilayered military-to-military cooperation programs. Such partnerships consist of different layers, with the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program at its core. These partnerships have been extended to the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) countries.¹ The partnerships comprise a large spectrum of cooperative activities that engage partner states in interoperability, security governance, defense reforms, defense education, the fight against small arms and light weapons proliferation as well as a range of other activities in the civil-military domain.

NATO’s response to the new global security environment has been greatly accelerating since 9/11. For the first time in its history, in support of and solidarity with the United States (US), the alliance invoked on September 12 its collective defense clause (Article 5 of the
Washington Treaty.) As part of this move, NATO also launched the maritime operation “Active Endeavour” in the Mediterranean. On a political level, NATO members and partners agreed to a program of cooperation against terrorism in non-military sectors (Partnership Action Plan against Terrorism).

After the United States overthrew the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the UN mandated that NATO contribute to the stabilization of that country. This mission marked the first time that NATO agreed to carry out an operation outside Europe. However, if the mission in Afghanistan fails, NATO as an institution will most likely fail, as well. Over the last two years, the organization expanded the scope of its international operations from crisis management to a variety of additional activities, including assistance in training and defense reforms in Iraq, support for disaster relief operations in Pakistan, and logistical support for African Union peace forces in Sudan.

In general, NATO’s response to the US-driven global agenda on democratic governance has been both declaratory and programmatic. NATO reasserted its allegiance to liberal principles at its 2004 Istanbul Summit, where it also adopted a policy promoting democratic governance of the defense sector (Partnership Action Plan on Defense Institution Building).

Dilemmas

Geographical dilemmas: The US is pushing NATO to become an organization with global reach, in terms of both missions and troop-contributing countries. The US would accept a continuous commitment to NATO only if it is “able to act wherever our interests are threatened.” Some European countries are concerned about overstretch and a US instrumentalization of NATO.

Dilemma of mission scope: There is a profound disagreement on how broad the mission spectrum of a future NATO should be. Some European countries, like France, want to see the alliance confined to the defense and military sectors whereas others, including the US as well as NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, also envision a future for the organization in areas such as peacebuilding and even peacemaking. Against this backdrop, it’s clear that the upcoming development of NATO is hostage to EU-NATO non-relations. While the EU has taken over NATO’s peace missions in the Balkans, there is no division of labor “at global and functional levels.”

Partnership dilemmas: The Euro-Atlantic Cooperation Council that governs the PfP is dysfunctional, and PfP work programs are now confined to a handful of countries in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Many PfP partners have become NATO members and the European neutrals, with the exception of Switzerland, are now investing instead in the battle group arrangement of the EU.
Transformation Dilemma: NATO is caught in a cycle of “reinvention” and transformation in order to adjust to the new global security environment. This transformation is costly; today’s political climate, which favors a strengthening of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), hampers these efforts.

Credibility dilemma: NATO has a strong and credible Cold War history. After the end of the Cold War, however, the Alliance’s reputation suffered, due to controversy over the 1999 Kosovo intervention. Moreover, NATO has become increasingly perceived, particularly in the developing world, as a proxy organization of the US.

Implications
From a geographical or regional perspective, NATO no longer has a specific focus. The 2004 Istanbul Summit has clearly shown that henceforth, NATO’s “out of area” debate is over. The organization’s agenda in the war against terrorism has enabled it to take a broader and to some extent a global view of security. With the most recent round of enlargement, the “Eastern border” of the Cold War has all but disappeared. The US has been pushing for NATO to get involved in the Middle East and Africa, both militarily and in terms of partnership building. The US Ambassador to NATO recently called for the creation of a global partnership with “contact countries,” such as Australia and Japan. In addition, NATO Secretary General Scheffer supports a “transformation” of NATO that would make it global in scope and possibly even in membership. The Autumn 2006 summit in Riga should prepare the basis for such a transformation.

Future Trajectories/Scenarios
Strengthened collective defense: In the event that a clear military threat to (some) NATO states would re-emerge, the alliance’s role could again shift to deterrence and war fighting capabilities. Such a scenario could arise if an authoritarian and revanchist Russia posed a particular threat to the Baltic NATO States, or in the event of an escalation of nuclear rivalry in the Middle East.

NATO as a toolbox/service center: Due to a lack of sufficient political empowerment, NATO could develop into a mere service provider for ad hoc coalitions, disaster relief, humanitarian action, etc. The former German Minister of Defense argued that such a scenario would be unacceptable to the Europeans: “a NATO which is limited to a ‘toolbox’ role will not be viable.”

NATO as stabilizer and peacekeeper: Building on its track record in Bosnia (SFOR/IFOR), Kosovo (KFOR), and Afghanistan (ISAF), NATO could increasingly become the UN’s organization of choice for robust and long-term stabilization missions. NATO can provide
planning, force generation and the mission-intensity continuum for operations in complex environments. The new NATO Response Force (NRF) can act as a spearhead for preparing the ground for peace missions. The UN, in turn, can provide legitimacy and the instruments for the peacebuilding phase of a conflict. The support mission in Sudan indicates that the UN’s demand for NATO missions will be primarily located in Africa.

**NATO as a framework for global partnership building:** NATO could furthermore become a framework for soft security partnerships at a global level — a development that might be driven by the rise of Asia and the confrontational power transitions entailed therein. This could include associations with current and future troop contributors, such as Australia, Japan or South Korea to form a global partnership. In view of the upcoming NATO summit in Riga, such a partnership is now being discussed.

**Fading into oblivion:** The strengthening of ESDP, US unilateralism, an estrangement of US-European relations, and insufficient resource allocations to bankroll NATO’s transformation may lead to an ineffective and dysfunctional alliance that could fade away within the next 5-10 years.

**Policy Recommendations**

1. *In order to remain relevant as a security institution, NATO has to act globally and it must for this purpose develop the necessary capabilities for force projection and sustainable operations.*

2. *NATO and its members need to agree on a common vision of how NATO can credibly provide security in a globalized world. Such a new vision would require a new strategic concept.*

3. *The Europeans have to spend more on defense and agree on the pooling of resources and on the specialization of national forces.*

The implementation of this recommendation will jeopardize mass conscript armies in Europe.\(^9\)

4. *NATO and the EU have to agree on a division of labor, based on their successful cooperation in the Balkans.*

5. *The US should politically empower NATO and refrain from using it à la carte only.*

6. *NATO should invest more in its successful soft security partnerships, such as PfP, but now on a global scale.*

NATO member states should agree to establish a global soft security arrangement, with membership based on criteria of shared values and contributions.
7. NATO should clearly communicate that its global realm be based on democracy and security governance as core principles for its activities.

8. As the relationship with the UN will be key for NATO’s role in the 21st century, the Alliance needs to formalize its ties with the UN and develop those capacities that add value to the world organization’s quest for peace and security.

The capacities are rapid deployment of expeditionary forces in conflict areas, rapid logistical support to disaster areas and the support of peace mission through force generation.

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References

1 The Mediterranean Dialogue countries include Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. The initial focus of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative is on Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.


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Review and Critique

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has faced a formidable number of challenges to its existence since its inception in 1949. In the 1960s, there were fears that the future of the Alliance was at risk when France withdrew from its military structure. Diplomats at NATO, however, could well have argued that later arrangements with France to ensure its military support, if required, demonstrate the strength and flexibility of the Alliance. The end of the bipolar system has once again prompted some observers, such as Christopher Layne, to ask whether the death knell should be sounded for NATO.¹ Yet, despite numerous near death experiences, NATO has always managed to re-invent itself. The institution now faces additional challenges posed by a security environment that is being altered not simply by the end of Cold War, but also by the forces of globalization. In order to maintain a legitimate and credible role within this changing context, NATO will have to respond in a fitting manner.

While military security remains relevant to states, globalization has rendered countries more vulnerable to transnational security threats, including infectious diseases, transnational organized criminality, international terrorism, and environmental degradation. Following the demise of the bipolar system, NATO has managed to transform itself from a purely collective defense (albeit with an important residual collective defense role) to a collective security actor. However, it still lacks the appropriate tools with which to address multifarious transnational security issues. One of the challenges that the institution faces is that of finding a legitimate and credible role as a soft security provider in an environment in which military power is not always an appropriate means to respond to crises.

Fred Tanner raises a fundamental question in his policy brief: “Will NATO have to go global in order to remain relevant as an international security institution in the 21st century?”² At present, little consensus exists as to the appropriate geographical scope of NATO. While the US is eager to see NATO attain greater global reach, the institution’s European members are concerned about possible overstretch. In addition, some member states are also concerned that NATO risks being perceived as a proxy for the US if it acts on a global scale. Despite lack of agreement on the issue, NATO is now acting much further afield than any one would have imagined when the debate about its raison d’être began a decade ago.

Another dilemma identified by Tanner relates to the institution’s mission. At present, no consensus exists as to what the correct mission of NATO should be. Some member states would like NATO’s scope to remain focused on defense and military issues. Others would like to see the institution play a much broader political role while continuing to engage actively in peacekeeping and even peacemaking. In light of 9/11, calls for NATO to play a leading role in the fight against international terrorism have grown louder; as a result, almost every aspect of NATO is reorganized and how it works today has been affected by increased emphasis on
fighting terrorism. How NATO responds to the question about its future scope will be vital to determining its relevance.

Yet, as Tanner points out, one of the major issues NATO must resolve is how to coordinate its efforts with other leading security actors. In particular, he argues that NATO needs to overcome its antipathy with the European Union (EU), as well as its transatlantic mindset, in order to become an effective global security actor. In other words, NATO needs to develop a new strategic concept that is premised on a common vision of the future. While transformation of the alliance may be perceived by some as necessary, many European members may prefer to invest their resources in further developing the EU’s European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Investing in one is of benefit to the other; if EU members enhance their military forces, these same forces could be used for either NATO or EU missions. Indeed, cooperation with the EU is highly likely, as the EU (like NATO does within the alliance) plays a growing role in coordinating the efforts and resources of EU member states in responding to transnational threats to security. NATO must successfully achieve a true strategic partnership with the EU, one that EU members as well as NATO members agree would be in their common interest. The trick will be for NATO to do so without duplicating what the EU, as well as other security actors, is doing.  

Dilemmas and Our Recommendations

Globalization and transnational security threats present both opportunities as well as challenges for NATO. In order for the institution to retain its relevance, as well as its legitimacy and credibility, it needs to address a number of issues related to its mission, geographical scope, and partnerships. We highlight eight dilemmas related to this issue area and eight corresponding recommendations that may help generate appropriate responses.
One of the most significant dilemmas facing NATO today relates to today’s quickly changing security environment. As mentioned, many of the security challenges that states are confronted with today are non-military and transnational in nature. While this implies a shift in the scope of NATO, the institution also needs to remain true to its institutional foundations. The North Atlantic Treaty states that an armed attack against one or more of NATO’s members either in Europe or North America shall be considered as an attack against all members. We suggest that this article needs to be redefined to take into account the altered nature of many of the contemporary threats to security facing NATO’s members. Although NATO uses soft power very impressively at times – witness the success of enlargement and the Partnership for Peace, both of which demonstrate that NATO uses soft power to get states to do what it wants, from democratization to the reform of defense institutions – soft power should also be explicitly included in its mandate (e.g. Prague and Istanbul Summit).
documents), as many of its activities are likely to increasingly involve post-conflict reconstruction and preventive measures.

NATO’s regional focus is largely a thing of the past; the alliance is active in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, which has been established to help the Afghan Government to provide a secure environment within which to rebuild the country, for instance. We propose that NATO engage in global operations when necessary, as well as to regularly update its security concepts. Yet, since the US is the primary large member state promoting a more global reach for NATO, the institution risks being perceived as a proxy for the US as it increasingly acts “out of area” in the absence of greater global consensus on this issue. In order to avoid this perception, NATO must show independence from Washington, but also solidarity with the US when warranted. Its members should also live up to the institution’s political standards, thereby securing the institution’s legitimacy and relevance.

Both issues of scope and geographical reach are made more difficult due to disagreements between Europeans as well as within the Atlantic Alliance, as to how best to respond to “new” security challenges. NATO needs to be able to react to more classical threats, as well as be able to respond to ethnic conflicts and to engage in preventive activities in relation to failing states and transnational threats to security. Consensus about the tools required by NATO, as well as its geographical remit, needs to be achieved. Greater dialogue between member states should be promoted regarding NATO’s role in a globalizing world. NATO should also educate other regional powers about its role. Without it, NATO’s relevance and legitimacy risks being eroded, and coordination with other security actors will be difficult.

Conclusion

Having survived challenges to its existence in the past, NATO is now confronted with a changed security environment, in part, as a result of globalization. The most fundamental challenges are related to the kinds of missions that NATO ought to take on, as well as whether it should increasingly define itself as a global security institution. Given the current lack of consensus among its members on these issues, a concerted effort needs to be made in order to develop agreement amongst NATO members as to its role in a changed world. Our aim has been to set out eight dilemmas or challenges facing the institution and to make recommendations that may contribute to the debate.

References

4 For examples from the Prague Summit, see the bulletin on Defense against New Threats at http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2002/11-november/e1121e.htm; for the Istanbul Summit see http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/2004/06-istanbul/home.htm.