



No Longer Obsolete

How NATO Endures in the
Twenty-First Century



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Abstract

Nearly seven decades after its founding, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is far from “obsolete.” This report examines how global institutions like NATO stay relevant, unified, and effective in the face of new crises. Change is central to the story of how NATO has avoided obsolescence and endured. Nearly every aspect of NATO—from its missions to its membership—is strikingly different than at the Alliance’s founding in 1949. Using a theoretical framework of “critical junctures” to explain variation in NATO’s organizational structure and strategy throughout its sometimes turbulent history, I argue in this report that the organization’s own bureaucratic actors played pivotal, yet overlooked, roles in NATO’s adaptation. I posit that NATO is remarkably resilient and will adapt to meet new bureaucratic challenges and security threats, from Russian military incursions into its neighbors to the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East.

Introduction

Lord Ismay, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's first secretary general, famously described NATO's founding rationale to "keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down."¹ Would Lord Ismay recognize NATO today? In its seventh decade, NATO's missions, functional scope, size, and membership are profoundly different from those of its origins. Consider Afghanistan, where NATO entered its first major ground war and longest-ever conflict, in a theatre far outside its traditional geographic area and with a coalition of more than forty countries whose cooperation would have been unthinkable to the original twelve signatories of the Washington Treaty in 1949. NATO's offer of membership to Montenegro in 2015 means an Alliance of 29 full members, several of which were once part of the Warsaw Pact or even the Soviet Union. Yet

NATO's adaptation is not exclusive to the twenty-first century. Ismay's formulation would seem equally dated to observers of Germany's rearmament within the Alliance after 1955, a scant six years after its founding; or of Russia's inclusion in post-Cold War political overtures like the Partnership for Peace and NATO-Russia Council. Indeed, NATO undergoes significant change with some regularity.

The fact of these changes, their boldness, and their frequency over a period of nearly seventy years, distinguishes NATO from other international institutions. Among post-World War II bodies with similar longevity to NATO, others reflect the international politics of their founding era more closely. Global institutions such as the United Nations Security Council have retained more consistent membership and organization. Regional

¹ See, for example, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, "A Transforming Alliance," remarks by the Secretary General of NATO, the Cambridge Union Society, Cambridge, 2 February 2005. This phrase, well known among NATO historians, appears in many different forms without a reliable primary source. I am grateful to Stanley Sloan for offering the version above as perhaps the most accurate version of what Lord Ismay might have said.

alliances expressly modeled after NATO such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) have long ceased to exist, while others such as the Western European Union fell into institutional obscurity even though their member countries remained aligned. Yet both adaptation and endurance characterize NATO.

Neither change nor longevity is inevitable, however. NATO is frequently said to be in crisis, its internal politics frustrating and inefficient, and its external policies and strategies suboptimal. Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 highlighted the potential for political split among Alliance members with dissimilar attitudes toward Russia, while also generating military and strategic urgency after years of declining defense investment in Europe. Previous crises, from the withdrawal of France from NATO's integrated military structure in 1966 to the membership enlargement debates of the 1990s, further illustrate the often-difficult struggles through

which NATO has attempted to meet new security challenges.

A common feature of NATO crises has been the possibility or proposal of alternative institutional arrangements outside NATO for meeting the new challenges. Whether, for example, through the assertion of national independence in nuclear deterrence, supranational solutions for European security, or ad hoc "coalitions of the willing" for expeditionary operations, the reinvention of NATO to address new security challenges is rarely an automatic or uncontested development. As a result, the considerable, frequent, and effective adaptation of NATO is puzzling.

The NATO Literature

NATO's survival is the central concern of other works, from Ronald Steel's *The End of Alliance* to the more recent *Why NATO Endures*

by Wallace J. Thies.² The present study differs from these other works in its emphasis on NATO institutions. This emphasis relies on a distinction between the “Alliance” as a treaty-based agreement among states and “NATO” as a formal international institution. Rather than a focus on why the alignment of European and North American states persists, this study accepts the existence of the Alliance but explores the fact that it continues to find institutional expression in the organization known as NATO. Given the changes in the international system since its founding and the proposal or creation of other regional defense and security institutions, how NATO adapts and remains the institutional embodiment of the transatlantic Alliance remains an important question.

Among those works that document changes in NATO, this study goes further in providing long term historical context for theorizing NATO adaptation. The pioneering works of Robert S. Jordan were among the first to draw important attention to the roles of institutional leaders in NATO’s development, but they stop short of generalizable insights for institutional theory which this study aims also to demonstrate.³ Although other works such as David Yost’s *NATO Transformed* and Rebecca Moore’s *NATO’s New Mission* assess changes after the Cold War, this study examines a broader scope of cases, addressing both the Cold

² Ronald Steel, *The End of Alliance: America and the Future of Europe* (New York: Viking, 1964); Wallace J. Thies, *Why NATO Endures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³ Jordan was especially explicit in his focus on “individuals and the impact of their personalities on international events” rather than general theory. Robert S. Jordan, *Political Leadership in NATO* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979), p. iii. See also, Robert S. Jordan, ed., *Generals in International Politics: NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander, Europe* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987); Robert S. Jordan, *The NATO International Staff/Secretariat, 1952-1957* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); and Robert S. Jordan, “A Study of the Role of the International Staff/Secretariat of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization During the Tenure of Lord Ismay as Secretary General,” DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1959.

War record and the contemporary patterns of NATO's institutional adaptation.⁴

The Argument

NATO is a highly adaptive institution. This study advances two main theoretical claims about how NATO adapts. First, institutional adaptation can be understood using an analytical framework based on recent advances in the study of institutions in political science and international relations. But doing so here entails a conception of NATO not just as an alliance among states, but also as a formally organized international institution. Second, although states maintain considerable power over international institutions, the latter have autonomous capacities and can play consequential roles in facilitating their own adaptation. This study finds consistent adaptation of NATO across multiple periods of Alliance history and in its contemporary affairs,

as well as regularity in the processes of how that adaptation occurs. Plausible alternatives to NATO have surfaced regularly during contingent periods of institutional instability, but NATO has ultimately adapted and endured. Institutional actors (i.e., those representing NATO itself, not necessarily its member-states) have played underappreciated and consequential roles in facilitating adaptation.

Sources and Methods

This study draws on the literature in historical institutionalism to develop a framework for the analysis of challenges to NATO's endurance based on "critical junctures"—significant relaxations of the structural constraints on institutional stability. Such crises or junctures constitute the challenges that threaten institutional endurance. By disrupting institutional stability, these conditions can make institutional change

⁴ David S. Yost, *NATO Transformed: the Alliance's New Roles in International Security* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998); Rebecca R. Moore, *NATO's New Mission: Projecting Stability in a Post-Cold War World* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2007).

more likely; but critical junctures are not synonymous with change nor do they necessarily involve it. While the historical record shows real adaptation across several periods of NATO history, the critical juncture framework allows for two other possible outcomes in institutional analysis—namely, continuity in NATO (i.e., the preponderance of stability over change) and the adoption of non-NATO alternatives for organizing cooperation among states.

The critical juncture framework also allows for an analysis of the key actors and events in how NATO adapts. The process-tracing method is used to show the causal path through which actors facilitate institutional adaptation.⁵ In order to guide the analysis, this study focuses on adaptation of NATO's internal organization and external strategy. Although states heavily constrain institutional action, the mechanisms by which institutional actors facilitate adaptation

indicate the consequential autonomy and capability of institutional actors.

The sources for this study consist of official documents from NATO and some of its member-states, as well as correspondence and interviews with officials in the NATO organization, national missions to the Alliance, and the military forces involved in NATO plans and operations.⁶ Where this study seeks to establish a basis for adaptation in historical context, secondary literature is used to identify important developments in NATO that merit further examination of primary sources. Speeches, diplomatic correspondence, and contemporaneous national discourse supplement official texts where useful.

Aims and Contributions

The original contributions of this study are both practical and theoretical. In order to

⁵ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 205-232.

⁶ Editorial note: NATO texts do not employ a consistent written style, and both British and American standards are common for English-language documents. This study defers to conventions and spellings according to the Oxford English Dictionary but does not impose these where the original is different.

illustrate the process of adaptation in NATO, ideas about institutions and strategy developed for other uses will be applied to NATO. The use of historical institutionalism and the critical juncture framework is an alternative to the main theoretical schools of thought in international relations, which do not consistently explain NATO's regular pattern of behavior in response to new challenges. Most international relations theory conceptualizes NATO through the lens of interstate alliance politics. This study does not set out to show that traditional international relations theory is unhelpful or wrong in describing why NATO endures. Rather, the purpose is to show how it adapts, which involves focusing on process and locating the importance of institutional actors within the broader knowledge of NATO. By examining institutional adaptation through critical junctures, this study emphasizes institutions' potential to exercise independent, autonomous powers. This

approach has implications for knowledge of both NATO and international institutions in general.

A practical contribution of this study is to inform understanding of NATO's contemporary endeavors and future challenges. Following NATO's first ground war in Afghanistan, its involvement in the 2011 Libyan civil war and its aftermath, renewed deterrence of Russia, a training mission in Iraq, and advisory assistance to the African Union, among other operations, has involved NATO in a relatively unprecedented range of global challenges.⁷ Noting NATO's latest organizational and strategic behavior provides an opportunity to identify continuities in the context of historic challenges to NATO's institutional endurance. It also provides an opportunity to show whether or how peace and wartime security challenges may be different in defining the range of feasible external strategies available to NATO. These observations have

⁷ East Asia and South America stand out among the few regions of the world in which NATO has not conducted significant military operations since the beginning of the twenty-first century. See North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Operations and Missions," http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-09364004-08587FCC/natolive/topics_52060.htm.

obvious implications for NATO's future tasks and missions.

A further practical contribution of this study is to illuminate the kinds of institutional arrangements that suit transatlantic security and defense cooperation. Each case in this study featured proposals for serious non-NATO institutional alternatives to cooperation, usually in the form of bids for relatively greater European autonomy. This study offers insight into the institutional characteristics of cooperation that NATO states prefer, which has implications not only for transatlantic alliance politics within NATO but also for continuing

efforts to institutionalize defense cooperation among European countries.

Although NATO's future remains a topic of sometimes acrimonious debate, the consistency of NATO's contemporary experience with previous challenges suggests cause for optimism. Plausible institutional alternatives to NATO have regularly surfaced in the aftermath of critical junctures, but NATO has ultimately adapted in ways that have promoted its endurance. Institutional actors have played consequential, if not always leading, roles in facilitating how NATO adapts.

NATO Adaptation into the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2012

The pattern of how NATO adapted to endure historical challenges in its first fifty years also offers insight into explaining the institution's early twenty-first-century trials. The framework of critical junctures can account for the sense of crisis and contingency after the Kosovo air campaign and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as the search for institutional alternatives that followed. Involvement in Afghanistan dramatically demonstrated the adaptation of NATO's organization and strategy in response to the new challenges. Though the outcome of the International Security Assistance Force mission was once thought to be a signal test for NATO's continuing endurance, changes including the adoption of a new Strategic Concept in 2010, intervention in the 2011 Libyan civil war, and the readiness measures following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 indicate that NATO

has moved beyond Afghanistan even as its involvement there continues well into a second decade.

This study considers the applicability of the overall argument on how NATO adapts for explaining contemporary challenges. While this "congruence" test does not offer a full process-tracing analysis of historical and documentary evidence, it demonstrates the plausibility that institutional actors played consequential roles in facilitating NATO's more recent organizational and strategic adaptation.⁸ Although NATO's future remains a topic of important debate, the consistency of NATO's contemporary experience with previous challenges suggests cause for optimism about NATO's continuing endurance as well as for further analysis of how NATO adapts.

⁸ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 181-185.

Critical Juncture: Kosovo and September 11

NATO's early twenty-first-century challenges fit the pattern of previous cases, particularly the form of a two-stage critical juncture in which events in Europe combined with events elsewhere to upset prevailing institutional stability. Kosovo's war for independence fits in the larger story of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, but NATO's participation in the conflict exceeded the forcefulness of its previous Balkan interventions. The Alliance's support of the Kosovars involved NATO in sustained air combat operations that strained the functioning of its institutions in a way that previous operations had not. NATO's intervention began a year after it first threatened to become involved, lasted seventy-eight days, in contrast to the three once predicted by the Supreme Allied Commander, and included such high-profile internal disputes as Gen. Sir Michael Jackson's refusal of Supreme

Allied Commander Gen. Wesley Clark's order to forcibly prevent Russian seizure of a key airfield.⁹

If involvement in Bosnia had demonstrated that NATO was adapting to the post-Cold War European security environment by changing its organization and strategy, the difficulties of sustaining operations in Kosovo left many with the sense that these adaptations were inadequate. The air campaign exposed the widening disparity in military capabilities between the United States and the European members of the Alliance, and also devolved into onerous political wrangling and charges of bureaucratic micromanagement of military operations.¹⁰ Since NATO had been involved in virtually continuous organizational adaptation and implementation of its new Strategic Concept during the 1990s, it was difficult to imagine that further institutional dynamism would be sufficient to overcome these problems. Moreover, diagnoses of NATO's difficulties in

⁹ Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Ellen Hallams, *The United States and NATO since 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 35-53.

Kosovo compounded broader structural trends and policy preferences within the Alliance at the turn of the twenty-first century. This was the “unipolar moment” when American power seemed historically unprecedented, and transatlantic policy differences had already emerged over issues ranging from the proposed International Criminal Court to the banana trade.¹¹

As NATO reflected on its fiftieth anniversary at the Washington Summit in 1999, the mood was less triumphal than a decade earlier when pronouncements of the Alliance’s success in the Cold War had dominated the sentiment. Although NATO had adapted to the post–Cold War world, its suitability for undertaking sustained military operations was put into question as a result of the experience in Kosovo. As the North Atlantic Council (NAC) acknowledged at the time, “Kosovo represents a fundamental challenge.”¹² To be sure, Kosovar

independence itself was not a significant enough issue that any of the Alliance members felt compelled to seek immediate change. But the experience raised questions about NATO’s efficacy in a potential future case where a member faced direct national security concerns calling for sustained expeditionary military operations.

Thus, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 on the United States was a pivotal moment for NATO too. Cold War challenges to NATO most often undermined the institution’s credibility, as when the first Berlin crisis and the outbreak of the Korean War underscored its lack of preparedness for a conventional war in Europe or when the second Berlin crisis and Cuban missile crisis exposed the flaws of nuclear deterrence and the strategy of “massive retaliation.” Post–Cold War challenges to NATO had undermined the institution’s relevance by introducing a structure of international politics

¹¹ Patrick Barkham, “The Banana Wars Explained,” *The Guardian*, 5 March 1999; Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (1990/1991), pp. 23-33.

¹² North Atlantic Council, Document S-1(99)62, “Statement on Kosovo,” Washington, D.C., 23 April 1999.

and new security challenges that were outside anything NATO had conceived during the Cold

War. Kosovo and September 11 undermined both credibility and relevance, as the air campaign underscored shortcomings in NATO's institutional warfighting capacities and the terrorist attacks raised the prospect

that the Alliance's largest and most powerful member-state might see little utility in turning to NATO after an attack.

Contingency: Article 5 vs. Coalitions of the Willing and European Autonomy

Despite difference over other issues at the turn of the twenty-first century, Alliance members initially demonstrated unequivocal solidarity in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. French support for the United States was particularly noteworthy insofar as the two

countries have so often been at odds on the particular details of institutional arrangements

for the Alliance. French President Jacques Chirac was the first foreign leader to visit New York City, just days after the attacks on the World Trade Center. And the September 12 headline in *Le Monde*, "We Are All Americans,"

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became a news item in its own right as others embraced the sentiment.¹³ Beyond this outpouring of support, however, the attacks gave rise to contingency over how to respond.

At first, the September 11 attacks offered an opportunity for NATO to assert its institutional pre-eminence. The collective defense provisions of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty—an attack on any one NATO member would be considered an attack on all—remained the bedrock of the Alliance even with

¹³ Jean-Marie Colombani, "Nous Sommes Tous Américains," *Le Monde*, 12 September 2001.

all the adaptation of the institution, including the increasing scope of its functions and breadth of its membership after the Cold War. The senior NATO diplomat, Canadian Ambassador David Wright, took note of this and advised Secretary General George, Lord Robertson that the conditions might be right for the North Atlantic Council to invoke Article 5. Robertson immediately seized on the idea and, employing the agenda-setting and convening powers of his office, pressed to make it happen. US Ambassador to NATO R. Nicholas Burns also fully appreciated the momentousness of this prospect, consulted Washington, and reported that the United States would consent to a NAC decision on these lines.¹⁴ With European members eager to demonstrate solidarity with the United States, and US diplomatic efforts ably encouraging and cultivating that support, the

signatories to the North Atlantic Treaty decided to invoke the collective defense provisions of Article 5 for the first and only time in history in a NAC decision on September 12, 2001.¹⁵

But it quickly became apparent that this historic decision did not translate to much serious consideration of a NATO role in the US response to the attack. In the days after the attack, discussions among the principal American foreign policy decision-makers at Camp David focused on the coordination of a US response, not a NATO one.¹⁶ The United States ultimately decided to pursue international cooperation on an ad hoc basis, rather than through established alliances or institutions such as NATO. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously articulated the formula, “The mission must determine the coalition; the

¹⁴ Ryan C. Hendrickson, *Diplomacy and War at NATO: The Secretary General and Military Action after the Cold War* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2006), p. 120.

¹⁵ To be sure, the September 12, 2001 decision was contingent on evidence that the attacks originated from a foreign source. When US officials confirmed this to the North Atlantic Council early in October, invocation of Article 5 became official. North Atlantic Council, “Statement by the North Atlantic Council,” 12 September 2001; George, Lord Robertson, “Statement by NATO Secretary General,” 2 October 2001.

¹⁶ Bob Woodward and Dan Balz, “At Camp David, Advise and Dissent,” Ten Days in September [series], *Washington Post*, 31 January 2002.

coalition must not determine the mission.”¹⁷ As if specifically to rule out the utility of NATO, he continued that if established alliances became involved, “the mission will be dumbed down to the lowest common denominator, and we can’t afford that.”¹⁸ US intervention in Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001 thus proceeded under the banner of Operation Enduring Freedom, a US-led operation which made use of the Combined Joint Task Force concept for organizing military forces in theater but included no role for NATO. NATO’s attempt to make good on its invocation of Article 5 further underscored its marginalization, as it provided only a few AWACS aircraft to patrol American skies while the main effort of the US response to the September 11 attacks went ahead in Afghanistan. Later, the United States reaffirmed its commitment to ad hoc coalitions

as it turned its attention toward Iraq in 2002 and 2003. The lead-up to the war in Iraq presented different challenges for NATO, since by that time deep differences had appeared among member-states, with the United Kingdom standing firmly with the United States in support of invasion while France and Germany led an equally determined European opposition to the war.¹⁹

In many ways, the dynamic of US independence or unilateralism represented a similar logic to European desires for greater national autonomy in defense during the 1960s. In both cases, countries viewed their most basic national security interests to be at risk and lacked confidence in the capacity of NATO to do much about it. Where France was most strident in pursuing its own independent course in the 1960s, the United States played that role in the

¹⁷ G. John Ikenberry, “America’s Imperial Ambition,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 5 (September/October 2002), p. 54.

¹⁸ Ikenberry, “America’s Imperial Ambition,” p. 54.

¹⁹ Political differences among the member states were so strained that US Ambassador Burns famously referred to the Iraq war debate as a “near death experience” for the Alliance. NATO’s institutional response despite these inter-state political differences exemplifies the significance of distinctions between the “Alliance” as a group of aligned countries and “NATO” as a formally organized international institution. NATO’s initial involvement in the Iraq war was indirect, as Turkey invoked Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty to discuss concerns about the security of its border with Iraq, and the Alliance ultimately agreed to the deployment of PATRIOT air defense missile systems to Turkey.

post–September 11 environment. Where President Charles de Gaulle had made the case for strong, independent military forces and unobstructed foreign policy decision-making in his time, President Bush made similar arguments in laying out the post–September 11 policy of the United States.²⁰

Meanwhile, contingency reflected more than a binary choice between NATO and national independence in the post–September 11 era. As in other critical junctures in NATO, moves toward greater European autonomy also gained momentum in the search for institutional alternatives. While the United States was pursuing greater independence, Europeans turned once again to integration. Aspirations for a more coherent and capable European security and defense identity had emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War, but Europe’s unsuccessful effort to broker peace in Bosnia had dampened expectations about the potential for

the new Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union and had particularly underscored the lack of autonomous European capabilities. In fact, the same recognition of the feebleness of European capabilities that frustrated the United States and discouraged it from acting through NATO after September 11 also motivated Europeans to consider new initiatives. The beginnings of a renewed effort occurred in the 1998 St. Malo declaration in which British and French leaders committed to the development of greater European defense capabilities.²¹ This decision built momentum for the 1999 Helsinki European Council meeting, which established the so-called Headline Goal for the European Union to create by 2003 a rapid reaction force of sixty thousand troops capable of deployment in sixty days. This force would be developed in order to accomplish the tasks set out at the Petersberg conference in June 1992, which included peacekeeping, humanitarian

²⁰ See, for example, George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy,” 1 June 2002; and *National Security Strategy of the United States*, September 2002.

²¹ Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom, “Joint Declaration on European Defence,” Joint Declaration issued at the British-French Summit, Saint-Malo, 3-4 December 1998.

assistance, rescue, and other operations short of high-intensity conflict. European Union representatives announced in December 2001 that the nascent EU Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) was officially ready to undertake limited missions.²² Further movement toward autonomous European capabilities in defense came in 2003 with the publication of the *European Security Strategy*, which aimed to address the familiar problems of achieving foreign policy consensus among European countries in their integrated defense and security efforts.²³ But the contemporaneous disagreements among European countries over whether to support the US-led invasion of Iraq and the lack of follow-through on the allocation of resources to develop new capabilities dampened these efforts as well.

These differences exacerbated the search for institutional alternatives to defense cooperation, but political consensus grew as the inflammatory rhetoric subsided. Strained relations among the Allies had made the various alternatives especially stark, as the American-led coalitions and the European initiatives acquired a rival, mutually exclusive character. Britain and “new Europe” lined up behind the United States’ call of “either you are with us or you are with the terrorists,” while “old Europe” bristled at the hubris of the *hyperpuissance*.²⁴ But obstinacy was not long lived as events encouraged renewed cooperation.²⁵ In Europe, the March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombing (known as “11-M”) and the July 7, 2005 London bus bombing (known as “7/7”) promoted transatlantic solidarity insofar as Europeans confronted the

²² European Council, Document SN 300/1/01, “Presidency Conclusions: European Council Meeting in Laeken,” 14-15 December 2001.

²³ European Council, “A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy,” Brussels, 12-13 December 2003.

²⁴ George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” Washington, D.C., 20 September 2001; Donald H. Rumsfeld, “Secretary Rumsfeld Briefs at Foreign Press Center,” U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript, 22 January 2003; Hubert Védérine, “Le monde au tournant du siècle,” *Politique Étrangère*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (1999), pp. 813-821; and Dominique de Villepin, Minister of Foreign Affairs (France), Speech to the United Nations Security Council, New York, 19 March 2003.

²⁵ “Jacques and George, friends again (sort of): France and America make up,” *The Economist*, 18 November 2005.

threat of terrorism in common with the US experience of 9/11.²⁶ America, for its part, had to confront the limitations of its power as the initially rapid toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq led to instability and insurgency for which the United States was unprepared.²⁷ Moreover, momentum for European integration suffered a serious blow when referendums on a proposed European constitution failed in 2005. These events by no means pointed the way to any transatlantic consensus about what to do, but they reinforced a sense that the Allies were on the same side of pressing security challenges and could benefit from cooperation in NATO. These catalyzing circumstances compare with the 1960s and 1950s cases of critical junctures in NATO when further actions of member-states (European states, particularly) constrained the viability of institutional alternatives to NATO. These events also conform to the experience of

the 1990s when developments in the external security environment spurred organizational and strategic adaptation that NATO member-states could find acceptable.

Organizational Adaptation: Transforming NATO's Integrated Military Structure

NATO undertook substantial organizational adaptation in response to the experience of the Kosovo air campaign and accelerated these changes in the aftermath of September 11. Most organizational adaptations initially concerned the integrated military structure, though enlargement of the Alliance's membership also continued at a remarkable pace. As a direct result of the difficulties of managing air space in Operation Allied Force, NATO adopted the Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) concept to streamline and coordinate air operations. While a CAOC could

²⁶ What to do about those threats remained a matter of debate, however, as the Madrid bombing is widely credited with influencing the outcome of impending Spanish elections and the subsequent withdrawal of Spanish forces from the coalition in Iraq. But decorum and discretion had also markedly returned to transatlantic relations at this point, as the Spanish decision drew nothing of the kind of public bickering that characterized relations leading to the start of the Iraq war in 2003.

²⁷ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

provide these functions for the air space of fixed Alliance territory, the concept was also designed to be able to operate in an expeditionary theater of operations. In this way, the CAOC served an airpower-specific purpose analogous to that of the Combined Joint Task Force concept during the early post–Cold War era.

The impetus for further “transformation” of NATO’s integrated military structure accelerated after September 11. Though considerable reform during the 1990s had already reduced many Cold War layers of command and control, NATO embarked on a further sweeping overhaul that resulted in the elimination of approximately half of the remaining headquarters, including those at the top level of the integrated military structure. The Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic position based in Norfolk, Virginia was jettisoned and all remaining operational command functions centralized under the Supreme Allied Commander Europe.²⁸ Because many European

members of the Alliance preferred to see an important NATO headquarters retained in the United States, however, a new Allied Command Transformation (ACT) replaced the old Atlantic headquarters. The purpose of the ACT would be to promote the continued development of relevant, expeditionary military capabilities.

NATO’s 2002 Prague Summit was a key event in the articulation of several organizational adaptations, as well as political commitments to increased capabilities. In addition to the creation of the new headquarters, NATO agreed to the development of an expeditionary NATO Response Force (NRF). The Prague Capabilities Commitment pledged member-states to maintain levels of defense spending and investment that would allow for realization of the NRF and the transformed capabilities envisioned. Finally, at Prague—the first NATO summit in a former Warsaw Pact country—NATO announced invitations to its largest round of membership enlargement yet, naming seven

²⁸ The command nominally changed from Allied Command Europe to Allied Command Operations, though both SACEUR and the SHAPE headquarters retained their titles and acronyms despite the change to the ACO name that more accurately described the command’s responsibilities.

countries as future members while also further institutionalizing dialogue with the creation of the NATO-Russia Council. Although media headlines emphasized enlarged membership and the new format of relations with Russia, NATO insiders viewed the focus on capabilities as the more transformational development. In many ways, the new members were about to join a “new NATO.”²⁹

Addressing European Institutional Alternatives to Strategic Adaptation

An important prerequisite to twenty-first-century strategic adaptation in NATO was the disambiguation of its roles from the developing aspirations of the European Union. Although strained relations among the Allies in the run up to the Iraq war contributed to a perception that EU capabilities could duplicate or otherwise render NATO redundant, NATO persevered in differentiating its institutional roles and responsibilities from the EU. Although this involved the drawing of clearer lines more

than it did co-opting of earlier European initiatives like the proposed European Defence Community and Western European Union during the 1950s, NATO’s institutional effort to explicitly and directly engage with potentially rival institutional alternatives is consistent with its historical pattern of engagement with other institutions.

The framework of the NATO-EU agreement on roles and responsibilities came to be known as “Berlin Plus” in reference to the June 1996 NATO foreign ministers meeting in Berlin that sought to improve European defense capabilities through the development of the European Security and Defence Identity within NATO. Commitment to “Berlin Plus” occurred in the context of NATO’s April 1999 Washington Summit and was one of the few significant developments in a summit otherwise largely overshadowed by events in the Balkans. NATO updated its Strategic Concept at the 1999 summit, for example, but the new document was

²⁹ Madeleine Albright, informal remarks at the NATO Chicago Summit, Chicago, 20 May 2012.

only incrementally distinguishable from the 1991 version. On the other hand, the statement that NATO would consider “making available its assets and capabilities” for European-led operations was a significant development.³⁰ NATO began limited institutionalized meetings with the EU in January 2001 and affirmed at the Prague Summit its willingness to share access to common assets and capabilities with the EU in cases where NATO itself was not engaged. These developments led to the signing of a formal agreement on a framework for NATO-EU cooperation and the transition of the NATO-led operation Allied Harmony, in Macedonia, to the EU in March 2003 (at the very height of tensions over the Iraq war). An October 2005 agreement on “Permanent Military Arrangements” established a NATO Liaison Team at the EU Military Staff and a corresponding EU Cell at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, which became active in March 2006.³¹ None of

this suggested that NATO-EU relations were seamless or even all that well developed. But, at the very least, in codifying the principle that NATO had the “right of first refusal” over the use of common military assets, it had at least safeguarded its institutional turf. Moreover, insofar as EU efforts focused on the development of capabilities necessary to carry out the Petersberg tasks, NATO’s substantive scope in higher-end defense capabilities remained institutionally unchallenged.

NATO’s Strategic Adaptation in Afghanistan

NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan proceeded directly from the aftermath of Kosovo and September 11, its initial organizational adaptations, and disambiguation of roles with the European Union. There is little evidence that NATO independently considered strategy in Afghanistan before becoming involved, however. NATO strategy documents

³⁰ North Atlantic Council, “The Alliance’s Strategic Concept,” Washington, D.C., 24 April 1999.

³¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO-EU: A Strategic Partnership,” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49217.htm.

during the Cold War significantly included functional and geographic qualifications in their titles, such as MC 14/3, “Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area.” From the end of the Cold War, such qualifications disappeared and NATO instead adopted the more generally phrased “The Alliance’s Strategic Concept.”³² These changes reflected the broadened substantive and geographic scope of NATO’s tasks and purposes. But such breadth also increased the potential for the detachment of NATO strategy from strategy as conceived by others, particularly if NATO were to become involved in activities where it was not the only or the leading strategic actor. Such was the case in Afghanistan.

NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan began with strikingly little discussion of the ends desired on the ground or of the ways and means applied to achieve them. Rather, participation reflected the adaptation of NATO to serve as the institutional mechanism of choice for Alliance cooperation on a given problem in which other actors, namely the United States, had set the strategic agenda. Involvement in Afghanistan was politically less polarizing than Iraq, and thus imposed lower member-state constraints on NATO action. Even those European countries that most stridently opposed the Iraq war considered military action in Afghanistan justifiable, and many sought ways to contribute. The UN-authorized International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) offered a way to

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³² The 1991 version was titled “The Alliance’s *New* Strategic Concept” (emphasis added).

do that without necessarily becoming entangled in the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom coalition.³³ Before 2003 executive responsibility for the ISAF mission went to a rotation of countries which all happened to be NATO members. When Germany and the Netherlands faced the prospect of shared command of ISAF in 2003, the possibility of shifting responsibility to NATO offered the potential benefits of reducing both the costs and the likelihood of involvement in combat operations (a thorny constitutional issue for Germany), while at the same time increasing continuity and stability to a mission that had been organized six months at a time. For the United States, organizing European contributions in NATO offered the advantages of potentially sharing more of the burden in Afghanistan with others thus freeing US resources for Iraq and decreasing the momentum for autonomous European defense initiatives by channeling European energies back into NATO. Moreover, the costs to the United States would be low since its own Operation

Enduring Freedom coalition would continue to operate independently of ISAF, and hence the United States wouldn't be constrained by NATO or ISAF organization or procedures.

Secretary General Lord Robertson once again jumped at the chance to put NATO in the lead. Even if member-states—namely, the United States—had not followed through on the invocation of Article 5 after September 11 for NATO-led action, Robertson had demonstrated the ability to obtain a consensus in the North Atlantic Council on a momentous decision. Involving NATO in ISAF offered a second opportunity to exercise influential institutional leadership. The secretary general was the most likely institutional actor to promote action in this regard as well. The dual-hatted responsibility of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) as the commander of US European Command complicated his position. Although this dual-hatting has been an advantage for the SACEUR in other instances, the specific case of Afghanistan entailed potentially awkward

³³ United Nations Security Council, Document S/RES/1386(2001), Resolution 1386, 20 December 2001.

organizational considerations for the US military chain of command, in which Afghanistan falls under the US Central Command area of responsibility. Moreover, any lessons learned from Kosovo would also suggest cautiousness for the US military officer serving as SACEUR, as Gen. Wesley Clark prematurely retired from the position after Kosovo due in part to poor relations with other senior US military officers that the air campaign exacerbated.³⁴

Thus, NATO took command of ISAF in 2003 for reasons that had more to do with Alliance politics and the promotion of institutional endurance rather than strategic rationale. There is some evidence to suggest that several actors explicitly doubted the cause in Afghanistan even while committing NATO to it for the good of Alliance solidarity.³⁵ At the very least, it is clear that no consensus existed on the mission or purposes of ISAF. Even under NATO's

nominal leadership, the various ISAF contributing countries mounted practically independent campaigns in different areas of the country.³⁶

Nevertheless, the geographic and functional scope of ISAF increased dramatically following NATO's assumption of its command. UN Security Council Resolution 1510 extended ISAF's mandate from its limited presence around Kabul to covering the whole of Afghanistan. The North Atlantic Council authorized a multi-stage plan for the expansion of ISAF under NATO's direction, beginning with a December 2003 direction to the Supreme Allied Commander, Gen. James Jones, to begin by assuming command of the German-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kunduz, northern Afghanistan. At the Istanbul Summit in June 2004, the North Atlantic Council announced it would establish four new PRTs in northern

³⁴ Jean Edward Smith, "Beware Generals Bearing a Grudge," *New York Times*, 13 February 2004.

³⁵ Judy Dempsey, "France Bars Moves for Greater Alliance Role," *Financial Times*, 10 February 2003.

³⁶ Theo Farrell and Sten Rynning, "NATO's Transformation Gaps: Transatlantic Differences and the War in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 5 (October 2010), pp. 673-699.

Afghanistan. And in early 2005, NATO began expansion of ISAF into western Afghanistan with the assumption of command for PRTs in Herat and Farah provinces.³⁷

As preparations began for the third stage of the ISAF expansion into the southern part of the country, there was no avoiding the reality that NATO troops would be increasingly involved in the full spectrum of ground combat operations. Although the northern and western parts of the country were not entirely free of violence, they enjoyed much more stability than the southern and eastern regions that comprised the Taliban's homeland and which shared a mountainous and porous border with other Pashtun tribal areas in northwest Pakistan. Nevertheless, ISAF expansion continued into the south in the summer of 2006 and into the east by the end of the year. Although the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom continued for the purposes of organizing some special operations missions, the NATO-led ISAF had displaced the

coalition's responsibility for conventional operations and the majority of US troops in Afghanistan were reflagged under the NATO mission.

The expansion of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan inspired two sorts of conclusions about NATO. On the one hand, it indicated the culmination of extraordinary adaptation. Afghanistan represented the first major land combat operation that NATO had ever undertaken. It brought new scale to the "out of area" issue, as central Asia was not only outside the territory of NATO's member-states but entirely outside of the Euro-Atlantic region. In addition, many non-NATO member countries participated in ISAF operations under NATO command. Forty-eight countries were participating in ISAF by 2010 (compared with twenty-eight members of NATO), with non-

³⁷ North Atlantic Council, "Statement," 22 February 2005; and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "About ISAF," <http://www.isaf.nato.int/history.html>.

NATO countries like Australia providing some of the most significant military contributions.³⁸

On the other hand, the situation in Afghanistan did not appear to be going very well.

Levels of insurgent violence skyrocketed after

2006. NATO commanders and

external commentators

pointed to a lack of resources

as an overriding problem.

Though the ultimate decision

on troop levels and other

capabilities rested with the member-states,

NATO's institutional efforts to convene and set

the agenda for greater troop contributions did

not meet with great success. Moreover, the ISAF

chain of command remained poorly integrated,

with many troop-contributing countries

asserting so-called national caveats on the

implementation of their forces. Countries

continued to maintain different ideas about

what kind of mission ISAF was supposed to be.

Canada, for example, fought a more or less conventional war against Taliban forces in

Kandahar province and shouldered a

disproportionate share of the combat casualties.

By contrast, German leaders deliberately and

seriously avoided the use of

the term *Krieg* for years in

order to avoid the legal and

political consequences of

acknowledging that German

troops were fighting in a "war"

overseas. All of this reflected poorly on NATO

and gave rise to questions about whether it

would survive Afghanistan.³⁹

Ultimately, Americanization brought an

end to questions over what Afghanistan would

mean for NATO. Remaining challenges for the

future of Afghanistan notwithstanding, NATO's

organizational and strategic adaptation had

proved sufficient to ensure its institutional

endurance. When the new administration of US

"Remaining challenges for the future of Afghanistan notwithstanding, NATO's organizational and strategic adaptation had proved sufficient to ensure its institutional endurance."

³⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "International Security Assistance Force: Key Facts and Figures," 25 October 2010, <http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/Placemats/25OCT10%20Placemat-%20page%201,2,3.pdf>.

³⁹ See, for example, Andrew R. Hoehn and Sarah Harting, *Risking NATO: Testing the Limits of the Alliance in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2010).

President Barack Obama decided substantially to increase US involvement in Afghanistan, it did so through NATO and ISAF. On his appointment as the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal reorganized and strengthened the ISAF headquarters structure to impose greater unity of command and aligned the efforts of the participants through the promulgation and enforcement of operational guidance based on the new US counterinsurgency doctrine. The North Atlantic Council also approved a plan to combine efforts for the training of Afghan security forces—a significant aspect of the counterinsurgency campaign—through the creation of a NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan (NTM-A), the commander of which would also be dual-hatted as the commander of

the US-led training command and subordinate to the ISAF commander.⁴⁰

Subsequent developments in NATO further demonstrated that the institution had moved on even as its involvement in Afghanistan continued. At its Lisbon Summit in 2010, NATO leaders adopted a new Strategic Concept that reaffirmed the core tasks of collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security, while also perhaps refocusing on “the Defence and Security of the Members.”⁴¹ At Chicago in 2012, NATO leaders announced a winding down of the ISAF mission by 2014 while also addressing wide-ranging regional and global security concerns in a sixty-five-point statement.⁴² NATO confirmed its willingness to act and its primacy as the institution of choice for organizing the military intervention in Libya from February to October 2011.⁴³ NATO has also pursued naval

⁴⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan,” 4 April 2009, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52802.htm?selectedLocale=en.

⁴¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” Lisbon, 19-20 November 2010 (emphasis added).

⁴² North Atlantic Council, “Chicago Summit Declaration,” Chicago, 20 May 2012.

⁴³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR: Final Mission Stats,” 2 November 2011.

and counter-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden, a training mission in Iraq, and advisory assistance to the African Union, among others. The Afghanistan mission continued under the new name “Resolute Support.”

NATO Adaptation into the Twenty-First Century

The patterns of challenges to and adaptations of NATO in the early twenty-first century are broadly consistent with other critical junctures in its history and yield fertile ground for future analysis of the processes for how these adaptations occurred.

The framework of critical junctures seems particularly well suited to explaining NATO’s early twenty-first-century challenges, which fit the pattern of earlier cases during which events in Europe combined with events elsewhere to upset NATO’s prevailing institutional stability. A decade after the end of the Cold War, Kosovo and September 11 undermined both NATO’s credibility and

relevance, as the air campaign underscored shortcomings in NATO’s institutional capacities and the terrorist attacks raised the prospect that the Alliance’s largest and most powerful member-state might see little utility in turning to NATO after an attack.

These twin shocks gave rise to contingency which pit the prospect of NATO’s first ever invocation of the Washington Treaty’s Article 5 against the United States’ early preference for ad hoc coalitions and Europe’s ambitious efforts at autonomy. These choices represented familiar alternatives to NATO, which faltered for familiar reasons.

The renewal of consensus around adaptations to NATO compares with the 1960s and 1950s cases of critical junctures in NATO when member-states began to view non-NATO institutional alternatives as problematic, as well as with the experience of the 1990s when developments in the external security environment encouraged expediency.

The range of NATO’s organizational and strategic adaptations in the early twenty-first

century was dramatic but also open-ended. Adaptations included the expeditionary transformation of the integrated military structure, readiness to conduct operations on a global scale, and willingness to cooperate closely with non-NATO “partner” countries. All of these

NATO implemented in Afghanistan, where for the first time NATO became involved in the full spectrum of military operations on the ground in a conflict that has demanded relatively constant further organizational and strategic refinements.

Conclusion & Directions for the Future

Today's North Atlantic Treaty Organization, with nearly thirty members and global reach, differs strikingly from the regional Alliance of twelve created in 1949. These differences are not simply the effects of the Cold War's end or twenty-first-century exigencies, but reflect a more general pattern of adaptability first seen in the incorporation of Germany as a full member of the Alliance in the early 1950s. Unlike other enduring post-World War II institutions that continue to reflect the international politics of their founding era, NATO stands out both for the boldness of its transformations as well as their frequency over a period of nearly seventy years.

This study examines how NATO adapts, using a framework of "critical junctures" from the literature on historical institutionalism to explain changes in NATO's organization and strategy throughout its history. This approach recognizes NATO not only as an alliance among states, but also as a highly organized

international institution. The key finding is that NATO's own bureaucratic actors played important and often overlooked roles in its adaptations. This conclusion has implications for knowledge of both NATO and institutional change generally.

After a quarter century of post-Cold War rapprochement and more than a decade of expeditionary effort in Afghanistan, renewed confrontation between Russia and the West has remade the debate about the relevance of the Atlantic Alliance once again. Crises from Ukraine to North Africa and the Middle East underscore NATO's continuing capacity for adaptation as a defining aspect of European and international security.

Looking forward, further application of critical junctures could be explored in institutional analyses of NATO. Selection of cases for the larger study from which this report is drawn was done on the basis of those critical junctures that presented the greatest challenges

to NATO endurance as the institutional embodiment of the transatlantic Alliance. Examining other cases when members may have considered or actually did turn away from NATO institutions, such as the Greek withdrawal from the integrated military command structure between 1974 and 1980, may further contribute to an understanding of how NATO adapts.

Further study of NATO could also usefully explore the question of why some historical crises meet the threshold for critical junctures while others do not. For example, the 1956 Suez crisis was a seminal event in transatlantic relations, but did not interrupt the path-dependent stability of NATO's organization or strategy. It is not entirely clear why. Other prominent events that have garnered the title "NATO crisis," such as the "Euromissiles" debate of the 1980s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, or the Libya campaign of 2011, might be useful for refining the understanding of critical junctures and of when they are likely to find institutional resonance in NATO.

Equally, an application of the critical juncture framework and this study's model of adaptation could also be applied to other international institutions. A particularly interesting assessment might be made of critical junctures in other security institutions, such as the contemporary Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and especially those that did not endure, such as SEATO or CENTO. A useful contribution to further research on European security might result from an application of the critical juncture framework and this study's model of institutional adaptation to a more thorough investigation of the Western European Union or the EU.

Examination of the institutional mechanisms of adaptation would benefit most interestingly from further exploration of the co-opting function. The "co-opting" function of NATO institutional actors also played a role in the development of the "mutually reinforcing" or "interlocking" nature of the institutional security arrangements in Europe, which are the

densest of any region in the world. Specific attention could be paid to how or whether NATO is able to co-opt an alternative institution or merely accommodate it while safeguarding its own endurance. The role of NATO's institutional actors in co-opting national actors or other institutions is especially important in this regard, as is any "dual-hatting" of national actors as NATO institutional actors.

There is room for further systematic study of important NATO institutions and institutional offices. There are no comprehensive histories of the offices of NATO secretary general or Supreme Allied Commander, for example. The work of the late Robert S. Jordan on NATO's Cold War political and military leadership is a model for the sort of further research that could be done, and Ryan Hendrickson's study of the secretary general's role in post-Cold War crises is a welcome contribution. Notwithstanding these, the overall scope of literature on the institution and its key offices is remarkably thin. Further empirical and historical study of NATO institutions would

improve knowledge about the role of institutional actors in NATO's adaptation, while also expanding the range of data available for comparative institutional analysis.

Finally, contemporary developments suggest some likely directions for the future of NATO organization and strategy. Emerging evidence on NATO's responses to Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine points to adaptation, the implementation and implications of which will be years in the making. Decisions to establish eight new headquarters in Eastern Europe reverse a decades-long trend of consolidation in the integrated military structure. Development of new "graduated response plans" implies the revival of the Cold War concepts of deliberate escalation and flexible response. The invitation to Montenegro to become the twenty-ninth NATO member points to the enduring attractiveness and expectations of Alliance membership, while the increasing invocation (often by Turkey) of the North Atlantic Treaty's lesser-known Article 4 on political consultation raises questions about what the character of

that membership will mean. Considering the long term in remarks at the sixtieth anniversary of one NATO institution, Secretary General Jens

Stoltenberg concluded “our Alliance must also adapt to the long term.”⁴⁴ How it will do so remains of enduring importance.

⁴⁴ Jens Stoltenberg, Remarks by the Secretary General of NATO at the 60th Anniversary of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Stavanger, Norway, 12 October 2015.