

The Transformation of NATO's Roles in Shaping Global Order and Security Governance

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse NATO's security roles as a significant contribution to the development of a rules-based international order and the establishment of an effective framework for global and regional governance in the 21st century. Central to this study is an examination of the evolving roles NATO has adopted in recent decades, some of which were articulated during the Alliance's founding in 1949, while others have emerged from the post-Cold War strategic transformations. The article is premised on a clear semantic distinction between the concepts of "international order" and "global governance", arguing that the various forms of security governance associated with NATO's roles collectively reinforce the creation and maintenance of a rules-based international order. This order is explicitly framed in NATO's strategic concepts, which emphasise collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security as foundational to the Alliance's mission and its engagement in global and regional security governance. By exploring these dynamics, the article sheds light on how NATO continues to adapt and contribute to international stability,

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balancing traditional defence responsibilities with emerging security challenges in a complex geopolitical environment.

KEYWORDS: NATO's transformation; NATO's security roles; global order; security governance

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to analyse the role of NATO in ensuring security as a contribution to shaping a stable international order and participating in the creation of an effective framework for global and regional governance in the twenty-first century. The principal focus of this study is the examination of NATO's roles, encompassing those originally articulated at the founding of the North Atlantic Alliance in 1949 as well as those that have arisen in response to NATO's evolution in the aftermath of the Cold War. The extent to which NATO, by adopting and redefining its set of roles and thus developing various identities, contributes to the development of a rules-based international order and a framework for global and regional security governance will be analysed in relation to changing security challenges and threats, in particular with regard to the activities of revisionist powers, i.e. China and Russia, seeking to undermine the foundations of the existing international order. This will facilitate the delineation of the relationship between NATO as an agent and the structure of the international system, thereby answering the primary research question of how NATO, through establishing and engaging in security governance processes, contributes to the creation of a stable regional and global order.

The article argues that after the end of the Cold War, the North Atlantic Alliance underwent a process of transformation in response to changes in global politics related to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, and the relative decline of the United States as the sole superpower. NATO is no longer just

a collective defence organisation but also strives to effectively manage security at the regional and global levels. NATO is an institution with an agenda that changes in response to the evolution of security threats and challenges, with the degree and scope of its activities depending on member states, including above all the preferences of its greatest power, the United States.

The research problem outlined above necessitates defining what is meant by international order and governance. Defining these concepts poses many challenges, particularly regarding their interrelationship. This article argues that while the two concepts are distinct in meaning, there is a relationship between them, as the dominant and changing world or regional order is largely shaped by the nature and scope of global or regional governance.

The problem in defining the terms “international order” and “governance” arises from divergent interpretations, which often render these concepts vague and open to debate. Both are considered “slippery” concepts, reflecting the complexity of their nature (Acharya, 2018, p. 4; Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 207). John Ikenberry (2001, p. 23) defines international order as “the governing arrangements among a group of states, including its fundamental rules, principles and institutions”. A definition of a similar, albeit broader, nature is provided in a publication by the RAND Corporation, which states that order is “the body of rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations among the key players in the international environment” (Mazarr et al., 2016, p. 7). In another approach, Alastair Iain Johnston (2019, p. 13) incorporates the concept of hegemony into the definition, conceptualising the international order as “an array of institutions, rules, and norms that more or less reflect dominant state’s interests”. Global governance, by contrast, addresses the political capacity to manage global challenges through institutions and actors beyond the nation-state. Initially overlapping with concepts like international regimes and multilateralism, global governance has evolved to denote political globalisation aimed

at managing economic globalisation and global problems. James Rosenau (1992) captures this with the idea of “governance without government”, portraying it as a continuum between traditional interstate politics and world government.

While often treated as synonymous, international order and global governance present an interesting complementary relationship. Harto Hakovirta (2002, p. 15) uses an analogy that studying one without the other is like building a house without a roof or vice versa. Global order offers a broad analytical framework within which governance operates, while global governance contributes to the establishment and maintenance of international order, representing both a substance and process of world order. In a similar vein, James Rosenau (1992, p. 8) already emphasised that governance and order are interactive phenomena, with governance shaping the nature of the prevailing global order. The concept of governance is inherently dualistic in nature, functioning not only as a prerequisite but also as a consequence of order itself. Consequently, the existence of order is predicated on governance, and governance is contingent on order.

As regards the characteristics of international order in the twenty-first century, the article adopts the concept of a multiplex world order, whose main proponent is Amitav Acharya (2014, pp. 1–11). The multiplex world order includes “A dynamically pluralizing global governance architecture with an emerging multilevel governance architecture comprising global, regional and subnational layers (e.g. cities), each with formal and informal institutions, networks and hybrid structures” (Acharya et al., 2023, p. 2341). This concept broadens the possibilities for explaining the contemporary transformation of global politics because, unlike the commonly used concept of a multipolar world, it focuses not only on the dynamics of power but also on the importance of ideas, norms and various types of interaction at multiple levels. Moreover, it emphasises a decentralised governance architecture that encompasses both old and new powers, with a greater role

for regional governance. Adopting such a perspective allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the roles that NATO plays in the context of regional and global security governance.

1. NATO'S ORIGINAL ROLES AND INSTITUTIONAL ADAPTABILITY

Despite ongoing debate surrounding the theoretical analysis of the North Atlantic Alliance, even after the Cold War, NATO, as a military alliance, continues to serve as a platform for its member states to pursue their national interests (Podraza, 2018; Webber & Hyde-Price, 2016). Moreover, it functions as an institution with multiple roles, contributing to the formation of diverse identities. This observation carries significant implications for research in this field. Analyzing NATO's roles can be approached through various international relations theories simultaneously – primarily neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and social constructivism – rather than being confined to a single paradigm. Adopting this perspective enriches analyses of NATO, given the Alliance's diverse and multifaceted transformation since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, it deepens our understanding of the international order, described as “multiplex”, encompassing various orders – primarily the Western liberal order established by the United States after the Second World War, but also the emerging order constructed by revisionist powers such as China and Russia. As a component of the liberal international order, NATO must consider not only internal dynamics related to the evolving preferences of its member states but also global changes arising from increasing security interdependence.

An analysis of NATO in the aftermath of the Cold War reveals the Alliance's remarkable institutional adaptability, despite the observations made by neorealists in the early 1990s regarding the potential for its collapse due to the disappearance of the threat

posed by the Soviet Union (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 52; Waltz, 1993, p. 76). Contrary to such claims, it is important to note that the George H.W. Bush administration (1989–1993) regarded NATO as a fundamental pillar of a stable European security environment. Indeed, the administration actively promoted a central and dynamic role for the Alliance in Europe, grounded in a renewed Atlantic approach (Baker, 1989). This position has enabled NATO to embark on the complex process of adaptation by assuming new roles alongside its traditional functions, establishing novel forms of security governance linked to these roles, and influencing the configuration of the international order. This influence pertains both to the liberal order and, more broadly, to the evolving multiplex order. Consequently, NATO, through its multifaceted roles – including those within specific security governance frameworks – can shape various manifestations of the global order. A prominent feature of the Alliance's post-Cold War transformation is its engagement in activities beyond its traditional territorial boundaries, a capacity previously nonexistent and intrinsically tied to the concept of a global NATO. As a result, NATO's responsibilities have expanded beyond merely countering external threats by defending its own territory; the organization now employs diverse instruments to impact stability and security across different regions worldwide (Daalder & Goldgeier, 2006).

The roles of the North Atlantic Alliance are defined in the Washington Treaty, which established NATO in 1949, as well as in strategic concepts and other key documents that delineate the organization's scope and functions. The initial articulation of these roles can be traced to the pronouncements of NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, who is often attributed with characterising the Alliance's primary objectives in 1952 as "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down" – though the provenance of this quotation remains uncertain (Lindley-French, 2015, pp. 37–51). The formulation succinctly

captured NATO's tripartite purpose: countering the perceived threat from the Soviet Union, ensuring the continued presence of American forces in Europe, and maintaining control over Germany. Such a definition of roles expanded the objectives set forth in the Washington Treaty, wherein NATO was primarily defined as a military alliance aimed at countering external threats and embodying a community of values shared by its member states (NATO, 1949).

The fundamental value of NATO during the Cold War era derived from Article 5 of the treaty, which explicitly stipulated that an armed attack against one or more member states would be considered an attack against all. This provision empowered member states to undertake necessary measures, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain security within the North Atlantic area. Although there was no automatic security guarantee, each state retained the sovereign right to decide independently whether to assist others. The significance of these assurances stemmed largely from the United States' available military capabilities. NATO's governance of member states' security reflected its character as an instrument through which the United States pursued its hegemonic interests, while simultaneously ensuring the security of European countries and Canada against the Soviet threat.

NATO was also established as a community of values, primarily defined in the preamble to the Washington Treaty. This concept refers to the ideological foundations shared by Alliance members – specifically, their unwavering commitment to the purposes and principles outlined in the United Nations Charter. This commitment involves the pursuit of peace with all nations, alongside the protection of the freedom, common heritage, and civilisation of its members. These principles are grounded in democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. The idea of NATO as a community of values transcends its role as only a defence organization as it affirms the shared moral

and spiritual principles among member states. This conception was strategically important to US President Harry S. Truman's administration (1945–1953), which employed it to persuade the Senate to ratify the Washington Treaty in the face of opposition from those advocating a return to isolationism or supporters of the so-called universal option – that is, American senators who believed that only the United Nations could guarantee security and peace (Podraza, 2019, pp. 86–87; Sloan, 2020, p. 9). It also had an impact on the issue of NATO cohesion. The significance of the Alliance is primarily rooted in its capacity to deter potential adversaries, indicating that NATO is predominantly a defensive alliance. However, there is a counter-argument posited by some politicians and academics that the conceptualisation of NATO as an Atlantic community of liberal values and norms has been a contributing factor to enhanced cohesion within the Alliance, particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War and the admission of new member states from Central and Eastern Europe (Sjursen, 2004, pp. 687–703). Without fully questioning the possibility of treating NATO as a community of values, geostrategic considerations have continually dominated its activities, as exemplified by the United States' invitation to Portugal, a founding member that was not a democracy at the time, whose inclusion was motivated by the strategic importance of the Azores – Portugal's Atlantic islands – for establishing an American base and aircraft refuelling facilities (Podraza, 2019, p. 90). Furthermore, there have been instances where certain member states, including Greece and Turkey, have witnessed a regression in democracy. However, this has not significantly impacted their functionality within NATO.

The two original roles of NATO correspond to two categories of governance. As a military alliance, NATO's primary objective is the governance of collective security and defence to counter external threats. The fundamental purpose of this role is deterrence, alongside the collective defence against an aggressor, as outlined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Although the precise nature

of security guarantees was subject to considerable debate during the negotiations leading to the establishment of the Washington Treaty, the more cautious approach advocated by the United States ultimately prevailed. This was evidenced by the United States' agreement to include military activity while withholding the unconditional application of the obligations set out in Article 5 as advocated by European states (Sjursen, 2004, pp. 687–703).

The content of Article 5 itself is open to interpretation. To date, NATO has invoked Article 5 only once, in response to the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, when the security guarantee was interpreted broadly. The attacks were carried out not by a state, but by the terrorist organisation Al-Qa-eda, and the targets were civilians rather than military personnel. Consequently, the provisions of the Washington Treaty can be interpreted flexibly. Moreover, collective defence measures may be introduced not only on the basis of Article 5, but also at the request of a member state. NATO has implemented such measures on several occasions. For example the collective defence measures introduced by NATO at Turkey's request were as follows: (1) the deployment of Patriot missiles during the Gulf War in 1991; (2) a package of defence measures and the Display Deterrence operation during the Iraq crisis in 2003; and (3) the deployment of Patriot missiles in response to the situation in Syria in 2022 (NATO, 2023). Additionally, other NATO activities may be considered to fall within the scope of collective defence. This assertion pertains to the decisions made following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, during which NATO undertook the most substantial augmentation of collective defence since the Cold War by reinforcing the Alliance's eastern flank (NATO, 2025; 2023; Mälksoo, 2024, pp. 531–547). On the day of the Russian invasion, 24 February 2022, at an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council, the Alliance activated its defence plans by strengthening the eastern flank, including the first deployment of the NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force – established in

2014 in response to the annexation of Crimea – as well as other elements of the NATO Response Force (NATO, 2022b).

From a theoretical standpoint, the two original roles of the North Atlantic Alliance can be interpreted in various ways. However, this article adopts a general perspective based on President Woodrow Wilson's famous speech to the US Congress on 2 April 1917, in which he called for war against Germany to make the world safe for democracy. These terms should be understood as the cornerstones of liberal internationalism, signifying endeavours to establish an international order that safeguards and fosters the growth, security, and advancement of liberal democracy (Ikenberry, 2020, pp. xi-xii). Nevertheless, it is important to note that an international order deemed "safe for democracy" need not be confined solely to the liberal paradigm of international politics.

From the perspective of NATO, the establishment of a secure global environment conducive to the proliferation of democratic institutions and values is predicated on the implementation of two distinct strategies. First, a governance strategy for building resilience within the North Atlantic Alliance countries across various dimensions against external threats. Second, a governance strategy for promoting democracy at regional and global levels. These two strategies align with two possible interpretations of Wilson's appeal: firstly, ensuring the security of the United States as a democracy; secondly, supporting the development of democracy around the world. It is evident that they play a pivotal role in the establishment, advancement, and maintenance of a rules-based international order. This notion is emphasised repeatedly in NATO's most recent Strategic Concept, formally adopted in Madrid in June 2022. The notion of international order, as elucidated in the Strategic Concept, encompasses both regional and global dimensions. The North Atlantic Alliance was established in 1949 with the objective of safeguarding the security of the Euro-Atlantic region. However, following the conclusion of the Cold War, the Alliance adopted a global outlook, encompassing the

identification of both challenges and threats, as well as potential partner countries and organisations. Consequently, the rules-based international order that NATO supports is characterised by both a regional dimension, pertaining to the Euro-Atlantic area, and a global dimension, reflecting the broader aspirations of NATO member states to promote democratic values and security worldwide. It is evident that both categories fall within the conceptual framework of multiplex order. Firstly, the Madrid Strategic Concept refers to various international orders. The text emphasises that the growing partnership between China – a country developing coercive policies that challenge the Alliance's interests, security, and values – and Russia – explicitly named as the most significant and immediate threat to Allied security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area – reinforces attempts to undermine the rules-based international order (NATO, 2022a). Indeed, the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, in conjunction with a number of other states seeking to revise the established international order, are attempting to create an alternative international order. Secondly, even in the event of a shift from a hegemonic world to a pluralistic and decentralised one, NATO's pursuit of a global, rather than merely regional, rules-based order may be consistent with the multiplex concept. Using the multiplex metaphor, as employed by Amitav Acharya (2014), there is potential for enhanced interdependence between the various narratives within discrete auditoriums. This may result in the emergence of fundamental principles that serve as a common denominator amongst competing international orders.

2. NATO AFTER THE END OF THE COLD WAR

The North Atlantic Alliance developed various forms of governance, which are considered to be the pillars of a rules-based international order. These forms of governance were initiated

during the Cold War, but particularly after its conclusion. NATO has undergone a process of historical adaptation, beginning with its initial function as the transatlantic pillar of a liberal order, during which it guaranteed the survival and defence of democracy in Europe during the Cold War (NATO 1.0). This was followed by NATO 2.0 in the post-Cold War period, which supported democracy in relation to the process of enlargement, partnership and intervention in Afghanistan. The subsequent iterations of NATO have seen an increase in capabilities and the establishment of global partnerships, with NATO 3.0 and NATO 4.0 playing a role in securing rather than promoting democracy (Larsen, 2020, p. 222). The development of NATO is primarily expressed through its core tasks, as defined notably in the Madrid Strategic Concept (NATO, 2022a). These include the provision of deterrence and defence; crises prevention and management; and cooperative security.

2.1 The role of NATO in crisis prevention and management

The concept of crisis prevention and management within NATO only emerged after the end of the Cold War, alongside a significant transformation in international politics. Provisions relating to crisis management first appeared in the strategic concept adopted in London in November 1991. The document states that, given the reduced likelihood of major aggression in Europe:

In the new political and strategic environment in Europe, the success of the Alliance's policy of preserving peace and preventing war depends even more than in the past on the effectiveness of preventive diplomacy and successful management of crises affecting the security of its members. (NATO, 1991)

This assertion was further reinforced in the strategic concept that was adopted in Washington in April 1999. In the context of

pursuing peace, preventing wars, and strengthening security and stability, it was emphasised that NATO will strive to prevent or effectively manage conflicts in cooperation with other organisations and partners, including through crisis response operations conducted outside the scope of Article 5, in accordance with international law. This entails respecting the primary responsibility of the UN Security Council for maintaining international peace and security (NATO, 1999). With regard to crisis response operations in the Balkans, reference was made to NATO's 1994 decisions to make Alliance assets and expertise available for United Nations (UN) or Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) peace operations.

The Lisbon Strategic Concept of November 2010 adopted a more comprehensive approach to crisis management, based on the assumption that crises and conflicts beyond the Alliance's borders could pose a direct threat to NATO's security (NATO, 2010). The term "crisis management" was defined broadly to encompass a wide range of activities, including crisis prevention, crisis management, post-conflict stabilisation, and reconstruction support. Furthermore, NATO emphasised the necessity of broadening and intensifying political consultations among Alliance members and with partners at various stages of a crisis. The importance of crisis management has been included in NATO's latest strategic concept, adopted in Madrid in June 2022 (NATO, 2022a). Crisis prevention and management has been identified as one of the three main tasks of the Alliance, alongside deterrence and defence, and cooperative security. Emphasis has been placed on human security, including the protection of civilians and the reduction of civilian casualties, which are crucial components of crisis prevention and management. Consequently, NATO has underscored the necessity to enhance the Alliance's capacity to respond to the effects of climate change, food insecurity, and health-related crises, thereby broadening the Alliance's understanding of security and the scope of its governance.

2.2 NATO and the concept of cooperative security

The notion of cooperative security, predicated on the necessity to establish security in conjunction with other nations and international organisations, engage in multilateral dialogue, implement confidence-building measures, and address non-traditional security concerns, is of paramount importance for the establishment and advancement of a rules-based international order – a fundamental objective of NATO. This concept evolved significantly following the conclusion of the Cold War, although its origins can be traced back to the 1967 Harmel Report. The Harmel Report clearly emphasised that military security and détente policy are not contradictory but rather complementary (NATO, 1967). Moreover, it recognised that the NATO area could not be viewed in isolation from the rest of the world, as crises and conflicts developing outside its borders could negatively impact the Alliance's security and global stability.

The concept of cooperative security has a clear ideological justification, particularly evident after the end of the Cold War. The process of admitting new member states and the establishment of a “democracy zone” through the cultivation of strategic partnerships with non-member states in various regions of the world have become inextricably linked to the promotion of shared values and the advancement of democracy (Boesen & Larsen, 2011, p. 92). Within NATO, despite earlier suggestions and initiatives, cooperative security was not fully incorporated into the strategic concept until 2010, when it was emphasised that:

The Alliance will engage actively to enhance international security, through partnership with relevant countries and other international organisations; by contributing actively to arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament; and by keeping the door to membership in the Alliance open to all European democracies that meet NATO's standards. (NATO, 2010)

The development of partnership relations enables NATO to fulfil a global stabilising function by managing security in a network created and developed in collaboration with other entities across various regions and on a global scale. These activities have been identified as being directly related to the shaping of the international order, as stated in the 2022 Strategic Concept:

We will continue to work towards just, inclusive and lasting peace and remain a bulwark of the rules-based international order. We will retain a global perspective and work closely with our partners, other countries and international organisations, such as the European Union and the United Nations, to contribute to international peace and security. (NATO, 2022a, p. 1)

In accordance with the 2022 Strategic Concept, the process of cooperative security includes NATO enlargement and the strengthening of relations with Alliance partners, encompassing countries from diverse geographical regions worldwide, with a particular emphasis on the European Union (NATO, 2022a, pp. 9–11). NATO pursues an open-door policy, aimed both at reinforcing the Alliance itself and contributing to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. Since the conclusion of the Cold War, 16 new members have acceded to NATO, increasing the total number of member states to 32, compared with the 12 that initially founded the Alliance. The open-door policy obviously has its limitations due to differences of opinion among NATO member states. Moreover, for years, Russia has opposed NATO enlargement, perceiving it as a demonstration by the West of treating Russia as a defeated power and disregarding its interests and dignity (Podraza, 2025). Moreover, Russian President Vladimir Putin has strongly criticized NATO's expansion, viewing it as a serious provocation that undermines mutual trust and detracts

from European security. Such a stance conflicts with NATO's concept of cooperative security.

The establishment of a network of partnerships is of paramount importance to NATO's post-Cold War strategy, as articulated in the 2022 Strategic Concept, due to its pivotal role in safeguarding global common goods, enhancing the Alliance's resilience, and upholding a rules-based international order. Currently, NATO collaborates with over 40 nations, fostering diverse forms of co-operation and security governance. These efforts include defence capability enhancement, interoperability development, and crisis management.

CONCLUSIONS

Since its establishment in 1949, NATO has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in shaping the rules-based international order. The Alliance has initiated and developed various forms of security governance, primarily within the Euro-Atlantic region, but increasingly on a global scale since the end of the Cold War. The diverse forms of security governance associated with NATO's activities constitute the fundamental pillars of the rules-based international order, as reflected in successive NATO strategic concepts. While NATO contributes to shaping this form of order on a global scale, it faces challenges from revisionist powers, primarily China and Russia. This underscores the relevance of the concept of a multiplex order, which comprises various alternative orders based on different principles. Naturally, one might question whether NATO will continue to be an effective institution in the future, contributing to security and peace both regionally and globally. The response to this question is complex; threats to NATO's activities arise not only from the international environment but also from within the collective West. Currently, significant uncertainties surround the foreign policy of President

Donald Trump, who resumed office in January 2025. The nature and style of the present American administration's actions raise serious concerns about NATO's cohesion in the face of external threats and the very survival of the Alliance. It is hypothesized that the United States may be reluctant to play as prominent a role in NATO as it did during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Such a decline in NATO's influence could potentially lead to the dissolution of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and substantially diminish prospects for developing a rules-based international order.

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