Why NATO Endures

Why NATO Endures develops two themes as it examines military alliances and their role in international relations. The first is that the Atlantic Alliance, also known as NATO, has become something very different from virtually all pre-1939 alliances and many contemporary alliances. The members of early alliances frequently feared their allies as much if not more than their enemies, viewing them as temporary accomplices and future rivals. In contrast, NATO members are almost all democracies that encourage each other to grow stronger. The book's second theme is that NATO, as an alliance of democracies, has developed hidden strengths that have allowed it to endure for roughly sixty years, unlike most other alliances, which often broke apart within a few years. Democracies can and do disagree with one another, but they do not fear one another. They also need the approval of other democracies as they conduct their foreign policies. These traits constitute built-in, self-healing tendencies, which is why NATO endures.

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PREFACE

My goal in this book is to look at some old and familiar problems in a new and different way, beginning with the curious relationship that has developed within the Atlantic Alliance, commonly known as NATO, since its creation in 1949.[1]

By almost any measure, NATO has been an overwhelming success, yet analyses of what it does and why it persists have been preoccupied with crisis and impending collapse. Relations between the United States and its European allies have had their ups and downs, but one constant in the history of NATO is the propensity of participants and observers alike to proclaim it "in crisis" and even on the brink of collapse.

Claims that NATO is once again in crisis have been made so often and by so many different writers that the contention might seem little more than a harmless cliché. On the contrary, I argue in Chapter 1 that this fascination with crisis and conflict has proven to be an intellectual dead end. The frequency with which these so-called NATO crises have occurred and the speed with which they have disappeared from public view has meant that observers have often resorted to inflated language to persuade their readers that *this time* NATO's troubles are real. Students of NATO have been quick to label disputes within it a "profound crisis," a "deepening crisis," a "general crisis," and the like. Terms such as these, however, have been bandied about in a remarkably casual fashion. None of those who have used these terms have bothered to define them in a way that would permit a disinterested observer to know when NATO was in crisis and when it was not.

More important, claims that NATO is again in crisis have served as a barrier rather than a pathway to new knowledge about it. NATO crises have often been described as the product of unusually sharp disagreements among the members, but this begs the question of whether these episodes have enough in common to constitute a class of situations so that one can learn a lot about many or all of them by studying intensively one or a few. Precisely because so many claims of an allegedly fatal crisis have proven to be false alarms, observers have often gone

[1] NATO is an acronym for North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Atlantic Alliance was created in 1949, but NATO-the-organization was not formed until 1951.

to great lengths to suggest ways in which the latest crisis differs from and thus can plausibly be considered more dangerous than all the rest. This preoccupation with discovering ways in which each new crisis differs from previous ones has all but guaranteed that knowledge about NATO and its internal workings does not and, indeed, cannot cumulate.

To remedy this situation, I develop two themes in this book: *why NATO is different* and *why NATO endures*. Concerning the first of these, in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I argue that NATO has proven to be a very different kind of military arrangement than the alliances that formed, dissolved, and re-formed between the creation of the modern state system in the mid-seventeenth century and the emergence of a bipolar international order after the Second World War. Political scientists are trained to think in generic terms; we strive to create concepts that have a common core so that phenomena that have a lot in common can be grouped together and studied as a class. As a research strategy this often works wonderfully, as exemplified by the literatures on international crises, international regimes, praetorian and civic polities, comparative legislatures, electoral realignments, and so on. But when it comes to "alliances," NATO members behave so differently than the members of the alliances formed by the great powers prior to the Second World War that to lump them all together under a single heading conceals as much or more than it reveals. Pre-1939 alliances were made up of states that were simultaneously rivals for hegemony both within Europe and outside it; hence, they plotted and schemed against one another and frequently abandoned one another in search of a better deal elsewhere.[2] The democracies that formed the Atlantic Alliance, in contrast, were not rivals for hegemony, nor did they fear one another. An alliance of democracies *should* be more enduring than an alliance that includes nondemocracies because democracies view one another as natural partners rather than latent rivals.[3]

My second theme, *why NATO endures*, is the subject of Chapters 5, 6, and 7. I argue in those chapters that NATO, an alliance made up almost entirely of liberal democratic states, contains hidden strengths that have allowed it to overcome – not just once but again and again – the kind of internal disagreements that destroyed virtually all prior and many contemporary alliances. Democracies have a great capacity for self-renewal. Regular elections mean that new leaders with new ideas are always appearing on the scene. Once in office, elected leaders are expected to amass a record of accomplishments that they can and do cite when running for reelection. This means *solving* problems, not letting them fester; it also means *improving* their state's relations with other members of the community of liberal democratic states. Here too, regular elections provide a powerful motivation for compromise and reconciliation. Democracies can and do disagree with one another's policies, but disputes are rarely pushed to the breaking point if for no

[2] The Anglo-American alliance during the Second World War is an obvious exception to this statement.

[3] Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation among Democracies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

other reason than the prospect of leadership change nurtures hopes that agreement, although out of reach now, *can* be achieved in the future. Last but certainly not least, no responsible leader wants to be tagged as the bungler who wrecked NATO – or even as the hapless bystander who did too little or acted too late and thereby allowed NATO to collapse.

By way of conclusion, Chapter 8 reviews the new knowledge gained from pursuing these two themes – why NATO is different and why NATO endures.

An author who undertakes a project of this size and scope inevitably incurs debts to numerous organizations and individuals. I owe a great deal to my students in Politics 575, International Politics of the Atlantic Alliance, who listened patiently as I described many of the ideas that subsequently found their way into this book. A recent sabbatical leave from my position at the Catholic University of America (CUA) allowed me to do much of the research and writing for this book. CUA also provided generous travel grants that allowed me to attend meetings of the American Political Science Association, the Northeast Political Science Association, and the Midwest Political Science Association, where I participated in panels that dealt with alliances in general and/or NATO in particular.

I have also benefited greatly from the advice offered by the editors and referees of several scholarly journals. Paul Gilchrist, at the time principal editor at the Institute of International Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, greatly improved my first attempt to tackle the NATO-in-crisis issue, during which time I explored ideas and developed arguments that I draw on in Chapter 5 of this book.[4] Claude Welch and Edith Hoshino, at the time the editor and managing editor of *Armed Forces and Society*, helped greatly with a subsequent article about NATO and its many crises – a subject to which I return in Chapter 1 of this book.[5] Andrea Ellner, editor of *European Security*, helped greatly with the draft of an article that I sent to her, a revised version of which is included here as Chapter 1.[6]

Turning to the first of the two themes explored in this book – why NATO is different – Bruce Russett and Randolph Siverson, at the time the editors of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* and *International Interactions*, respectively, provided sound advice and welcome encouragement as I explored the differences between the Atlantic Alliance and pre-1939 alliances and developed ideas that subsequently found their way into Chapters 2, 4, and 8 of this book.[7] Philip Tetlock and George Breslauer, of the University of California, Berkeley, invited me to write a chapter for their edited volume on *Learning in U.S. and Soviet*

[4] Wallace Thies, *The Atlantic Alliance, Nuclear Weapons and European Attitudes: Re-Examining the Conventional Wisdom* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, 1983).

[5] Wallace Thies, "Crises and the Study of Alliance Politics," *Armed Forces and Society* 15 (Spring 1989): 349–369.

[6] Wallace Thies, "Was the U.S. Invasion of Iraq NATO's Worst Crisis Ever? How Would We Know? Why Should We Care?" *European Security* 16 (March 2007): 29–50.

[7] Wallace Thies, "Alliances and Collective Goods: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31 (June 1987): 298–332; Wallace Thies, "Randomness, Contagion and Heterogeneity in the Formation of Interstate Alliances – A Reconsideration," *International Interactions* 16 (1991): 335–354.

Foreign Policy, in which I developed ideas that I draw on in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book.[8] Frank Uhlig, Jr., and Pelham Boyer, respectively the editor and managing editor of *Naval War College Review*, provided advice, encouragement, and (after several drafts) an opportunity to publish an article on a different, less successful alliance commonly known as ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States).[9] Col. Lee Hockman (USA), editor of *Military Review*, gave me an opportunity to explore the differences between the Atlantic Alliance and its rival, the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO). These latter two articles develop ideas that subsequently found their way into Chapter 4 of this book.[10]

Regarding the book's second theme – why NATO endures – Col. Lloyd Matthews (USA, ret.), who was then the editor of *Parameters*, provided advice and encouragement for several articles that developed ideas that subsequently found their way into Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this book.[11] I am grateful to Keith Payne and Leonard Weinberg, respectively the editors of *Comparative Strategy* and *Democracy and Security*, for their advice and encouragement regarding articles that explored the case of NATO and post–Cold War Yugoslavia, which helped greatly when writing the Bosnia case in Chapter 7, along with an important contemporary issue – NATO expansion.[12]

I have also benefited from conversations with colleagues and students here at Catholic University, principally Jim O'Leary, Maryann Cusimano Love, Patrick Bratton, Dorle Hellmuth, Sara Hower, and Ray Millen. Needless to say, responsibility for the final product is mine alone.

[8] Wallace Thies, "Learning in U.S. Policy toward Europe," in *Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy* ed. George Breslauer and Philip Tetlock (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990), pp. 158–207.

[9] Wallace Thies and James D. Harris, "An Alliance Unravels: The United States and ANZUS," *Naval War College Review* 46 (Summer 1993): 98–126.

[10] Wallace Thies and Monica Podbielski, "What Makes an Alliance Strong? NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization in Retrospect," *Military Review* 77 (July–August 1997): 130–135.

[11] Wallace Thies, "What Future for the Atlantic Alliance," *Parameters* 16 (Summer 1986): 26–35; Wallace Thies, "On NATO Strategy: Escalation and the Nuclear Allergy," *Parameters* 18 (September 1988): 18–33; Wallace Thies, "The 'Demise' of NATO: A Post-Mortem," *Parameters* 20 (June 1990): 17–30.

[12] Wallace Thies, "Compellence Failure or Coercive Success? The Case of NATO and Yugoslavia," *Comparative Strategy* 22 (July–September 2003): 243–268; Wallace Thies, Dorle Hellmuth, and Ray Millen, "Does NATO Enlargement Spread Democracy? Evidence from Three Cases," *Democracy and Security* 2 (#2, 2006): 210–230.