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June 22, 2007

Global NATO: Congressman Suggests Creating Worldwide Alliance

By Vince Crawley
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington -- NATO's 26 nations should consider expanding membership well outside of Europe and North America -- perhaps inviting Pacific-region democracies to join -- the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee told NATO's senior commander June 22.

"In a period of globalization, where everything is globalized, from academics to trade, clearly NATO ideally would be transformed into a global security mission," Foreign Affairs Chairman Tom Lantos said in a hearing devoted to the future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

"We should consider seriously NATO's own expansion beyond the borders of Europe and North America," Lantos said. "Why not allow firmly democratic nations, such as South Korea, New Zealand, Australia and Israel, to join the world's greatest military alliance? Their interests and ideals are joined with ours."

Lantos directed his question to U.S. General Bantz Craddock, NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe, and Daniel Fried, the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs.

Craddock and Fried replied that NATO planners are discussing how to best handle global missions, but discussion of expanding beyond the traditional North Atlantic region is still in its very early stages.

NATO was formed in 1949 to help U.S. and Western European militaries join forces to halt Soviet expansion. After the Soviet Union disbanded in 1991, NATO spent much of the 1990s helping to bring stability to the Balkans. Currently, the alliance has deployed nearly 40,000 troops to Afghanistan to help bring stability and prevent the resurgence of the Taliban. (See related article.)

"From the best military advice perspective, it would indeed be enormously helpful to have ... more democratic, peace-loving nations as a part of the alliance," Craddock told Lantos.

Craddock said NATO's current members have high ambitions for what they want the alliance to accomplish in Afghanistan and other missions well outside Europe. However,

he said, NATO member nations often don't provide the military personnel and resources to accomplish their strategic goals.

"I think I am a bit impatient," Craddock said. "We need to crack the whip a little harder and move a little faster, because NATO is involved today in operations, not in planning and preparing to counter the Warsaw Pact."

Nations well outside the traditional NATO boundaries have joined in NATO-led operations, prompting alliance staffs to begin discussing more formal partnership arrangements with countries such as Australia and South Korea.

Craddock said many democracies outside the NATO region could offer well-equipped military forces, which could contribute to NATO's longtime troop and equipment shortfalls.

The nations mentioned by Lantos -- who also suggested Japan as a potential partner -- could bring manpower and military capabilities to the NATO alliance that "no doubt would be very helpful," Craddock said.

The State Department's Fried said that nothing in the North Atlantic Treaty specifically limits the geography of the alliance. However, he said, it might be premature to discuss such a major shift in thinking as expansion beyond the traditional North Atlantic region. "I don't have for you an answer whether or not NATO ... will ever be ready to take that step. Right now it is not," he said.

Instead of global membership, the alliance is discussing global partnerships. Partnerships differ from memberships in that NATO membership is founded on Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty -- that an attack on a member nation is considered an attack on all NATO nations. The partnerships under discussion would not have this core provision.

Fried said discussions about the possibility of global memberships "would be useful" in helping NATO understand that it now is involved in missions of a global scale.

"From a perspective of planning and preparing at my headquarters," Craddock said, "we are looking at the ability to expand. Is that a first step to a global enlargement? I don't know. That'll be, obviously, a political question."

Lantos expressed concern that NATO, which makes decisions by consensus, might be moving too slowly in adapting to its new global role.

"Global conditions will not wait until our slow-moving bureaucratic structures catch up with the global challenges," Lantos said.

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