

I

The Curious Relationship

A curious relationship has developed within the Atlantic Alliance, also known as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), since its inception in 1949. NATO is widely regarded as the most successful alliance ever, and statesmen on both sides of the Atlantic have lavished praise upon it.¹ They also complain incessantly about its shortcomings, most of which they blame on their counterparts across the sea. These complaints have not gone unnoticed by observers in the press and academia, who have been quick to pronounce the Alliance “in crisis,” or even on the brink of collapse. Looking back over the history of the Alliance, there seems to have been scarcely a year when it was *not* widely said to be in crisis, or at least in disarray.²

Is it really the case that NATO is perpetually on the brink of collapse? Claims that NATO is in crisis have been frequent in no small part because the idea of a crisis is a useful one for insiders and outsiders alike. For insiders, warning of an actual or impending crisis is the rhetorical equivalent of a shot across the bow – a way of serving notice that trouble is brewing and something should be done about it forthwith. For outsiders, a crisis in the Alliance is the rhetorical equivalent of an alarm bell – a way of dramatizing a problem that might otherwise be dismissed as unworthy of space on a prestigious op-ed page or in a scholarly journal. Outsiders of all sorts have been quick to pronounce the Alliance in crisis, often at the urging of officials eager to publicize their concerns and ensure that they are taken seriously in other NATO capitals. Perhaps the most visible

¹ The “greatest defensive alliance the world has ever known,” in the words of Paul-Henri Spaak, former Belgian prime minister and NATO Secretary General, “Hold Fast,” *Foreign Affairs* 41 (July 1963): 611.

² Others have made this point too – for example, Lawrence Kaplan, “NATO: The Second Generation,” in *NATO after Thirty Years* ed. Lawrence Kaplan and William Clawson (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1981), pp. 14, 29; William Park, *Defending the West: A History of NATO* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1986), p. vii; Paul Cornish, *Partnership in Crisis: The US, Europe and the Fall and Rise of NATO* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997), p. 2; Dieter Mahncke, Wyn Rees, and Wayne Thompson, *Redefining Transatlantic Security Relations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 105.

manifestation of this fixation on NATO crises is the enormous literature that has been written about them – a literature devoted to convincing its readers that these crises are real and that something should be done about them.³

In retrospect, claims that the Alliance is in crisis have been made so often that they may seem to be little more than a harmless cliché. This book takes a darker view of what has become the dominant mode for assessing the health and future prospects of perhaps the most influential international institution ever created. Political shorthand of this kind obscures more than it reveals; it also serves as an impediment rather than an aid to clear thinking about alliances in general and the Atlantic Alliance in particular.

In the rest of this chapter, I do not attempt to cover the scholarly literature on NATO in its entirety. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been many fine works using new theoretical tools to explain how the Atlantic Alliance operates and why it endures.⁴ My critique applies only to that portion of the NATO literature that falls within what I call, in the next section, the *alliance crisis syndrome*. This is a very large literature in its own right, and it poses important conceptual and theoretical challenges that, if left unresolved, will continue to impede progress toward a better understanding of how and why alliances form and come apart.

THE ALLIANCE CRISIS SYNDROME

The history of the Atlantic Alliance, as Stanley Hoffmann once wrote, is a history of crises. But what exactly does it mean to say that an alliance is in crisis?⁵

At the time they occurred, disputes like those over Suez during the 1950s, the French withdrawal from NATO's integrated military commands during the 1960s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of the 1970s, or American opposition to a natural gas pipeline linking the Soviet Union to western Europe during the early 1980s seemed to contain within themselves the potential for

³ For overviews of the NATO-in-crisis literature, see Wallace Thies, "Crises and the Study of Alliance Politics," *Armed Forces and Society* 15 (Spring 1989): 349–369; Elizabeth Pond, *Beyond the Wall: Germany's Road to Reunification* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1993), pp. 276–278; Wallace Thies, "The 'Demise' of NATO: A Post-Mortem," *Parameters* 20 (June 1990): 17–30; Lawrence Kaplan, *NATO Divided, NATO United* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), pp. 151–155.

⁴ For example, John Duffield, "International Regimes and Alliance Behavior: Explaining NATO Conventional Force Levels," *International Organization* 46 (Autumn 1992): 819–855; John Duffield, "NATO's Functions after the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly* 109 (#5, 1994–1995): 763–787; Robert McCalla, "NATO's Persistence after the Cold War," *International Organization* 50 (Summer 1996): 445–475; Celeste Wallander, "Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO after the Cold War," *International Organization* 54 (Autumn 2000): 705–735.

⁵ Stanley Hoffmann, "NATO and Nuclear Weapons: Reasons and Unreason," *Foreign Affairs* 60 (Winter 1981/1982): 327. Martin Hillenbrand makes much the same point, "NATO and Western Security in an Era of Transition," *International Security* 2 (Fall 1977): 5.

severe and even unbearable strains on the Alliance. Viewed with the wisdom that hindsight provides, these episodes appear as transient phenomena, dominating the headlines for a few months until supplanted by the next intra-NATO row.

Because NATO crises have occurred so often and passed so quickly, observers straining to win and hold their audience's attention have frequently resorted to a particular way of writing about the Alliance and its ills. It is an approach found so often within the literature on NATO that it can usefully be labeled the "Alliance crisis syndrome" – namely, *exaggerated claims* based on *unexamined premises* and backed by *superficial comparisons* drawn from the history of the Alliance.

Exaggerated Claims

Instead of mere crises within the Alliance, observers have instead claimed that *their* subject is a "profound crisis,"⁶ a "deepening crisis,"⁷ a "fundamental crisis,"⁸ a "general crisis,"⁹ a "qualitatively different crisis,"¹⁰ an "unprecedented" crisis,¹¹ and even a "real crisis."¹² Two additional claims are often made to add substance and specificity to the overall alarmist outlook: (1) this crisis is the worst ever and, (2) the Alliance is in danger of falling apart or has even ceased to function (although the obituary has yet to be written).

The first of these loomed large in commentaries on the 2003 dispute over whether and when to go to war against Iraq. Henry Kissinger wrote in February 2003 that "The road to Iraqi disarmament has produced the gravest crisis in the Atlantic Alliance since its creation five decades ago."¹³ As seen by Elizabeth Pond, "relations in the transatlantic community . . . were in greater crisis in 2003 than ever before."¹⁴ Philip Gordon concurred: "The debate about

⁶ Klaus Knorr, "The Strained Alliance," in *NATO and American Security* ed. Klaus Knorr (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 3. Walter Hahn uses the same term in "Does NATO Have a Future?" *International Security Review* 5 (Summer 1980): 151.

⁷ Roger Hilsman, "NATO: The Developing Strategic Context," in *NATO and American Security* ed. Klaus Knorr, p. 11.

⁸ Philip Windsor, *Germany and the Western Alliance: Lessons from the 1980s Crises* (International Institute of Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper #180, 1981), p. 1.

⁹ David Guess, "What the West Should Know about German Neutralism," *Commentary* 75 (January 1983): 30. Walter Laqueur uses the term "general NATO crisis," *Europe since Hitler* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 427.

¹⁰ Josef Joffe, "European-American Relations: The Enduring Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 59 (Spring 1981): 838.

¹¹ Robert W. Tucker, "The Atlantic Alliance and Its Critics," *Commentary* 73 (May 1982): 63–64. See also Henry Kissinger, "A Plan to Reshape NATO," *Time*, March 5, 1984, p. 20.

¹² Laqueur, *Europe since Hitler*, p. 132. See also Hillenbrand, "NATO and Western Security in an Era of Transition," p. 20.

¹³ Henry Kissinger, "Role Reversal and Alliance Realities," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2003, p. A21.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Pond, *Friendly Fire: The Near-Death of the Transatlantic Alliance* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2004), p. ix. For a similar judgment, see Andrew Moravcsik, "Striking a New Transatlantic Bargain," *Foreign Affairs* 82 (July–August 2003): 74.

whether or not to invade Iraq has provoked one of the worst transatlantic crises ... of the entire post-World War II period.”¹⁵ How do we know this crisis was the worst ever? “The cross-Atlantic vitriol,” Zbigniew Brzezinski explained, “is unprecedented in its ugliness, with NATO’s unity in real jeopardy.”¹⁶ Ronald Asmus agreed, calling the “current rift ... unprecedented in its scope, intensity, and, at times, pettiness.”¹⁷

Concerning the latter claim, the 2003 crisis over Iraq produced numerous funeral judgments. Elizabeth Pond cited “the cumulative brawls that led to the near-death of the transatlantic alliance in 2002–2003.”¹⁸ Charles Krauthammer was more acerbic: “The grotesque performance of France, Germany and Belgium in blocking aid to Turkey marks the end of NATO’s useful life. Like the United Nations, it will simply wither of its own irrelevance.”¹⁹ “The damage inflicted on Washington’s ties to Europe by the Bush administration’s policy [toward Iraq],” Christopher Layne wrote, “is likely to prove real, lasting and, at the end of the day, irreparable.”²⁰

In 2003, the claim that the Atlantic Alliance was facing its greatest crisis ever was made so often and by so many expert observers that it might seem self-evident that something was terribly wrong, except for three problems. First, almost from the time the Alliance was formed, observers have been discovering ominous trends, problems that grow increasingly acute, and contradictions that deepen with each passing year. Predictions that the Alliance is doomed have been commonplace since the mid 1960s.²¹ These claims are almost never backed by the kind of evidence that would allow a disinterested observer to verify whether the alleged changes are actually occurring in the predicted direction. Instead, judgments about the Alliance’s health and future prospects are typically based on little more than impressions formed by

¹⁵ Philip Gordon, “The Crisis in the Alliance,” *Iraq Memo* (The Saban Center at the Brookings Institution, Memo No. 111, February 24, 2003), p. 1. Andrew Moravcsik, “Striking a New Transatlantic Bargain,” *Foreign Affairs* 82 (July/August 2003): 74, refers to “the most severe transatlantic tensions in a generation.”

¹⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Why Unity Is Essential,” *Washington Post*, February 19, 2003, p. A29.

¹⁷ Ronald Asmus, “Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs* 82 (September/October 2003): 20.

¹⁸ Pond, *Friendly Fire*, p. ix.

¹⁹ Charles Krauthammer, “A Costly Charade at the U.N.,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 2003, p. A23.

²⁰ Christopher Layne, “America As a European Hegemon,” *The National Interest* #72 (Summer 2004): 17. See also *Renewing the Atlantic Partnership*, Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, Henry Kissinger and Lawrence Summers, Co-Chairs, 2004, p. 1.

²¹ For example, Ronald Steel, *The End of Alliance: America and the Future of Europe* (New York: Viking, 1964); Robert Kleiman, *Atlantic Crisis: American Diplomacy Confronts a Resurgent Europe* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964); Earl Ravenal, *NATO’s Unremarked Demise* (University of California, Berkeley, Institute of International Studies: Policy Papers in International Affairs, #10, 1979); Irving Kristol, “Does NATO Exist?” *Washington Quarterly* 2 (Autumn 1979): 45–53.

observers watching and listening as the latest transatlantic quarrel unfolds.²² Journalists accord great weight to complaints made by anonymous officials from defense and foreign ministries. Observers from the academic world write books and articles that analyze the underlying issues and prescribe needed changes. The sheer volume of material published on the Alliance's ills becomes an index of its troubles. The potential for self-fulfilling prophecies is very great.

Second, the widespread reliance on impressionistic evidence has rendered the NATO-in-crisis literature inherently subjective and imprecise. The "transatlantic clash over Iraq," Philip Gordon wrote in 2004, provided "a sense of what a transatlantic divorce might look like and how it might become possible."²³ Looking at the same events, Thomas Mowle concluded that even though "the Iraqi crisis made clear that the United States and its allies in Europe are increasingly at odds," the relationship "is not in a crisis, yet."²⁴ Nor is this a new problem. To some, the 1956 Suez Crisis was NATO's gravest to date²⁵; to Klaus Knorr, Suez was one of the "many but minor pulls" that even a solid alliance will inevitably encounter.²⁶ Ronald Steel proclaimed "the end of [the] alliance" in 1964, but for Kurt Birrenbach "the first symptoms of estrangement" between America and Europe wouldn't appear until 1973.²⁷ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Josef Joffe wrote, "left a legacy of confusion, distrust and resentment which, in retrospect, turns the many disputes of the past into minor family squabbles."²⁸ In Stanley Hoffmann's view, the divisions over Afghanistan were less than in the case of, say, the 1973 Yom Kippur War.²⁹ Writing about NATO in the 1990s, Binnendijk and Kugler saw it as "filled with optimism and hopeful visions of a bright future for itself."³⁰ As recalled by Richard

²² For a rare bit of candor in this regard, see Keith Dunn and Stephen Flanagan, "NATO at Forty: An Overview," in *NATO's Fifth Decade* ed. Keith Dunn and Stephen Flanagan (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1990), p. 5.

²³ Philip Gordon, "The Transatlantic Alliance and the International System," in *Conflict and Cooperation in Transatlantic Relations* ed. Daniel Hamilton (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2004), p. 75. For a similar view, see Pond, *Friendly Fire*, p. 72.

²⁴ Thomas Mowle, *Allies at Odds?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1, 164. See also Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier, *Reconcilable Differences: U.S.-French Relations in the New Era* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2002), p. 3.

²⁵ Robert Strausz-Hupé, James Dougherty, and William Kintner, *Building the Atlantic World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 42; Edmond Taylor, "This Long NATO Crisis," *The Reporter* 24 (April 21, 1966): 17.

²⁶ Knorr, "The Strained Alliance," p. 3.

²⁷ Steel, *The End of Alliance*; Kurt Birrenbach, "The United States and Western Europe: Partners or Rivals?" *Orbis* 17 (Summer 1973): 405.

²⁸ Josef Joffe, "European-American Relations: The Enduring Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 59 (Spring 1981): 835.

²⁹ Stanley Hoffmann, "The Western Alliance: Drift or Harmony?" *International Security* 6 (Fall 1981): 106.

³⁰ Hans Binnendijk and Richard Kugler, "Dual-Track Transformation for the Atlantic Alliance," *Defense Horizons* #35 (November 2003): 2.

Holbrooke, “By the spring of 1995 it had become commonplace to say that Washington’s relations with our European allies were worse than at any time since the 1956 Suez crisis.”³¹

Third, the inability of observers to back up their assessments with something more than impressionistic claims about vitriol and petty behavior has often led them to fall back on repetition or even hype as the basis for their judgments. Henry Kissinger owns the distinction of pronouncing the Atlantic Alliance in serious trouble in all six decades of its existence.^{32–36} Charles Krauthammer’s February 2003 claim that the pre-Iraq War dispute over aid to Turkey “marks the end of NATO’s useful life”³⁷ would likely be more persuasive had he not three months earlier proclaimed that “NATO as a military alliance is dead. It took ill with the fall of the Berlin Wall and then died in Afghanistan.”³⁸ The latter claim too was problematic because seven months before that the same Charles Krauthammer wrote, “NATO died in Afghanistan . . . NATO, as a military alliance, is dead.”³⁹

³¹ Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War*, rev. ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 361. See also Rob de Wijk, who dates an “all-time low” in the transatlantic relationship to November 1994, *NATO on the Brink of the New Millennium* (London: Brassey’s, 1997), p. 111, quoted in David Yost, *NATO Transformed* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1998), p. 195.

³² Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), pp. 201–206; Henry Kissinger, “The Search for Stability,” *Foreign Affairs* 37 (July 1959): 550–551.

³³ Henry Kissinger, *The Troubled Partnership* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965); Kissinger, “Central Issues of American Foreign Policy,” in *Agenda for the Nation* ed. Kermit Gordon (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1968), pp. 594, 596.

³⁴ As Secretary of State, Kissinger proclaimed that 1973 would be the “year of Europe,” the year when the Alliance’s troubles were finally seriously addressed.

³⁵ Henry Kissinger, “Something Is Deeply Wrong in the Atlantic Alliance,” *Washington Post*, December 21, 1981, p. A21; Henry Kissinger, “A Plan to Reshape NATO,” *Time*, March 5, 1984, pp. 20–24. See also Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, “To Withdraw Missiles We Must Add Conditions,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1987, Part V, p. 1, which predicted “the most profound crisis” in NATO history if a zero-zero agreement was reached on intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe.

³⁶ Henry Kissinger, “The End of NATO?” *Washington Post*, July 24, 1990, p. A23. See also Henry Kissinger, “Expand NATO Now,” *Washington Post*, December 19, 1994, p. A27, which claimed that “The level of bitter recriminations over Bosnia within the Atlantic Alliance is unparalleled since the Suez crisis of nearly four decades ago.” David Denoon was the first to make this point about Kissinger’s propensity for pronouncing the Alliance in crisis, in his essay “The Context,” in *Constraints on Strategy* ed. David Denoon (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1986), p. 9 (note 62).

³⁷ Krauthammer, “A Costly Charade at the UN.”

³⁸ Charles Krauthammer, “The Bold Road to NATO Expansion,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2002, p. A41.

³⁹ Charles Krauthammer, “Re-Imagining NATO,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2002, p. A35. See also Jeffrey Gedmin, “The Alliance is Doomed,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2002, p. A21. Five years later, the same Charles Krauthammer was scoffing at claims that the Atlantic Alliance was in disarray (“Alliances in Ruins?” *Washington Post*, November 16, 2007, p. A33).

Unexamined Premises

The resort to inflated language by observers straining to make their voices heard has meant that important analytical issues are often overlooked or submerged in a torrent of alarmist claims. Discussions of the state of the Alliance typically begin with the claim that it is again in crisis, followed by a review of causes, consequences, and proposed solutions. None of the many writers who have contributed to the NATO-in-crisis literature have defined their terms in a way that would permit a disinterested observer to know when the Alliance is in crisis and when it is not.⁴⁰ Nor do they conceptualize these episodes in a way that would make it possible to reconcile conflicting claims about the relative severity of various crises or even about when they begin and end. Instead, judgments about whether the Alliance is in crisis and how bad the situation has become are typically based on indicators like harsh language, petty behavior, or the number of points at issue among the members.

Consider in this regard the evidence used to support the claim that the 2003 crisis over Iraq was one of the worst ever, if not *the* worst ever. Philip Gordon cited “the tone of the transatlantic debate,” which “has degraded to levels not seen in recent memory.”⁴¹ A Council on Foreign Relations study group agreed: “For a time, rhetoric replaced diplomacy as the primary instrument for taking positions, making criticisms, and shaping conclusions.”⁴² Elizabeth Pond used three indicators: “the broad spectrum of mutually reinforcing disputes, the accompanying vitriol, and . . . the divergence in self-identification on the two sides of the Atlantic.” In her view, the sheer number of issues at stake exacerbated by “bad temper” and an “unusually high incidence of personal pique” were what made the 2003 pre-Iraq War crisis NATO’s worst ever.⁴³

There are, however, at least four problems with this approach. First, claims that NATO is facing an unusually large number of troublesome issues and/or an unusually high level of vitriol are common in the history of the Alliance. As early as 1957, a distinguished study group was formed to mull over whether

⁴⁰ The exception that proves the rule is Francis Beer, who defines a NATO crisis as a “situation in which a significant segment of relevant political actors perceives that fundamental values of the system – or even its future existence – are seriously threatened” (*Integration and Disintegration in NATO* [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969], p. 281). I know of no study of crisis in the Alliance that even cites, much less builds upon, Beer’s work in this regard. Richard Neustadt defines a crisis between allies in terms of four elements – muddled perceptions, stifled communications, disappointed expectations, and paranoid reactions – but his work deals only with bilateral relationships rather than the Alliance as a whole (*Alliance Politics* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1970], pp. 56, 71–72). Citations to Neustadt are likewise conspicuously absent from the NATO-in-crisis literature.

⁴¹ Gordon, “The Crisis in the Alliance,” p. 1.

⁴² *Renewing the Atlantic Partnership*, p. 1.

⁴³ Pond, *Friendly Fire*, pp. x–xii.

the Alliance had a future.⁴⁴ “Scarcely a month passes,” an American observer wrote toward the end of the Cold War, “without a book, article, or speech proclaiming a new or imminent ‘crisis’ in NATO.”⁴⁵ Nasty language is an old problem rather than a new one. During the 1956 Suez crisis, British Conservatives accused the United States of “betrayal” and wondered openly if the Alliance had come to an end.⁴⁶ During the Bosnia peace negotiations at Dayton in 1995, the British representative “exploded at the American ‘bastards,’ and a French diplomat had this to say about [Richard] Holbrooke: ‘He flatters, he lies, he humiliates; he is a sort of brutal and schizophrenic Mazarin.’”⁴⁷ NATO members are *always* sniping at one another. When they do it in public it’s called a crisis; when they do it in private it’s called diplomacy.

Second, students of NATO take for granted that the more points at issue, the worse the Alliance’s condition must be. The problem here is that counting the number of issues involved is not a reliable indicator of whether the Alliance is doing well or poorly. The Alliance’s so-called crises do more than strain relations among its members. They also mobilize the Alliance’s admirers and defenders, of whom there are many. Crises offer opportunities to ambitious politicians – to mediate, to ingratiate themselves to one side or the other, to score points at the expense of political rivals, or even reconcile with those from whom they (or their predecessors) have been estranged.⁴⁸ An issue that proves divisive in one context can be a catalyst for change in another. In 1956, British Labor blamed the Tory government, not the United States, for the Suez calamity. As recounted by Aneurin Bevan, “the line taken by President Eisenhower drew him closer to Labor and further away from his political counterparts in Britain. Indeed, informed circles of Labor actually grew more friendly to the United States in the second half of 1956, for Labor’s Suez policy more closely resembled that of the White House than of our own Conservative Government.”⁴⁹ Not to be outdone, Harold Macmillan, Anthony Eden’s successor as prime minister, set out to restore the special relationship with the

⁴⁴ *NATO: A Critical Appraisal*, A Report Prepared by Gardner Patterson and Edgar Furniss, Jr., On the Basis of an International Conference Held at Princeton University, June 19–29, 1957 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Conference on NATO, 1957). Their lead sentence: “The year 1957 finds the future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in doubt” (p. 1).

⁴⁵ John Reed, Jr., *Germany and NATO* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1987), p. 104. See also Cornish, *Partnership in Crisis*, p. 114.

⁴⁶ Denis Healey, “Britain and NATO,” in *NATO and American Security* ed. Klaus Knorr, p. 221.

⁴⁷ Sebastian Mallaby, “A Campaign for the Allies Too,” *Washington Post*, March 22, 1994, p. A21. See also Holbrooke, *To End a War*, p. 318.

⁴⁸ See, for example, DeNeen Brown, “Canada’s Prime Minister Seeks to Mend Fences,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 2003, p. A12; and Keith Richburg, “French Defense Minister, Visiting U.S., Hopes to Improve Ties,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 2004, p. A12.

⁴⁹ Aneurin Bevan, “Britain and America at Loggerheads,” *Foreign Affairs* 36 (October 1957): 65.

United States. He was so successful that he and his American counterparts, who were also eager to put Suez behind them, unwittingly set the stage for another “most serious crisis” – namely the French veto in 1963 of Britain’s application to join the Common Market.⁵⁰

Third, the NATO-in-crisis literature suggests that disputes within the Alliance grow more debilitating over time, in the sense that each new crisis is promptly labeled the worst ever. But if new crises impose greater strains than all previous ones, why hasn’t the Alliance collapsed? One can’t help but wonder how an institution perpetually on life support could endure for more than a half-century, much less win the Cold War, and nearly double in size in recent years.

Fourth, the NATO-in-crisis literature suggests that there is a threshold that separates crises from noncrisis situations. After listing the many and varied strains on the Alliance as of 2003, a Council on Foreign Relations study group, wrote that “The war in Iraq brought these strains to the point of crisis.”⁵¹ Presumably once the crisis threshold is crossed, behavior changes, political processes change, and so too do political outcomes, otherwise what would be the point of labeling a dispute a crisis? But what kinds of changes occur during a crisis (vitriol and pettiness aside)? The NATO-in-crisis literature has little to say on this point. Conversely, vitriol and pettiness are unreliable indicators of how well the Alliance is performing. Knowing that “any credible threat of a bombing campaign would depend on the United States, ... U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke was dominating the diplomacy of the Kosovo crisis. His brusqueness left the Europeans in general, and the British in particular, aggrieved.”⁵² Yet the war for Kosovo is today generally regarded as a NATO triumph rather than a debilitating crisis.⁵³

Superficial Comparisons

Writers who claim that NATO is facing its greatest crisis ever almost always include a disclaimer indicating awareness that there have been many such

⁵⁰ Spaak, “Hold Fast,” p. 619; Strausz-Hupé, Kintner, and Dougherty, *Building the Atlantic World*, p. 326; Stanley Hoffmann, “Discord in Community,” in *The Atlantic Community* ed. Francis O. Wilcox and H. Field Havilland, Jr. (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 4; William T. R. Fox and Annette Baker Fox, *NATO and the Range of American Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 16.

⁵¹ *Renewing the Atlantic Partnership*, p. 1. For a similar approach, see Herman Kahn and William Pfaff, “Our Alternatives in Europe,” *Foreign Affairs* 44 (July 1966): 587.

⁵² Martin Walker, “Europe: Superstate or Superpower?” *World Policy Journal* 17 (Winter 2000/2001): 111.

⁵³ Ronald Asmus describes the 1990s as a “renaissance” for NATO (“Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance,” p. 20); while Andrew Moravcsik cites a “trend ... toward transatlantic harmony” during the two decades prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq (“Striking a New Transatlantic Bargain,” p. 78).

crises before. But they also insist that *their* crisis is different – indeed, very different, and thus more stressful – than all previous ones. “In the past,” Elizabeth Pond wrote regarding the 2003 Iraq War crisis, “however heated the confrontations, transatlantic quarrels tended to be over single issues, or at most two or three questions at a time, not over a whole range of topics that obstructed conciliation on any one of them and maximized ill-will.”⁵⁴ “The alliance,” Philip Gordon noted, also regarding the Iraq War crisis, “has weathered many serious crises before – but without the common purpose of the Cold War to hold the allies together, this time the damage could prove far more lasting.”⁵⁵ What made Iraq such a difficult problem for the Alliance? “It was,” a Council on Foreign Relations study group wrote, “the first major crisis within the Alliance to take place in the absence of an agreed-upon danger.”⁵⁶

There are, however, at least three reasons for being skeptical about claims of this sort. First, the historical comparisons employed are often so superficial as to be almost useless for judgments regarding the severity of the Alliance’s troubles and its future prospects. The authors who write about NATO’s worst-crisis-ever take it as self-evident that the Alliance is again in crisis. For them references to history are a way of (1) avoiding the “cry-wolf” problem, by indicating awareness that the alarm bell has rung many times before, and (2) transitioning to the main point – namely, that *this* crisis is different and thus worse than all the rest.

Second, there is the problem of conflicting claims. In 2001, Antony Blinken wrote that America and Europe were converging rather than splitting apart, and that the very idea of a crisis between them “is largely a myth manufactured by elites – politicians, intellectuals, and the media – whose views clash with those of the people they purport to represent.”⁵⁷ Six months later, Jessica Tuchman Matthews wrote that “Today’s differences amount to much more than the quarrels among friends that have characterized the relationship for decades.”⁵⁸ Whose view was more correct? How would we know?

Third, consider an earlier period in which claims that NATO was facing its worst crisis ever were also widespread – namely, the 1980s. The first

⁵⁴ Pond, *Friendly Fire*, p. X. Twenty years earlier, distinguished scholars were making essentially the same argument regarding the number and complexity of the issues straining the Alliance. See, for example, Karl Kaiser et al., *Western Security: What Has Changed? What Should Be Done?* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1981), pp. 8–10, 20–21; Robert Tucker, “The Atlantic Alliance and Its Critics,” *Commentary* 73 (May 1982): 63–64.

⁵⁵ Gordon, “The Crisis in the Alliance,” p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Renewing the Atlantic Partnership*, p. 9.

⁵⁷ Antony Blinken, “The False Crisis Over the Atlantic,” *Foreign Affairs* 80 (May/June 2001): 35–48 (the quoted excerpt is from p. 47).

⁵⁸ Jessica Tuchman Matthews, “Estranged Partners,” *Foreign Policy* 127 (November/December 2001): 48.