Program on the Geopolitical Implications of Globalization and Transnational Security

GCSP Policy Brief Series
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Editorial of GCSP Policy Brief No. 14
Is NATO Going Global?

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September 28, 2006

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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. 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?” 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.³

**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).
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.