NATO IS A GLOBAL ORGANIZATION IN ALL BUT NAME

By Seth A. Johnston

NATO’s condemnations of the recent North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile tests attracted little critical attention. After all, the United Nations and most countries with a stake in northeast Asian security made similar statements. But the North Atlantic Council’s interest in the North Pacific is just one remarkable example of how NATO has become a more global institution than its name would imply. Although the security of its member states in Europe and North America are at the core of its purposes, a strictly transatlantic or regional view is too narrow to fully describe what NATO does.

NATO is a global organization in all but name. Its worldwide engagement consists of three essential features. First, military operations involve NATO in places far from the Euro-Atlantic area. Second, NATO maintains political and military ties with countries in neighboring regions and around the world. Third, NATO has recognized that transnational security challenges defy regional boundaries. NATO’s membership may be regional, but its activities are global.

The post-Cold War “out of area” debate is entirely anachronistic given the range of military operations NATO forces have been engaged in over the past twenty years. NATO’s first mission outside the territories of its members involved peacekeeping in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1995 to 2004. The 1999 Kosovo campaign and 2011 Libya intervention involved NATO in aerial combat outside its home territory. NATO’s command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan since 2003 has been its most groundbreaking operation. It involved NATO in full-spectrum joint military operations thousands of miles from the nearest Alliance territory. The ISAF mission put NATO in charge of troops from non-NATO countries as diverse as Australia, Georgia, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates. NATO has also pursued naval and counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, supported a training mission in Iraq, and provided advisory assistance to the African Union, among others. Indeed, South America and East Asia stand out among the few regions of the world in which NATO has not conducted significant military operations.

Global military operations necessarily involve political ties in neighboring regions and around the world. Partnership activities often include not only defense and military

Seth Johnston teaches international relations at West Point. He writes in a personal capacity and his views do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.
cooperation, but also civil-military relations, civil emergency planning, and scientific and environmental research. Partner relations have been institutionalized in various settings, such as the NATO-Russia Council; NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Commissions; the Mediterranean Dialogue; and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. The Partnership for Peace and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council involve the twenty-two regional partners in Europe and Eurasia. NATO’s “Global Partner” countries include bilateral programs with Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Pakistan, and Mongolia. In all, more than forty non-NATO countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East participate in one of these institutionalized partnerships. Moreover, NATO also maintains institutional links with other multilateral bodies, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Union, and the United Nations.

Finally, global issues invite coordinated global action. NATO has taken a stake in studying and preparing for emerging and transnational security challenges including cyber-attacks, energy security, environmental protection, missile defense, as well as terrorism and nuclear proliferation. Its cyber initiatives are particularly broad in scope and involve non-NATO countries, other international organizations, academia and the private sector. The three core tasks NATO adopted in its new Strategic Concept at the Lisbon Summit in 2010 are collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. None of these are exclusively or even necessarily regional. Alliance leaders reaffirmed an interest in coordinated action to address this wide range of transnational threats at its 2012 Chicago Summit. NATO promotes its purposes and values through a global approach to international peace and security.

It was not always this way. Lord Ismay, NATO’s first secretary general, recognized the global nature of challenges to the interests of NATO members as early as the 1950s. He advocated for the enlargement of the Alliance’s geographic and functional scope but was not successful. Instead, the United States championed the establishment of other regional security organizations modeled on NATO, such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and the Central Treaty Organization in the Middle East. While the latter organizations have not survived, NATO has adapted to take on global roles.

Although the membership and interests that NATO is meant to serve remain transatlantic, its military operations, political partnerships, and substantive concerns are all global to a remarkable degree. NATO today is a significant global player, exercising broad political and military influence across much of the world. It should be recognized as such.

— Denise Lim served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.

NOTES