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How NATO survived George W. Bush: an institutionalist perspective

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This article challenges the conventional wisdom that the cohesion and institutional health of NATO was seriously threatened by the policies pursued by the George W. Bush administration in the US during its first term. On the basis of case studies of decisions made in 2001–2003 regarding the Balkans, the response to 9/11, and defending Turkish airspace in the build-up to the war with Iraq, it argues that NATO's status as a robust and mature international institution helped it to effectively channel and blunt potentially serious challenges to its cohesion and effectiveness; both from the Bush administration and from European governments sceptical about aspects of Bush's approach. Consequently, NATO was not seriously or lastingly damaged by the disputes that did arise during this period.

Keywords: NATO; international institutions; George W. Bush; Balkans; Iraq

Introduction

It is often argued that the George W. Bush administration, especially during its first term in 2001–2005, pursued policies and approaches that produced an 'assault' on the existing world order, witnessed a 'revolution' in US foreign and security policies, and constituted an attempt to consolidate a new era of 'unilateralism' and American 'imperialism'.¹ In the specific context of NATO, these tendencies allegedly stoked transatlantic discord to the extent that the alliance experienced a 'near-death experience' in 2002–2003, owing in particular to severe disputes over Iraq.²

Yet these narratives underplay how NATO was reaffirmed and in some ways strengthened during the Bush presidency. Between 2001 and 2008 it expanded its membership substantially, deepened its institutional relations with Russia, maintained peacekeeping responsibilities in the Balkans, and undertook major new operations in Afghanistan. The success or otherwise of each of these initiatives can be debated. Taken together, however, they hardly seem to constitute evidence of an institution in terminal decline from the early 2000s.

This article seeks to account for the underlying institutional strength of NATO during the early Bush era. It suggests two related causal factors. Firstly, by 2001 NATO was well established as a robust and significant international security institution. Secondly, this mature institution was able to safely channel and manage the disputes that did arise amongst its members – including the US – during the key years 2001–2003.

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NATO as a mature international security institution

Cold War evolution

The 1949 North Atlantic Treaty places no automatic obligation on its signatories to offer military assistance to allies under attack. Article 5 requires each signatory to take 'such action as it deems necessary'; leaving the door open in theory for them to opt to take no enforcement action.³ The treaty does not provide for the creation of much organisational structure either. Its content nevertheless does suggest that its signatories wanted something more solid and permanent than a traditional military alliance.

In a traditional alliance, little or nothing might be done to provide *collective* military resources. Members would promise to help with their national assets if an ally was attacked.⁴ The wording of the North Atlantic Treaty suggests that its signatories had something more substantial in mind. Article 3 states that 'in order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties separately *and jointly* by means of continuous and effective self-help *and mutual aid*, will maintain and develop their individual *and collective* capacity to resist armed attack' (emphases added). The treaty also provided for the creation of an intergovernmental North Atlantic Council (NAC) in which each signatory would be represented. The NAC continues to be the senior forum for collective consultations and decision-making amongst NATO member states.

A nascent security community was also evident in the 1949 treaty. Thomas Risse-Kappen has argued persuasively that such a community already existed amongst the three major states involved in its negotiation (the US, the UK and France); based on the wartime alliance between them.⁵ In this context, Nicholas Henderson, a British diplomat involved in negotiating the treaty, later recalled the 'overriding presence of ... common purpose' animating senior political leaders at the time.⁶ This sense of purpose drew on the wartime co-operation between the US and the UK in particular, which had been premised on the 'Atlantic Charter' signed by Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt in August 1941. To be sure, the main immediate driver behind this agreement had been pragmatic; especially from the British government's perspective seeking as it was to maximise practical American support for its war effort at a time of national peril. Nevertheless, the charter was explicitly premised on 'certain common principles ... for a better future for the world', including opposition to territorial aggrandisement by states and the waging of aggressive war.⁷ By thus framing Anglo-American relations as values- as well as interest-based, the Atlantic Charter marked them as being qualitatively different from relations and co-operation with other states – even wartime allies. The Soviet Union – a *de facto* ally since the German attack two months previously – was not invited to sign the charter. Other British allies, such as the various governments-in-exile in London, were not even mentioned in it.

In the late 1940s, the Atlantic Charter represented an antecedent for the type of relationship envisaged amongst signatories of the North Atlantic Treaty: one embodying a sense of shared values as well as pragmatic security co-operation against a perceived common strategic threat. This helped to provide a basis for moves soon after the signing and ratification of the treaty to institutionalise its provisions; many of which were inspired not coincidentally by the US and the UK. Perhaps the most significant institutional development during these early years was agreement by the member states in 1952 to create international political and military staffs and a process for

continuously reviewing national defence plans. A seminal 1957 study by Karl Deutsch et al. called this review process 'an unprecedented performance' in the degree to which member states opened up their defence planning processes to multilateral scrutiny and recommendation.⁸ This study introduced the term 'security community' to describe a group of states whose military co-operation, if not integration, had developed to the extent that armed conflict amongst them had become inconceivable.

Neither the force-planning process nor any other aspect of NATO's institutional development has involved formal supra-nationalism. There are no legal or institutional means to *compel* member state compliance with its procedures or recommendations. Nevertheless as they developed, the force-planning process – overseen by a Defence Planning Committee (DPC) – together with wider political and diplomatic consultations in the NAC, increasingly influenced the decision-making of member states. As they did so NATO 'matured' as a significant international security institution.

Robert Keohane has defined mature institutions as 'involv[ing] persistent and connected sets of rules (formal or informal) that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity and shape expectations' amongst member states.⁹ International regimes largely supply the 'rules' which are central to an effective institution of this kind. They informally regulate and shape the way in which members of an institution conceptualise, formulate and carry out policies on issues within its remit.¹⁰ In the NATO structures as they developed, the influence of emerging regimes was most clearly evident in the consultative and behavioural norms and procedures developed in the NAC, DPC and other senior committees.

In 1979 Frederic Kirgis published the results of a detailed investigation into the impact of NATO consultations on national policies during the institution's first three decades; studying consultations on proposed force reductions in Europe. He found that whilst members had generally *not* been prepared to consult about the basic decision as to whether forces would be reduced, there were several cases when they had been willing to modify or defer reductions in response to multilateral pressures that had emerged during the force-planning process. Conversely, there were few occasions when national governments felt able to ignore NATO recommendations altogether.¹¹ Other studies shared the conclusion that even powerful NATO members, including the US, were willing to defer or modify planned reductions in response to institutional pressure.¹²

During the Cold War years, NATO's consultative and behavioural regimes developed substantial robustness, although the institution has never been empowered to compel its member states to follow prescribed courses of action, as noted. In perhaps the most serious Cold War-era challenge to NATO's institutional strength, in 1966 President Charles de Gaulle withdrew France from the force-planning process and integrated military structures. At the time some, including perhaps de Gaulle himself,¹³ expected this action by the leader of one of NATO's key European members to seriously debilitate the institution. Although major readjustments were required, including moving NATO's political and military headquarters from France to Belgium, the core NATO consultative and behavioural regimes were 'adjusted rapidly and with relative ease through multilateral and bilateral negotiations' as one contemporary study put it.¹⁴

This smoothness of the relocation process may have been facilitated by Belgium – and Brussels specifically – being a logical and fairly obvious choice for NATO's main

headquarters. In 1948, the UK, France and the Benelux countries had chosen the Belgian capital as the base for their plans to establish a putative 'Western Union Defence Organisation' (WUDO). Within the WUDO framework, these signatories initiated programmes for collective command and planning structures for their armed forces, and also for the construction of commonly funded 'infrastructure' such as airbases and fuel pipelines. The substance of these programmes was taken over when NATO members agreed to develop their own collective military assets and infrastructure from 1950 to 1951. The extent to which the WUDO provided a model for subsequent NATO military integration is disputed, but the work which had already been done under the former's auspices undoubtedly made it easier for NATO members to bring collective military structures into being relatively quickly and effectively in response to the heightened sense of threat engendered by the Korean war.¹⁵ This was acknowledged by Lord Ismay, NATO's first Secretary-General.¹⁶ Thereafter, the choice of Brussels as the seat of the European Economic Community in 1957–1958 had further enhanced the city's status as Europe's *de facto* institutional capital.

All told therefore, the emerging NATO institutional norms and processes survived disruptions caused by the partial French withdrawal in the 1960s essentially intact. French representatives continued to participate in political consultations, and the French government signed agreements to facilitate continued military co-operation on a bilateral basis. Eventually, France was drawn back into most aspects of collective NATO force-planning and consultation; a process that has accelerated since the end of the Cold War.

After the Cold War

The prevailing view of NATO's institutional maturity by the late Cold War period was summed-up by Glenn Snyder in 1984. He argued that:

it is largely because the alliance itself is fundamentally stable that ... policy divergences may develop and persist. The alliance is stable because it is essentially a product of the structure of the system and of the common security interests generated thereby. So long as that structure and those interests persist the allies are free to disagree.¹⁷

NATO was thus 'stable' within the systemic context of bipolarity. At the end of the 1980s, the existential question arose as to whether and how it would survive in a new and fundamentally changing security environment.

Degradation in NATO's consultative and behavioural regimes would be a significant indicator that it was not adapting effectively. Increasing non-observation by member states of core norms is a key component of regime decline. John Gerard Ruggie argues that decline is underway if a *pattern* of repeated non-observation emerges. Occasional non-observation is tolerable providing that norms and rules are observed by most participants most of the time. If, however, non-observation becomes more frequent and is viewed as increasingly acceptable, then the regime is weakening.¹⁸

Virtually all NATO members made significant defence budget cuts during the 1990s in response to the disappearance of the Soviet threat. These reductions took place within parameters agreed in NATO however. In 1993, Gunther Hellmann and Reinhard Wolf noted that:

In accordance with the decision of NATO to establish an allied rapid reaction corps, many member states are setting up intervention forces for deployment to distant regions ... Forces are [being] optimized for the defense of far-away allies rather than for the protection of national borders.¹⁹

Subsequent developments suggested that these new forces were available for the defence of far-away *interests* as well as the territory of allies.

This was arguably the most significant normative development since the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. In another reflection of the founding members' interest in creating something more than a traditional military alliance, the treaty did provide – through Article 4 – for consultations and possible collective action in defence of shared interests outside the area covered by the Article 5 collective defence clause. Given the overriding perception of the Soviet threat during the Cold War however, Article 4 had been largely ignored during NATO's first four decades. During the early 1990s on the other hand, it became a key reference point in an emerging legal, normative, and political framework within which member states discussed and decided on a series of military interventions in the Balkan region.

NATO and the Balkans

To be sure this engagement was hardly a smooth and seamless process at first. The George H.W. Bush administration did not see the Balkans as a foreign policy priority; a view epitomised in a comment attributed to Bush's Secretary of State James Baker that the US did not have 'a dog in that fight'. Even so, tentative American suggestions were reportedly made that NATO might have a role to play in preventing or at least mitigating the conflicts arising from the disintegration of the federal Yugoslav state from 1991. These were, however, rebuffed by members of the then European Community (EC).²⁰ Some EC leaders evidently saw a chance for their own institution to lead in responding to the emerging Balkan conflicts. Most (in)famously Jacques Poos the then Foreign Minister of Luxembourg (which held the EC's rotating presidency in the second half of 1991), grandly declared as he departed on an early diplomatic mission that 'this is the hour of Europe, not the hour of the Americans'. In similar vein, Jacques Delors then President of the European Commission, stated that 'we do not interfere in American affairs [and] we trust that America will not interfere in European affairs'.²¹ Unfortunately, such rhetorical hubris was not matched by relevant capabilities or will, and the EC and its members proved unable to marshal an effective diplomatic or economic, still less military, response: most especially to the civil war in Bosnia that got underway from the spring of 1992.

In the US, the incoming Clinton administration had the Bosnia conflict on its agenda from its earliest days in 1993. The issue was discussed at National Security Council meetings on a regular basis: 18 times during Clinton's first 10 months alone.²² The problem here was not, therefore, a lack of attention. Rather, it was the inability of the president and his principal advisers to come up with a viable and consistent policy. During the years 1993–1995, there were times when the unity and cohesion of NATO was severely strained by the seeming inability of anybody to devise and commit to an effective means of bringing the bloodshed in Bosnia to an end.

Having said that, during this period member states still managed to agree on a number of unprecedented measures that effectively took the institution 'out of area',

in the sense of responding to a security crisis not involving an attack on the territory of one or more members, for the first time. These steps included deploying multinational headquarters staffs to help bolster the UN humanitarian relief forces deployed on the ground in Bosnia, and using NATO command and planning assets to assist in conducting airstrikes mainly against Bosnian Serb military forces in response to threats or attacks on the UN forces.

None of this actually brought the conflict to an end, nor did it prevent questions arising about NATO's relevance to post-Cold War European security if it were unable to force a halt. For a variety of reasons, including such questions about NATO's 'credibility' and a concomitant willingness of the US to continue to act as 'leader of the free world', senior members of the Clinton administration – principally National Security Adviser Anthony Lake – finally seized the initiative in the summer of 1995.²³

Lake's idea was for sustained offensive military action against the Bosnian Serbs, regarded as being the most resistant of the warring groups to a negotiated settlement, with concurrent political pressure on the Serb leadership in Belgrade in order to coerce the former into agreeing to a ceasefire and the latter into entering a peace process on behalf of the Serb nation as a whole. Having secured agreement from Clinton, Lake was purposely assertive in selling this proposal to NATO allies. He told his European interlocutors that the president had firmly decided on this course of action and was counting on their support; both political and practical.

Evidently learning from a diplomatically disastrous 1993 visit to Europe by Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who had brought no firm US plan to rally allied support around, Lake secured their support with little apparent difficulty. One member of his travelling party indeed described convincing European leaders as having been 'a piece of cake', whilst others contended that they fell into line almost automatically once 'the big dog had barked'.²⁴ These appraisals probably reflected relief as much as hubris. The Lake mission to Europe had been premised on the belief that complaints amongst governments there about an absence of American leadership were motivated by an interest in leveraging such leadership rather than seeking possible alternatives, as some EC leaders had done in 1991–1992. Lake's success in ensuring allied buy-in to his proposal vindicated that assumption.

Success was not simply down to Lake's assertive salesmanship. Crucial to the outcome was the Clinton administration's newly declared willingness to commit thousands of US troops to either help police any ensuing peace agreement, or assist in a withdrawal of international forces in the event of failure. General Wesley Clark, the senior military representative on Lake's team, conceded that without those commitments his proposal 'would never have gotten to first base with our Allies'.²⁵ Thus, the success of 'assertive multilateralism' (to use the Clinton administration's favoured term) relied on significantly more than just respect for – or deference to – the reputation of the US as the pre-eminent international power, and leader in NATO. The Clinton administration was expected to underwrite that reputation by contributing the major share of military resources to ensure success, or at least minimise the costs of a failure. In return, its European NATO allies would come together to support the US strategy for Bosnia's future, with a wide cross-section of them also contributing to the forces on the ground required to make it work.

Following the negotiation of the Bosnia peace accord under US auspices at Dayton Ohio in autumn 1995, this is essentially what happened. Senior officials in

the Clinton administration – from the president down – embarked on a major public lobbying effort to successfully persuade a sceptical Congress to acquiesce in the deployment of over 20,000 US troops as part of a 60,000 strong peace Implementation Force (IFOR), to be deployed in Bosnia within a NATO command and planning framework. The major thrust of this effort was a warning to senators and congressmen of the impact on NATO's credibility of attempts to block US participation in this mission. Clinton, in a televised speech that one British newspaper called 'perhaps his finest foreign policy address in three years of office',²⁶ asserted that:

as NATO's leader and the primary broker of the peace agreement, the United States must be an essential part of the mission ... If we're not there, NATO will not be there [and this will] erode our partnership with our European allies.

Warren Christopher meanwhile stated that US refusal to participate would spell 'the end of NATO' and told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that 'taking action in Bosnia now is an acid test of American leadership'.²⁷

It is a measure of the potency of these appeals that Clinton's die-hard Republican opponents in Congress opted not to try to block the deployment of US troops to Bosnia; even though this would rapidly increase the American military presence on the ground there from a handful of headquarters staff to over 20,000 combat-ready troops. Doubtless the demonstrated willingness of NATO allies to keep their part of the bargain and contribute to IFOR alongside the US had helped: all but two of them would make some military contribution to the force from the beginning of 1996.²⁸

The deployment of IFOR to Bosnia represented a key milestone in NATO's post-Cold War evolution. Using NATO as their institutional framework, its member states established a presence and a stake in the security and stability of the Balkan region, which they have maintained to the present day. After the IFOR deployment, preserving NATO's 'credibility' progressively became a central concern motivating continued commitment to the region. This was seen during the Kosovo crisis at the end of the 1990s. Shortly after the start of the air campaign against Serbia in March 1999, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook publicly declared that 'the whole credibility of NATO is at stake [in the outcome] ... It is in the national British interest to maintain NATO's credibility'.²⁹ In the US, the Pentagon's After-Action Report on the operation identified 'ensuring NATO's credibility' as a formal campaign aim.³⁰ Indeed, it was being cited so frequently by the end of the Clinton administration in 2000 that a British parliamentary committee felt compelled to caution that 'it is difficult to imagine a legal justification [for future interventions] based upon the need to support any organisation's credibility'.³¹

George W. Bush and NATO

US troops in the Balkans

Unsurprisingly given its importance to NATO therefore, one of the main transatlantic security issues during the 2000 US presidential election campaign had been a pledge by candidate George W. Bush to withdraw American troops from Bosnia and Kosovo. This was part of his attack on the Clinton administration's approach to using military force. Bush had declared in debate with his opponent Al Gore in

October 2000 that ‘I don’t think our troops ought to be used for what’s called nation-building. I think our troops out to be used to fight and win war.’ Reinforcing this, campaign adviser Condoleezza Rice asserted that ‘we don’t need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten’.³²

The last meeting of NATO defence ministers before Bush was confirmed as president-elect in December 2000 had focused largely on the future of the NATO-led stabilisation forces deployed in both Bosnia and Kosovo. The agreed communiqué from this meeting suggested that its outcome was purposely – if subtly – designed to raise the stakes for any incoming Administration seeking to reduce or abrogate the US commitment to one or both of these missions. It stated that forces in both Bosnia and Kosovo would be maintained at their current overall levels. A review was also announced of the numbers committed to the Kosovo Force (KFOR). This would be conducted by the member states’ permanent representatives on the NAC, and it would report at its next ministerial meeting in mid-2001.³³ This subsequent meeting then agreed a *further* review of KFOR, as well as initiating one of the force levels in Bosnia.³⁴

The impact of these apparently innocuous bureaucratic process moves was to subtly increase the potential political and diplomatic costs to the new Administration of proceeding with Bush’s campaign pledge to withdraw US troops from the Balkans. If it did so and effectively short-circuited an ongoing intra-NATO review process, this might be portrayed as undercutting the reputation of the US as a reliable leader and ally, damaging NATO’s credibility, and undermining continued European willingness to shoulder military responsibilities in the Balkans. Furthermore, the new Bush administration might thus give weight to charges of unilateralism and disregard for established multilateral structures and norms that were already being made by critics at home and abroad.

Against this backdrop, president-elect Bush had started hedging on his campaign commitment even before he was inaugurated. In a January 2001 interview, he had stated that he had no ‘deadlines in mind’ for beginning withdrawals, also saying that ‘I honor the agreements that the president [i.e. Clinton] has ... that our country has made.’³⁵ The self-correction here was revealing. It suggested that Bush recognised from the beginning of his presidency that the US contribution to NATO’s Balkan operations went beyond a narrow political commitment from his predecessor, and embodied one on behalf of the US to NATO as a whole.

Concurrently, senior officials attuned to NATO’s institutional needs mobilised during the first months of the new Administration in an effort to neutralise Bush’s campaign pledge. Secretary of State Colin Powell developed the neat formula that American and European troops went into the Balkans together and so would leave together. Senior American military officers assigned to the NATO command and planning structures also weighed in by supporting the conclusions of the NATO defence ministers meetings that there should be no change in existing US troop commitments to either Bosnia or Kosovo.³⁶

These arguments cumulatively influenced the president, who took an early high-profile opportunity to address concerns that the US was about to quit the Balkans. On his first visit to Europe in June 2001, Bush announced at NATO headquarters that ‘I’m going to commit to the line that Colin Powell said: “We came in together, and we will leave together.” It is the pledge of our Government, and it’s a pledge that I will keep.’ He also appeared interested more generally in rebutting suggestions that his preference was for an essentially unilateral approach to decision-making; one,

therefore, likely to be detrimental to NATO's multilateral norms and processes. In this respect, the new president asserted that:

Unilateralists don't come around the table to listen to others and to share opinion; unilateralists don't ask opinions of world leaders. I count on the advice of our friends and Allies. I'm willing to consult on issues. Sometimes we don't agree, and I readily concede that, but there's a lot more that we agree upon than we disagree about ... I think the people of NATO now understand they've got a strong, consistent, loyal ally.³⁷

Compare this with Bush's abrasive approach in an area that was *not* within NATO's purview: climate change and his disavowal of the Kyoto environmental protocol. On this issue, where Bush dealt with his European interlocutors in a national rather than institutional context, he proved much less amenable to compromise. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* shortly after returning from his European trip in mid-2001, the president described with evident pride how 'I went to dinner ... with [the then] 15 leaders of the EU, and patiently sat there as all 15 in one form or another told me how wrong I was ... [but I] stood my ground. I wasn't going to yield ... I made my point.'³⁸ Whilst the Balkan issue soon faded as a discordant question in transatlantic relations, climate change would remain as a recurring source of contention for the duration of Bush's presidency.

Bush kept his pledge not to unilaterally quit the Balkans. His Administration subsequently sought to reinforce the twin messages that the US could be counted upon to remain engaged, and that any changes in force levels in Bosnia or Kosovo would only come about by consultation and agreement with NATO allies. In the summer of 2002, for example, notwithstanding the onset of the post-9/11 'war on terror', the Pentagon dispatched 1000 additional troops to take part in a major exercise in Kosovo. This deployment was explicitly designed 'to demonstrate the continued strength of American commitment': a message that was further reinforced by a visit from Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, General Richard Myers. He duly pronounced ongoing NATO operations in Bosnia and Kosovo to be 'so vitally important in this region', and reaffirmed that 'the Balkans is still a high priority with the US administration of President Bush'.³⁹

American troops eventually did withdraw from Bosnia in December 2004. This was managed within NATO and in coordination with the European Union however, and it reflected as much the interest of EU members in enhancing their Union's own putative military capabilities as an American desire to get out. As a result, the NATO mission was formally handed over to the EU's military planning staffs which formed a new force – the EU Force – to continue it at reduced troop levels. Meanwhile NATO and the US nationally both retained a 'footprint' in Bosnia in the form of small headquarters staffs, in order to provide the basis for redeployment if necessary in the future.⁴⁰ US troops have continued to serve in Kosovo throughout Bush's presidency, and beyond.

Two noteworthy aspects are evident in the discussions here. The first is the extent to which NATO was effectively insulated during Bush's first months from the transatlantic frictions that quickly developed over issues outside its purview; such as climate change. There was no discernible overspill of the tensions that arose over these issues into the intra-NATO consultative and behavioural structures and processes. The second is the relative speed with which President Bush moved to abrogate his

campaign pledge to withdraw militarily from the Balkans. This was done publicly within five months of his taking office. There is little evidence of this move being questioned or encountering serious resistance within the higher echelons of the new Administration. Once in office and exposed to the influence of NATO's multilateral norms and procedures – brought into play both through the commissioning of a series of ongoing NAC reviews in Brussels and the lobbying of senior officials and military officers within the US government – Bush had quickly moved in a direction conducive to maintaining intra-NATO cohesion and agreement on an important and relevant security issue.

9/11 and the invocation of Article 5

The George W. Bush administration has been criticised for allegedly wilfully disregarding the help offered by NATO allies in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, through the invocation for the first time of Article 5.⁴¹ In assessing such claims, it should be borne in mind that this had been a conditional offer. On 12 September 2001 the NAC had declared that Article 5 would be invoked only *after* the council had 'determined that this attack was directed from abroad'. Twenty days elapsed before then NATO Secretary-General Lord (George) Robertson announced that the NAC was satisfied with American evidence that al-Qaeda, based in Afghanistan, was responsible, and that it considered Article 5 operational.⁴² There were suggestions that some NATO members had initially been dubious about invoking the article at all.⁴³

The European procedural concerns – reasonable perhaps in theory – jarred with post-9/11 realities in the US. As Elizabeth Pond has put it: 'Europeans grossly underestimated the psychological impact of the 9/11 attacks in triggering that fierce American patriotism that focused America's combined sense of victimhood and unassailable power into a can-do global war on terrorism.'⁴⁴ Offering Article 5 in two instalments, with a three-week gap in between, hardly chimed with this mood; neither did reported demands for possibly overly lengthy multilateral consultation before military action was taken.

Despite this, the Bush administration did not ignore the hugely important political and symbolic NATO act when it did come. On 4 October, two days after invocation was confirmed, the NAC speedily agreed to a package of eight measures of practical support for the impending war on terror. Some of these, such as overflight rights, could have been arranged bilaterally between the US and individual European states, but the point here is that they were purposely negotiated and agreed within and through the NATO consultative framework. Furthermore, two collective NATO-led military operations were announced. One involved the deployment of surveillance aircraft to help patrol US airspace (Operation Eagle Assist), and the other a naval task force to undertake counter-terrorism patrols in the Mediterranean (Operation Active Endeavour). Secretary-General Robertson noted that both had been 'requested by the United States' and he also declared that together they effectively 'operationalise[d] Article 5'.⁴⁵

Invoking Article 5 was a step that had initially been suggested *to* the Bush administration rather than requested *by* it. Indeed, American officials were reportedly initially 'surprised' by the suggestion.⁴⁶ Under these circumstances, it can be argued that the onus was on European member states to take the lead in fleshing out what

practical assistance NATO might offer. A window of opportunity to do this existed in the three weeks between the conditional invocation of Article 5 on 12 September, and its confirmation in early October. Little was done during this period however.

Thus there did appear to be a *temporary* breakdown – or at least hiatus – in NATO's multilateral consultative processes under the shocking and extraordinary impact of the 9/11 attacks. On the American side a flavour of this was conveyed by Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith in congressional hearings shortly thereafter:

We received, from the allies, an impressive and gratifying, spontaneous outpouring of offers of support after September 11. These came at a time when the entire United States, not least the Government, was stunned by an attack that nobody expected. We were quickly organizing a response. We were organizing a war in a place that we did not expect to go to war before that [i.e. Afghanistan]. There was an enormous amount going on. And pulling together the efforts of the whole government ... to develop the war plan, was an enormous challenge.⁴⁷

With the American government understandably distracted by having to deal with the immediate aftermath of the attacks and begin planning a response, European allies, having pledged their strong rhetorical support, arguably could and should have taken a lead in formulating proposals for operationalising Article 5. Instead they waited for the US to request assistance in October 2001, with some later complaining, perhaps to obscure their own lack of dynamism, that NATO had been undermined by *American* indifference. Notwithstanding this, a package of measures was quickly negotiated and adopted by the NAC that month, as noted. This challenged the view that the events of 9/11 had shown Article 5 – and thus by implication NATO per se – to be largely irrelevant.⁴⁸ Going forward, the NAC's willingness to embrace the principle of a collective response to 9/11 would also help in providing the basis for allied contributions to the international stabilisation operations that were agreed for Afghanistan following the removal of the Taliban regime from power in late 2001.

Iraq and Turkish air defence

Analysts of the period 2002–2003 have argued that divisions over Iraq plunged NATO into one of the most serious crises in its history. In particular, it has been suggested that a dispute over the possible provision of air defence assets to Turkey in early 2003 strained it 'to the breaking point'.⁴⁹ The alleged severity and impact of this dispute has been exaggerated however; perhaps deliberately so by some of the protagonists. It allowed prominent opponents of war in Iraq – particularly in France and Germany – to take a stance internationally and appease domestic opposition at the same time. The Bush administration meanwhile could use the alleged crisis to mobilise support for its case, whilst blaming opponents for any potential lasting damage to NATO. Thus much expedient posturing was evident on both sides. For example, the French government – widely viewed as leading opposition within the NAC to sending air defence systems to Turkey within a NATO framework – had nonetheless reportedly assured its Turkish counterpart that it would not block such a decision when it finally came to be made.⁵⁰

The ultimately limited and manageable nature of the 'crisis' was apparent to prescient observers at the time. Richard Holbrooke, who had worked closely with NATO

member governments in Europe as Bill Clinton's Bosnia point man in the mid-1990s, observed that 'what we have is a messy situation but not a crisis, because it is still fixable'.⁵¹ Secretary-General Robertson, who was centrally involved in managing the dispute, accurately calibrated the damage done to NATO cohesion as akin to 'a hit above the waterline, not below'.⁵²

When the main protagonists decided things had gone far enough, they moved quickly and effectively to de-escalate tensions. The institutional mechanism for achieving the desired de-escalation was to transfer discussions on the issue from the dead-locked NAC to the DPC, in which France at the time was not represented and therefore had no blocking vote. This effectively created the conditions for Germany and others to abandon their opposition, whilst the French government could reasonably claim to have facilitated a resolution by removing itself from the discussion. As a non-participant in the DPC, the latter also did not have to formally sign up to the final decision and thus explicitly abandon its original 'principled' stance.⁵³

Some portrayed this outcome as a 'snub' to France.⁵⁴ This misunderstood the nature of NATO decision-making however. Under the NAC's consensus rules the French government had to give its consent for the discussion to be moved to the DPC. By doing so it could keep its pledge to its Turkish ally not to stand in the way of an eventual positive decision, *and* continue asserting that it had not abandoned its position of opposing preparations for a possible war in Iraq. Thus, France was actually centrally involved in creating the conditions leading to a resolution of the dispute.

In this example, two factors were in play preventing serious or lasting damage to NATO's cohesion and effectiveness. In the first place, it is apparent that no member state was interested in pushing the dispute to the extent of risking major damage to NATO. Notwithstanding the undoubted depth and bitterness of disagreements over Iraq, the major players in the argument over Turkish air defence purposely calibrated their actions in order to ensure that alliance cohesion was not 'holed below the waterline'.

Secondly, NATO's consultative norms and structures provided the necessary means to resolve the problem. As noted earlier, since the French disengagement from NATO's military structures and processes in the 1960s, a series of formal agreements, and less-formal understandings, had been developed in order to facilitate the continuing participation of France in intra-alliance consultation and decision-making on political and strategic issues. Thus, the French stance of participating in the NAC but not the DPC was more than just a fortuitous anomaly in 2003. It was a structural manifestation of the ways in which NATO's consultative norms and procedures had evolved and been adapted in order to accommodate the unique position of successive French governments and so enable their state to continue to play multiple roles within the alliance.

In early 2003, another brief hiatus in NATO's consultative processes was successfully and creatively overcome. Protracted or even permanent deadlock within its consultative forums, and a subsequent decision by the US and supportive allies in Europe to provide the desired air defence assets to Turkey bilaterally outside a NATO framework, could have constituted evidence of a normative and hence institutional weakening of NATO. This had not occurred however.

Later in the spring of 2003, there were discussions about potential NATO roles in Iraq in the aftermath of the US-led invasion. Colin Powell observed in congressional testimony that 'some planning is going on and some ideas are being pursued' within

NATO forums, including with French participation.⁵⁵ These consultations yielded agreement to deploy a NATO Training Mission-Iraq (NTM-I) working alongside national efforts to support the creation and development of a new Iraqi army. There was also logistical support forthcoming to enable Poland to lead a multinational contribution to the post-conflict stabilisation forces in Iraq.

Although it was kept numerically small at the insistence of members who had opposed the invasion, the NTM-I did significant work in the context of its time (although questions would later be raised about the efficacy of western military assistance programmes after the collapse of Iraqi army units in the face of the advance of so-called Islamic State fighters into Iraq during 2014). By 2008, according to Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried, it had 'trained over 10,000 Iraqi Government security personnel and coordinated over \$170 million in military equipment transfers'.⁵⁶ Agreement by all members to establish the NTM-I so soon after the dispute over Turkish air defence was an effective demonstration of what Wallace Thies has termed the 'self-healing tendencies' of NATO as a mature international security institution.⁵⁷

Conclusions

The evidence drawn from the case studies discussed earlier suggests that the challenge posed to NATO by the George W. Bush administration in its early years was not as severe or sustained as many contemporary observers suggested. Transatlantic disputes and differences did arise, but they were managed and mitigated by American and European leaders in order to ensure that they did not reach a level capable of seriously or permanently damaging NATO.

At the beginning of his presidency and despite being quite willing to engage in public arguments with European governments over non-NATO issues such as climate change, Bush moved with notable alacrity to ditch a campaign pledge to withdraw US troops from the Balkans. He thus neutralised a potential early threat to NATO's internal cohesion. The ameliorative approach was reciprocated on the European side. After a short delay, the US's NATO allies responded practically to the challenge of demonstrating the relevance of Article 5 in the aftermath of 9/11, and they tacitly but effectively co-operated with the US in managing the dispute over Turkish air defence.

It is not suggested that NATO's institutional maturity was the *sole* factor conditioning and facilitating such pragmatism. Nevertheless in all three cases, established and practised consultative processes and mechanisms were available and *used* by member states on both sides of the Atlantic in order to help them manage the challenges. NATO's norms and processes thus functioned as one important intervening variable in helping to frame member state approaches and actions in ways that minimised the potential for causing serious or lasting harm to the institution.

The case studies discussed here also suggest that NATO's institutional norms and processes work most evidently and perhaps also most effectively when the leaders of its members believe that they face a significant threat or challenge. Challenges can arise internally as a result of divisions on relevant issues, or they can be forced on the members by the emergence of an external threat. This raises the question as to whether a prolonged period of intra-NATO consensus, coupled with a benign external threat environment, might engender ossification and a diminution in the effectiveness

of NATO's institutional attributes. The record since the end of the Cold War suggests that this question is – and is likely to remain – strictly hypothetical however.

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Notes

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