

Foundations of Global Security:

Why has NATO persisted in the Post-Cold War Period?

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Introduction.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a 32-member alliance within North America and Europe, founded on the 4th of April 1949 under the principles of collective defence and collaborative efforts. The founding members – Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, United Kingdom and the United States of America – came together to form a pact of collective security against the growing threat of soviet expansion - This pact, signed as the North Atlantic Treaty¹, has continued to pave the path of politics within modern Europe over 75 years later.

While NATO was historically formed to defend shared interests within the North-Atlantic region against the rise of communism, persistence of NATO into the modern era showcases the contemporary need for protection against the ‘changing tides of geopolitics’. NATO plays a crucial role in maintaining stability in Europe and beyond, adapting to contemporary geopolitical challenges and ideological conflicts² while evolving into a force to battle the new wave of hybrid warfare. NATO serves as a force of balance through Europe and an institution born out of the requirement for international co-operation to combat the evolving needs of contemporary geopolitics and the clash of ideologies, including outside of the North-Atlantic region.

¹ NATO (2023). The North Atlantic Treaty (04 Apr. 1949). [online] NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/eu/natohq/officialtexts_17120.htm [Accessed 10 Feb. 2025].

² Smith, J. (2022). *Obsession with NATO expansion: a deeply ideological move inevitable in provoking conflicts* - *Global Times*. [online] Globaltimes.cn. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1257438.shtml> [Accessed 17 Mar. 2025].

A balancing force for power.

NATO has persisted into the modern era as a balancing force to counter the eastern expanse of Russian neo-imperialism. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian federation has been claiming and subsequently “illegally”³ annexing sovereign European states. This began with in 2008 with the Russo-Georgian war, relating to territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Now Russo-Expansionism has been felt through the annexation of Crimea (2014) and the invasion of mainland Ukraine (2022).

The ever-growing threat of the Russian expansion can be summarised by an extract from NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept, whereby it states that “Russia is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.”(NATO; 2022)⁴ This suggests the ‘balance of powers’ theory is substantial in the persistence of NATO, as the soviet union evolved into the Russian federation. However, some suggest that Russian aggression is a direct result of “The west exploited a weakened Russia in the aftermath of the Cold War by expanding NATO.” (Schuette; 2023)⁵ This leaves us with the question, would the end of NATO in preference to diplomatic missions bring peace to Europe?

³ Dews, F. (2014). *NATO Secretary-General: Russia's Annexation of Crimea Is Illegal and Illegitimate*. [online] Brookings. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/nato-secretary-general-russias-annexation-of-crimea-is-illegal-and-illegitimate/> [Accessed 17 Mar. 2025].

⁴ NATO (2022b). NATO-Russia: setting the record straight. [online] NATO. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/115204.htm> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2025].

⁵ Schuette, C. (2023). Russian Disinformation on NATO Expansion and the War in Ukraine. *Source: Journal of Strategic Security*, [online] 16(4), pp.34–56. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/48751614>.

From a Neoclassical Realist perspective, NATO's persistence is not just a reaction to an anarchic international system but also a result of Western political leadership and threat perception. NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe was not an inevitable consequence of power-balancing but a strategic decision influenced by policymakers' belief that Russia would remain a long-term security challenge, possessing a definite threat to the power balance and the status-quo.

Liberalists believe that diplomacy and pacifist international institutions can maintain peace without the need for military alliances like NATO. They argue that conflict resolution should rely solely on peaceful means – such as negotiations, economic co-operation and international law – not military deterrence. However, it can be argued that this viewpoint is somewhat naïve to the way the world works. If liberalists were correct in this matter, one could argue that diplomatic engagement should have been enough to prevent conflicts within former soviet states and yet, as explained above, diplomacy failed to protect Ukraine from Russian aggression. The violations of the Minsk agreement⁶ provide evidence to suggest that diplomacy is not strong enough a force to counter Russian expansionism.

Furthermore, a liberalist argument may be based on the idea that the European Union could maintain all of Europe's diplomatic, economic and warfighting capabilities. While the EU does have some form of joint task forces and multinational battlegroups, the extent to which NATO operates could not be replicated within the EU. The EU's defence structures, such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), have been largely ineffective in addressing military threats. This can be seen through the Crimea crisis, when EU nations

⁶ Allan, D. (2020). *The Minsk-2 agreement*. [online] Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine-0/minsk-2-agreement> [Accessed 17 Mar. 2025].

relied on NATO frameworks to respond. Finally, NATO acts as the shield under which the EU is protected as of the 32 members of NATO, the EU makes up 23⁷. These 23 NATO Members make up 85%⁸ of the EU, showing the extent that Article 5 has.

NATO is by far the longest standing and strongest military alliance in global history, however that is not NATO's only strength. NATO is also "effective international organization that materially increases its members' joint military capabilities and political influence" (Knipsel; 2024)⁹ This could be argued to be a key factor in considering NATO's prolonged longevity, exceeding the '7-year average'¹⁰ length of strategic alliances, this unheard-of length has led to NATO ensuring its 'Sui Generis' nature.

However, it could be argued – from Liberal-Institutionalist viewpoint - that NATO's prolonged length is due to its institutional co-operative frameworks, rather than its warfighting capabilities against geopolitical threats. This, however, is not exactly the case. During the aftermath of 9/11, the US declared a "war on terror" invoking the North Atlantic Treaty's article 5 for the first and last time – during which, it is said, "Our [The United States] NATO allies are assisting directly in the defence of American territory." This act of unity ultimately led to the formation of the US-Led 'coalition of the willing' during the 2003 Invasion of Iran.

⁷ NATO (2024a). *NATO Member countries*. [online] NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm [Accessed 17 Mar. 2025].

⁸ European Union (2024). *EU country profiles | European Union*. [online] european-union.europa.eu. Available at: https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-countries_en [Accessed 17 Mar. 2025].

⁹ Knipsel, S. (2024). NATO at 75—powerful and necessary, or costly and obsolete? [online] University of Rochester - News Center. Available at: <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/what-is-nato-countries-map-article-five-605022/> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2025].

¹⁰ Bleeker, J. and Ernst, D. (1995). Is Your Strategic Alliance Really a Sale? [online] Harvard Business Review. Available at: <https://hbr.org/1995/01/is-your-strategic-alliance-really-a-sale> [Accessed 14 Mar. 2025].

Western Political Dominance.

The realistic requirement for a military and political alliance, such as NATO, within Europe can be seen through the lens of the issuing of western dominance through militaria and political means, especially within eastern Europe and the former Yugoslav states. NATO has operations throughout the Yugoslav wars, the most prominent being the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and the Kosovo War (1998-1999). NATO intervention in Bosnia began on the 16th of July 1992 and ended on the 2nd of December 2004 (lasting 12 years), while the Bosnian war (6th April 1992 – 14th December 1995) ended nearly 9 years prior with the signing of the Dayton Accords¹¹.

NATO's continual presence, first through the Implementation Force (IFOR) and later the Stabilisation Force (SFOR), played a crucial role in maintaining the peace envisioned by the Dayton Accords. Initially tasked with monitoring and enforcing UN Security Council Resolutions 713 and 757, NATO supported UN peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia. "After three years of relative inaction, NATO weighed in with an aggressive air campaign, and less than three weeks later the Bosnian Serbs not only acceded to demands to lift the artillery siege of Sarajevo but also proved willing to make key concessions at the negotiating table" (Brookings Institute; 2017)¹². Within months, U.S.-brokered peace talks in Dayton, Ohio, led to the signing of a treaty, solidifying NATO's role in post-war stabilisation. The use of military means to bring about peace within the Balkan states was arguably one of NATO's most significant political operations.

¹¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (1995). Dayton Peace Agreement | OSCE. [online] Osce.org. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/bih/126173> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2025].

¹² The Brookings Institution (2017). The Value of Highly Capable Proxy Forces. [online] Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/9780815732419_ch1.pdf [Accessed 10 Feb. 2025].

However, this was not the end of NATO's contribution to the Yugoslav wars, with NATO's involvement in peacekeeping and air campaigns during the Kosovo War, which was fought between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). Milosevic's regime – which included war crimes¹³, such as the ethnic cleansing of Albanians within Kosovan territory – allowed for NATO's "78-day air campaign against Milosevic's regime, aimed at putting an end to violence in Kosovo"¹⁴ to begin. Once the Yugoslavian forces withdrew, NATO forces continued to lead peace-support operations under KFOR (Kosovo Force) however NATO's air campaign was not without flaws as it caused the irrefutable loss of life for approximately 500¹⁵ civilians – an estimate backed also by the Human Rights Watch¹⁶, an estimate higher than the total loss of life of opposing forces under the air strikes.

Constructivist may argue that NATO has persisted, not because of military threats or strategic necessity, but rather NATO has evolved into a "Community of shared values". [Definition]. Constructivists also argue that NATO could exist with or without a major military adversary because its members share a collective political and ideological identity, as

¹³ Human Rights Watch (2001). UNDER ORDERS: War Crimes in Kosovo - 1. Executive Summary. [online] Hrw.org. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/kosovo/undword.htm> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2025].

¹⁴ NATO (2024). NATO's Role in Kosovo. [online] NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48818.htm [Accessed 10 Feb. 2025].

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch (2009). Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign - The Crisis in Kosovo. [online] www.hrw.org. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2000/nato/Natbm200-01.htm> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2025].

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch (2008). Ljudski gubici u NATO bombardovanju (Srbija, Kosovo i Crna Gora). [online] Hlc-rdc.org. Available at: <https://www.hlc-rdc.org/db/nato/index.html> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2025]. [TRANSLATION: Human losses in NATO bombing (Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro)].

NATO is sustained by a “western collective identity” (Risse-Kappen; 1996)¹⁷ rather than strategic interests.

A Neo-Classical Realist’s counter-argument to this suggestion would focus the notion that while NATO is an alliance of states within the North Atlantic region, the cultures and practises of these states differ to the point in which stating the entire region shares a singular identity is unfounded. If NATO were purely an alliance of shared values, we would expect only strong democracies to be members. However, Turkey, a key NATO state, has increasingly moved towards authoritarianism¹⁸, yet remains integral to NATO’s security framework. This suggests that NATO persists due to geopolitical and military interests rather than a shared political identity

To further this point, Neoclassical Realism suggests that NATO’s strategy is shaped not only by external threats but also by domestic political pressures. The U.S. push for increased NATO defence spending reflects internal political debates over burden-sharing, while Turkey’s democratic backsliding shows that NATO prioritises strategic necessity over ideological unity. This causes one to question that if NATO were purely a values-based alliance, why does it struggle with internal divisions?

NATO has many internal issues, such as enlargement, the sharing of nuclear resources and capabilities, and defence expenditure. With 3 of the 5 NPT-Designated nuclear states being NATO members, nuclear resource sharing has been a key point in NATO’s internal

¹⁷ Risse-Kappen, T. (2016). Collective identity in a democratic community. *Domestic Politics and Norm Diffusion in International Relations*, [online] pp.78–113. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315623665-5>.

¹⁸ Freedom house (2024). *Turkey: Country Profile*. [online] Freedom House. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey> [Accessed 17 Mar. 2025].

debates. “Nuclear deterrence by the US and through NATO and with the presence of American warheads in Europe is the ultimate test of NATO’s credibility.” (Chalmers & Lunn; 2010)¹⁹ Moreover, another prime example of political disagreements within NATO would be the Turkish Veto of Nordic states accession to NATO in 2022-2023, due to Sweden’s alleged support of Kurdish forces.²⁰

This point has been emphasised by The U.S.’s consistent use of NATO as a vehicle for strategic goals, from Cold War containment to post-9/11 operations. As mentioned above, the pressure on allies to increase defence spending (as seen under the Trump administration), which has been seen by some as an “impossible”²¹ demand, further suggests that NATO’s survival is tied to power politics, not just shared values. While constructivists argue that NATO’s survival is rooted in a shared Western identity, differences in societal norms and strategic realities suggest otherwise. NATO persists because of its military necessity and geopolitical role, not merely as a values-based institution.

¹⁹ Chalmers, M. and Lunn, S. (2010). *NATO’s Tactical Nuclear Dilemma*. [online] *Internet Archive*. 61 Whitehall, London SW1A 2ET: Royal United Services Institute. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20120529205033/http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/NATOs_Nuclear_Dilemma.pdf [Accessed 15 Mar. 2025].

²⁰ Levin, P. (2023). *The Turkish Veto: Why Erdogan Is Blocking Finland and Sweden’s Path to NATO - Foreign Policy Research Institute*. [online] www.fpri.org. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/the-turkish-veto-why-erdogan-is-blocking-finland-and-swedens-path-to-nato/> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2025].

²¹ Posaner, J., Kayali, L., Brinkmann, J. and Noyan, O. (2025). *Europe splits on Trump’s call to dramatically boost defense spending*. [online] POLITICO. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-tells-allies-spend-5-percent-gdp-defense-nato/> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2025].

Conclusion.

There are many different stances on the question as to why NATO has persisted in the Post-Cold War Period, but it is the conclusion of this essay that NATO persists because it is ultimately needed. From acting as a balancing force against the rising power of Russia, to being a tool of western political dominance – NATO has proven itself as the longest lasting alliance in the history of mankind. As conflict has evolved, so has NATO. The shift in focus from deterring soviet aggression to crisis management and counterterrorism allows NATO to be such an influential power. Its continued relevance withing international relations is not just at testament to its institutional resilience but rather to the ongoing geopolitical tensions that make it such a needed organisation.

Article 5 alone acts as a cornerstone in deterrence against aggression within the north Atlantic region. While some see its limitations, especially in reference to cyber warfare, others focus on powerful and unified message of collective defence. NATO is now, just as it always has been, an importance and necessary institution. NATO serves as a force of balance through Europe and an institution born out of the requirement for international co-operation to combat the evolving needs of contemporary geopolitics and the clash of ideologies, including outside of the North-Atlantic region.

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