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Published in:
Comparative Strategy

DOI:
10.1080/01495933.2019.1653043

Publication date:
2019

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 15. Sep. 2023
Abstract:
NATO’s crisis management engagement came of age in the Kosovo crisis of 1999, as the Alliance committed fully to this role in its 1999 Strategic Concept and consequently inscribed the engagement in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture it sought to refine in subsequent years. The war in Afghanistan brought change as NATO at first sought to implement its crisis management principles and then, when it ran into policy failure, accepted the Americanization of its strategy and then ultimately sought to reformulate its principles in more modest terms. Where Kosovo lessons initially were seen as a lesson in European security management, their limits on the wider global stage became a lesson in NATO’s wider transformation for 21st century security and defense operations. NATO is still today coming to terms with the experience.

Keywords:
North Atlantic Treaty Organization, crisis management operations, comprehensive approach, strategy

Kosovo Traumas
How NATO Got Itself Out of Depth in Crisis Management Operations

The remark attributed to Leon Trotsky, ‘You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you,’ inadvertently captures the essence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) relationship to crisis management operations. These operations invited NATO into a leadership role, but NATO interests were either not aligned or not strong enough to provide for consistent leadership. And this proved the rub for NATO for the two decades that followed: NATO was widely seen as the only credible military option for Western diplomacy in matters of crisis management and, relatedly, the promotion of new standards of protecting civilians and saving strangers, but, as Western diplomacy lacked a political compass, NATO developed an ambitious and ultimately unmanageable agenda that it today seeks to scale to manageable proportions.
Kosovo propelled NATO into the role as first responder to security crises. The shift away from defense to crisis management had begun earlier, but with Kosovo it became intimately clear that NATO through the 1990s had gained ambitions for which it did not have an adequate political-military posture. Questions of strategy thus came to bedevil the Alliance (Gray, 2010; Strachan, 2014). In terms of purpose, which is the foundation for strategy, the question was whether NATO should define its own narrow but clear purpose in crisis management operations, or rather act in wider global interests. In terms of military guidance, the question was whether NATO should apply military power to impose its will on an opponent or rather lend its military force to a much broader and amorphous process of international conflict management? NATO answered these questions in an irregular fashion, at first struggling, then gaining grand confidence and finally retreating.

The enduring legacy of Kosovo is a contested and ongoing political balancing act between cooperative security and human rights legitimacy on the one hand and NATO-led military coercion and strategy on the other. In NATO, the balancing act is dynamic and political to the point where formal processes of organizational learning at best have marginal weight: NATO does not learn strategic lessons by organizational design but by informal political processes (Hardt, 2018). The cumulative effect in NATO has been to grant considerable influence on the Alliance’s development to the most willing and able allies who sometimes act through NATO, sometimes in parallel through coalitions, but who consistently leverage their operational weight to shape NATO’s strategic agenda (Jung, 2012; McInnis, 2013; Rynning, 2013; Weitsman, 2014; Schmitt, 2018). As the political gravity and focus of coalitions change, so does NATO’s policy focus.

The article traces the multifaceted impact hereof on NATO. The first section examines how NATO allies in the immediate post-Kosovo years, 1999-2005, entered a phase of strategic ambiguity defined not least by internal disagreement on the war on terror but ultimately with a determination to rescue the Alliance and take control of its political destiny. Thus began a new phase of grand ambition, 2006-2012, that promised to overcome the timidity of the post-Kosovo years and offer strategic strength, and it led NATO deep into Afghan governance. Climbing down or adjusting its sights came next for NATO, and the third and final section traces how a new strategic bargain, if such it is, emerged in NATO and enabled the Alliance’s inactivity as the Syrian war unfolded and expanded—ultimately to the detriment of the Alliance’s cohesion. The conclusion takes stock of what Kosovo and its aftermath in terms of strategic adjustment tells us about NATO and its ability to cohere at the political-military interface.

**Balancing Alliance Resolve and Security Community, 1999-2005**

The two key representatives of NATO at the time—Secretary General Javier Solana and Supreme Allied Commander Wesley Clark—declared NATO’s operation in Kosovo a success but also acknowledged it had been a risky endeavor: NATO had to a great extent been unprepared for this type of war, or sustained coercive diplomacy, and the Alliance was in need of an infusion of leadership (Clark, 1999, 2001; Solana, 1999). The question was, then, how to define leadership and how to channel it into an agenda for Alliance change.
There could be no question that NATO one way or the other had to bring military force to the table of coercive diplomacy: without this tool in the toolbox, Western diplomacy would have lacked in credibility and impact (Deutch, Kanter and Scowcroft, 1999; Holbrooke, 1999b, 1999a). The leadership agenda might then suggest that NATO needed to reinforce its strategic line of command in order to better embed the threat of the use of armed force in its political ambitions. To an extent strategic command and credibility was an issue. NATO had in Kosovo embraced its own ‘humanitarian agency’ and thus raised the stakes in terms of its reputation and indeed honor in the wider complex of security governance (Huysmans, 2002). What Thomas Schelling once had argued in the context of nuclear strategy now emerged as an issue for NATO in humanitarian affairs: that the credibility of threats depends on a reputation for resolve. In Kosovo, in 1999, NATO had acted in a way that put further distance to the institutional deadlock of the early 1990s when no one held the keys to coercive diplomacy in Bosnia. However, as Joyce Kaufman was to write, NATO still had work to do in aligning its political and military actions (Kaufman, 2002, pp. 224–225).

We can trace this need for improvement through the political-military debates that followed from Kosovo. Some analysts pointed to NATO’s inadequate political agreement, which caused the Alliance to use force in the absence of a campaign plan and operational staffs to manage it, as it opened Operation Allied Force on March 24, 1999 (Daalder and O’Hanlon, 2000). Others emphasized that NATO allies had too few national interests involved in the Kosovo issue to commit to a vigorous fight with Serb forces (Nardulli et al., 2002) or coerce the Kosovo Liberation Army in parallel (Crawford, 2001), and that NATO allies, by engaging in such a fight, overlooked their long-term interest in working with Russia and China on larger scale international issues beyond Kosovo (Mandelbaum, 1999). The risk that NATO could get caught between expansive humanitarian values and limited national interests is reflected also in the debate on air strategy: the NATO Kosovo campaign command was riveted by dissent between the supreme commander, General Wesley Clark, who sought to tailor the use of force to political limits and subordinate commanders, notably Lt. Gen. Michael Short, NATO’s Joint Air Force Component Commander, who pleaded for a classical campaign of shock and awe (Henriksen, 2007). A great air power debate ensued wherein some argued that it was politically dangerous to believe that advanced technology—air power—could decide complex societal conflicts as the one in Kosovo (Lieven, 2001), some argued for the power of air force to decide even complex wars (Harvey, 2006), others argued that a mix of military and diplomatic efforts had sealed NATO’s ultimate success (Byman and Waxman, 2000) and yet others that the end of the war was due not so much to NATO’s strategic choices as the exhaustion of the strategy adopted by Serb president Milosevic (Posen, 2000; Lake, 2009).

Leadership thus applied to the traditional axis of politico-military command and its relevance for new wars and conflicts. Leadership had a second and equally important dimension, though, which involved the wider security governance community of government institutions and non-governmental organizations and agencies. As a new type of conflict, Kosovo demonstrated that NATO had to get deeply involved in this game to make security governance work (Croft et al., 2000; Wouters and Naert, 2001; Webber et al., 2004). Moreover, a shift was taking place inside this community whereby new norms for humanitarian action emerged to challenge and adjust established principles of sovereignty within international law. NATO’s Operation Allied Force did
not have the blessing of the United Nations Security Council on account of principally Russian but also Chinese skepticism, and without a mandate from this Council the armed intervention was illegal. Yet it was also legitimate, most observers agreed, though in a context of vigorous debate, because NATO acted to uphold emerging norms of human security and the responsibility to protect human beings from gross violations (Independent International Commission on Kosovo et al., 2000; Shinoda, 2000; Steinke, 2015).

NATO had sought to walk this balancing act between reinforcing its own capacity for politico-military resolve and integrating further into a security community in support of security governance during the Kosovo air war as it gathered for its 50th anniversary summit in Washington, DC, in April 1999. Here NATO adopted a revised Strategic Concept in which the Alliance devoted a section to ‘Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management’ (NATO, 1999b). NATO stressed the need to act early to prevent conflict escalation and, if need be, to contribute to the ‘effective management’ of conflicts with NATO crisis response operations. It was NATO’s most explicit statement to date that the Alliance had a rationale beyond collective defense and that it had to re-tool its organization also for crisis response operations. In recognition of the security community, NATO not only emphasized in the Strategic Concept the role of ‘partnership, cooperation, and dialogue’ with other organizations, it also issued a separate declaration on ‘Partnership in the 21st Century’ that promised new mechanisms to make these partnerships more robust and operational (NATO, 1999c).

In the wake of Operation Allied Force, which terminated on June 10, 1999, NATO was at liberty to deepen its line of thinking on crisis response operations. Immediately following the end of Operation Allied Force, on June 11, NATO deployed a Kosovo force (KFOR) to uphold security in the province, though in respect of Yugoslav sovereignty, as stipulated by UNSC Resolution 1244, and in support of the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) that followed. It put NATO at the heart of the wider international effort to bring stability to the area and, in December 1999, NATO, having ‘reviewed the status of NATO’s comprehensive approach and continuing commitment to the promotion of security, stability, peace and democracy’, concluded that ‘common efforts in Kosovo demonstrate the value of the concept of mutually reinforcing institutions’ (NATO, 1999a). A year later NATO reiterated its support for UNMIK and also emphasized its hope that Balkan regional stability and integration could allow all countries of the region to ‘take their place in the Euro-Atlantic structures’ (NATO, 2000). With this NATO was in effect saying that there was a direct link between crisis response operations on the one hand and on the other the enlargement of the Alliance, which, like Balkan crisis management, had characterized NATO policy debates through the 1990s. If both served to support a Euro-Atlantic order, NATO would be in a very good position.

In hindsight we know that this assumption had inherent limits and that the balancing act between Alliance resolve and security governance involved some fundamental questions regarding political leadership. A security community of multiple actors would always be at risk of lacking leadership, simply because collective action is hard to engender. Appeals to UNSC leadership were—and continue to be—popular, but they also grant veto-power to Russia and China, which for NATO is a troublesome principle to accept: NATO can accept case-by-case partnership with the UNSC, just as NATO can maintain its respect for the institution of international law, but the Alliance was never ready to grant Russia a vote in its political decisions, and crisis response operations were not going
to change that. So, the question lingered: who could and should rightfully take leadership of security governance missions? NATO’s unique political-military capabilities exacerbated difficulties because these granted NATO a leadership role that others might contest and which NATO allies, in the bigger scheme of things, might not desire. A related question was therefore: how could NATO uphold its resolve, its ability to issue credible threats in crisis management situations, and yet be just a cog in the wheel of a crisis management where political leadership might be organized elsewhere, or might be diffused into a network of actors?

NATO provided some of the answers in regard to its own organization. Specifically, it continued deepening its Partnerships for Peace to give them operational edge, offering partners access to a Political-Military Framework of enhanced cooperation and therefore also access to the Force Generation mechanism that NATO had developed through the 1990s to mobilize forces for crisis response operations. Moreover, NATO refined its own planning and decision-making procedures and by 2005 rationalized it into a coherent Crisis Response System (CRS) that subsequently has been subject to yearly reviews and refinement. NATO’s CRS envisages a six-phased process:

- Phase 1: indications and early warnings
- Phase 2: strategic assessment of implications for NATO security
- Phase 3: development of potential response options
- Phase 4: planning (concept of operations)
- Phase 5: execution (operation)
- Phase 6: transition and termination

Critically, in every phase NATO’s decision-making body, the North Atlantic Council, makes the key decisions that move the process forward. ‘Political control is paramount’, as a former NATO official notes (Nick Williams, 2018, p. 9), and with this he emphasizes political control with military affairs and strategy—a classic concern in democratic institutions.

However, the wider question of political control inside new wars and conflicts and therefore security governance remained. By the time NATO adopted its CRS, the focus in the international community had moved from Kosovo to Afghanistan and also Iraq. NATO had in the spring of 2003 taken collective command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, offering political relief from the allied disputes provoked by the Iraq war and also organizational relief for the lead nations that hitherto had managed ISAF. NATO had a Force Generation system that could do some of the heavy lifting of putting together a security force for the Kabul area where ISAF was located, and NATO had established partnerships and a Political-Military Framework for involving them in operations. With ISAF, though, NATO got caught up in a crisis management operation whose size and complexity NATO was unprepared for and which therefore brought questions of ownership and leadership to a climax. NATO did not seek out ownership of the Afghan campaign broadly speaking: it was meant to be an international community effort along the lines of the stabilization of Kosovo from June 1999—UN mandated and with common efforts by mutually reinforcing institutions. However, as ISAF grew, and as the campaign gained a prominent military edge, NATO de facto gained ownership of the campaign and had to define its own exit from it.
During phase 3 of NATO’s CRS, when the Alliance was considering options for ISAF beyond the policing mission in Kabul, NATO’s political level, the NAC, received military advice in the form of options for consideration. This took place in September-October 2003. Based on background interviews conducted by the author, we know that the NAC decided to navigate two extreme options (of either focusing solely on Kabul or extending the Kabul model to the entire country): one did not meet political expectations; the other outmatched them and was too costly. The NAC then had the options of building up in Kabul and expand ISAF’s presence around the country for occasional events, such as elections, or to pursue a so-called functional expansion (with so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams, PRT) and develop its permanent footprint around the country. In hindsight one is led to wonder whether the flexible option would have granted NATO and ISAF better—more limited and focused—terms of engagement, but functional expansion and PRTs aligned both with US stabilization thinking (notably for Iraq) and a wider desire to invest in humanitarian relief and development, and at the time the political expectation was that the security situation in Afghanistan was manageable and therefore amenable to development work. Functional expansion, therefore, became the NAC option.

The NAC decision was not a maximalist decision—the NAC could have gone for the bigger ‘extend Kabul’ option. Still, its PRT decision was politically ambitious and as such, once the security situation refused to improve, dovetailed not only with the aforementioned development vision but also the ‘go in hard’ approach that the Balkans seemingly had taught seasoned practitioners (Ashdown, 2007). Critically, it brought NATO to the forefront of the difficult task of running ‘empire lite’ operations wherein military power, money, and humanitarian motives defy easy coordination (Ignatieff, 2003) and where, as a consequence, leadership tends to digress into narrow ownership.

**Losing the Balance: NATO’s Ownership of Afghanistan, 2006-2014**

NATO’s crisis response system had in a sense withstood the stress test of new wars. By placing political decision-making at the front end of every planning step, NATO had drawn the lesson from Kosovo that crisis response operations take place at the confluence of high principles and realpolitik, and that NATO needed political guidance to navigate it. If NATO let high humanitarian principles drive its strategy, the Alliance would become the handmaiden of cosmopolitan governance and be led into confrontation with Russia and China. Inversely, if NATO bowed to Russian and Chinese concerns, the Alliance would weaken the liberal and humanitarian values it represented.

The concern with political navigation also helped NATO in the War on Terror unleashed in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. If the US decision to let NATO sit on the sidelines of the early phase of the Afghan campaign, in spite of the Alliance’s invocation of its collective defense clause, Article V, and if the Iraq war of March 2003 divided the allies to the point where Nicolas Burns, the US ambassador to NATO, labeled it a near-death experience, then NATO needed an opportunity to rebound. NATO’s political investment in the stabilization force in Afghanistan, ISAF, fit the bill. It brought the United States back into NATO, as one analyst noted, and once again gave collective meaning to NATO crisis response operations (Webber, 2009).
However, it also meant that NATO was now the most visible driver of the stabilization mission in the country. The UN Afghanistan mission (UNAMA) alongside bilateral aid efforts was in charge of coordinating development and governance efforts, and NATO and ISAF’s remit remained security, but, as the security situation deteriorated, ISAF grew more important. The mission thus grew on NATO and the international community in a way that Kosovo did not prepare them for: the key momentum in terms of institutional learning after Kosovo had for NATO been the Euro-Atlantic security architecture—defined by the sum total of NATO’s security contribution to crisis management operations but also NATO enlargement, NATO-EU cooperation and, relatedly, partnership policy, including with Russia, and then a host of issues related to Weapons of Mass Destruction, missile defense, terrorist threats (mainly to NATO forces and installations), and arms control. The 1999 Strategic Concept defined this agenda and ensuing staff work at the headquarters. Where Afghanistan challenged this institutional mindset was in relation to the sequencing of security, governance, and development: it would not be possible to go in hard and then draw down; to the contrary, efforts had to be comprehensive, simultaneous, and, given Taliban resistance, escalatory. The accumulated effect on NATO was upsetting, necessitating first the renewal of the Alliance’s Strategic Concept (Kamp, 2009) and then a confrontation with the underlying question of whether NATO could continue its crisis management engagement as a ‘valuable node in a global security network’ (Williams, 2011, p. 139) or rather was at risk of losing its coherence in the shift from collective defense to collective security action (Rynning, 2012).

As a matter of fact, NATO went deep into the political ambitions involved in the mission following its expansion of ISAF. The initial agreement behind international stabilization efforts, the 2001 Bonn Agreement, was focused on interim efforts to set up Afghan authorities and supporting these. By 2005 Afghanistan had both a constitution and newly elected president and parliament, and so at the time when NATO was rolling out ‘big ISAF’ the question arose: what should Afghanistan and the international community do next?

The answer was to go big in all the terms laid out by the conclusions of the international Afghanistan conference held in London in 2006—involving democratic governance, justice reform and the protection of human rights, high rates of sustainable economic growth, social development, counter-narcotics, zero tolerance of corruption, and genuine security (London Conference on Afghanistan, 2006). This Afghanistan Compact was eminently aligned with the liberal and humanitarian principles that also drove the Kosovo intervention. However, and as mentioned, the challenges inherent in the mission were of a different order of magnitude. Where the primary political difficulty in Kosovo had been Russia’s opposition to the intervention, it was now NATO’s own commitment to the burden involved in the mission. It led NATO to search for various principled and pragmatic ways in which it could share the burden inside an international community, as we are about to see, but still the cumulative result was a campaign that grew on and finally overwhelmed NATO. The rescue for NATO was not the international community but the United States which, early in the Obama presidency, surged its Afghan campaign—and then drew down. As NATO followed in these US footsteps, it was confronted with the troubled legacy of principled ambitions and limited resources. Before we get to this point, though, we should trace how NATO got in deep in Afghanistan.
'The allies realized that a military solution does not exist’, NATO’s Secretary General (2004-2009), Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, outlined in response to a question regarding NATO’s commitment in 2005-2008 to a Comprehensive Approach policy (interview with author, February 1, 2010), but the problem was that ‘NATO cannot steer the Comprehensive Approach process’. That leadership belongs to the UN, de Hoop Scheffer continued, and ‘I objected to having NATO take responsibility of things it cannot control’. The logical alternative was therefore to push for UN leadership and carve out a distinct NATO role within the international community effort. The problem with this push was that it was NATO-led, not UN-led, and that there was significant resistance within the UN system to playing along NATO’s tune. In part this concerned Russia and China, which did not want to upload responsibility for the campaign to the UN Security Council more than was necessary, which is also to say that they were content to let NATO struggle on the Afghan ground (see also Tracey German’s article in this special issue). In part this concerned the wider UN humanitarian and development community, which covers a wide range of UN organizations and agencies invested in many parts of the world. This is the ‘blue’ UN that depicts itself in opposition to the ‘black’ UN—the political part of the UN. There was no appetite in this community for prioritizing the Afghan mission, which implied cooperating closely not only with—from its perspective—‘black’ UN but also the ultimately ‘black’ organization, NATO, and which would also imply a shift of resources from other crisis areas to Afghanistan.

Under these conditions there was no chance of invigorating whatever ‘blue’ legacy NATO might have had from the Kosovo operation (i.e., rescuing people) to negotiate a wide-ranging UN-NATO agreement on Comprehensive Approach policy. Instead, in what must be considered a heroic feat of secretary-general leadership, NATO’s Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and the UN’s Ban Ki-Moon managed to come to an agreement on secretariat cooperation contained in the September 2008 Joint Declaration on UN/NATO Secretariat Cooperation (Scheffer and Ki-Moon, 2008). Yet this came late in the Afghan game, and the real need for policy could be defined in 2006 at the moment when ISAF’s full expansion was being completed and in the wake of the London Conference’s renewal of the Bonn process. In November 2006 NATO sought to kick off policy initiative at its Riga summit when it invited all leading donors to Afghanistan—notably UN agencies (including the World Bank and many others) and the EU—to participate in the summit and visibly sought a change of strategy.

In line with de Hoop Scheffer’s concern that NATO should not take responsibility for things it cannot control, the NATO Riga communiqué defines the Afghan mission as NATO’s ‘key priority’ but goes on to state that ‘NATO will play its full role, but cannot assume the entire burden’ (NATO, 2006). In fact, NATO had in-house been working on a policy of shared burdens—the Comprehensive Approach—since its informal defense ministerial meeting in September 2005 and Riga was the occasion to move to the next stage of policy articulation and implementation. The end point came at the April 2008 Bucharest summit—which like Riga occurred in a big tent format with partners present—where NATO adopted both a generic Comprehensive Approach policy (so-called Action Plan) and a more tailored plan for ISAF (so-called Comprehensive Strategic Political-Military Plan, CSPMP). Revealingly, though, while the CSPMP highlighted NATO-partner cooperation, NATO could not circulate its new comprehensive and strategic plan to these partners on account of Turkish opposition, which lasted into the fall of 2008.
Turkey's reticence related to partner cooperation and by implication to the potentially deepening of ties between NATO and the EU, a traditional sore point for Turkish diplomacy. To the extent that NATO would be part of a wider but vaguely defined international community, it remained possible that NATO would be contributing to largely EU-led missions, or at least would be asked to coordinate closely with the EU, which was a Turkish red line. Through the internal NATO negotiations, Turkey thus sought to emphasize that the onus of reform also applied to partners such as the EU, and not merely NATO, and moreover that NATO and the EU already had a ready-to-go framework for operational cooperation, the Berlin Plus framework. Turkey's position naturally provoked concern among EU-friendly allies who found the Berlin Plus framework insufficiently narrow—as it implied NATO's politico-military leadership.

Turkey's well-known position on NATO-EU relations was not the only focal point of the CA negotiations inside NATO in the years 2006-2008. Another concerned the balance of initiative between NATO and non-military international organizations: if the latter for some reason did not take the initiative on civilian development and governance programs, should NATO seek it? The United States was among the group of allies arguing for a 'pragmatic' approach whereby NATO should acquire a limited civilian planning capacity that could be plugged into the military chain of command and enable NATO to kick start some civilian programs in a crisis area. The logic hereof was that, if NATO was engaged in the crisis in the first place, then it made little sense to deny the Alliance the means necessary to accomplish its objectives. Or, put differently, outside actors—with a leading voice in other international organizations—should not be able to deny these means to NATO.

The inverse position was variously emphasized by allies such as France, Belgium, Germany, or Norway with either a strong tradition of peacekeeping and development engagement, a business best separated from the use of force, they would argue, or a tradition for wanting to carve out a role for the EU in the softer area of crisis management. To these allies, a 'pragmatic' build-up of NATO civilian capacities would put humanitarian and development workers in the field at risk because NATO adversaries would fail to distinguish them from the Alliance's troops, and it would in the long run do more harm than good to the set of inter-organizational relations that lay at the heart of the Comprehensive Approach mindset.

There was plenty in these issues to make for a rerun of the principled or high-minded architectural debates of the 1990s that centered on the institutional primacy of either the EU or NATO. The allies could not have been unaware hereof but perhaps also needed to square the new policy initiative—the Riga-initiated process on CA policy—with some overarching considerations. In the course of 2007, the negotiations gradually zoomed in on supposedly more manageable issues related to the Action Plan that the Alliance would need alongside a framework policy. However, the devil hides in details, and mere questions such as whether NATO’s new practice from Afghanistan of deploying a civilian Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) to report directly back to the Secretary General, and thus not via the military chain of command, should be continued as a general NATO policy proved contentious. A permanent SCR capacity would, after all, amount to a first step in the build-up of civilian capacities. Moreover, even apparently anodyne questions of NATO control of military operations gained political significance: to some allies NATO control was stating the obvious (the reader will recall the logic of political control from the Crisis Response
System); to others it was tantamount to suggesting that NATO’s political control of the Afghan mission hitherto had been insufficient—that the most engaged allies had taken this control into their own hands.

In the fall of 2007, the plot thickened. The Bucharest summit was set to take place in April 2008, and the United States was visibly impatient with the lack of a strategic campaign plan for the Afghanistan mission. NATO and ISAF had rolled out into most provinces of Afghanistan on the assumption that the Bonn agreement of 2001 and the London summit conclusions of 2006 would provide guidance, but the intensified insurgency had surprised them, and NATO and ISAF had no shared framework for responding. Even at the military level the campaign was fragmenting into disparate national campaigns. Getting the Alliance to agree on CA policy and CA strategy was critical, therefore. Given the sense that NATO’s own campaign was adrift, NATO decided in the fall to make a CA ‘strategy’ a deliverable for the Bucharest summit—meaning the allies committed to agreeing—and to shift the emphasis from the broad CA idea of interlocking institutions to the more restrained idea of NATO’s own contribution to the CA framework.

We have taken note so far of two difficulties in the NATO partnership environment: the wider role of the EU and the UN, respectively. A third factor made its appearance at this crucial stage of the negotiations, namely the failure of a US-led push to create a ‘super-envoy’ position for the coordination of all international civilian efforts in Afghanistan (Rynning, 2012, pp. 138–141). The designated super-envoy was Paddy Ashdown, previously known as the ‘viceroy’ of Bosnia, who was briefed in late 2007 on the job, accepted it, and then met with Afghan President Karzai in January 2008 to reach agreement. Karzai backed out, though, and the deal fell through: an international super-envoy was too powerful for Karzai’s liking, who already faced a formidable military partner in ISAF/NATO, and then it did not matter that the super-envoy position would have spearheaded a wider international agreement on how to get CA policy off the ground. It was yet another setback for the big CA ambition.

The principal organizations—NATO and the UN—thus had to settle for improving their own ways and means in the hope that the outcome would make collective sense. As noted, NATO ended up agreeing to both an overarching CA policy and then a CA strategy for Afghanistan but for months thereafter could not share these documents with partners on the ground because of Turkish reservations. The UN strengthened UNAMA’s coordinating mandate (in Security Council Resolution 1806), and the UN secretariat did agree to formalizing cooperation with the NATO secretariat, as we saw. However, and in spite of the eloquent ‘ISAF Strategic vision’ published at the NATO summit, developments left little doubt that the initiative lacked energy in a number of respects (ISAF, 2008). The two principal agents on the ground, ISAF commander General McKiernan and UNAMA head Kai Eide did not coordinate well, and NATO allies remained in doubt as to how far they wanted their military mission to go in the direction of training and assistance, and thus the campaign remained fraught with deficits of coordinated purpose and command.

NATO’s rescue was American and more specifically the election of a US president, Barack Obama, who put the ‘good war’ in Afghanistan front and center of his strategic policy. In the course of 2009, in a somewhat tumultuous decision-making process, President Obama decided to ‘surge’ all dimensions of the campaign—in terms of security, development, and governance assistance
An answer had thus been provided to the conundrum at the heart of the Comprehensive Approach, namely how to get real on-the-ground leadership and coordination. US leadership was the answer for now, but it effectively Americanized NATO strategy and highlighted the pertinence of the question of how NATO as a whole could gain political control of crisis management campaigns; or put differently, how NATO-Europe could get to agreement on its contribution to crisis management policy at a time when the United States was urging them, as part of its concerted effort to multilateralize the US effort, to step up their contributions.

The broader issue of tying NATO to US strategy is dealt with in James Sperling’s contribution to this special issue, and here we should focus on the challenge posed by the Americanization of NATO strategy in 2009-2010. NATO’s response came in the 2010 Strategic Concept (NATO, 2010). It placed ‘Security through Crisis Management’ on par with collective defense, which was inconceivable before the Afghan mission (thus, during the Kosovo intervention, NATO was thinking about how to define crisis management as secondary to collective defense; it did not contemplate placing these tasks on par). It opened for NATO’s engagement in crisis management ‘before, during, and after’ crises, which was an expansive or broad ambition, but then circumscribed NATO’s role by delineating how NATO should merely ‘contribute’ to broader stabilization efforts and how this entailed a carefully defined ‘appropriate but modest civilian crisis management capability to interface more effectively with civilian partners’.

By 2010, NATO had thus reached consensus on a crisis management role that was more advanced than that defined in the wake of the Kosovo intervention and which clearly integrated NATO into a network of cooperative organizational relationships. The contrast to the reality on the Afghan ground was unmistakable, though: here the United States and its close allies and partners were in the lead, and as NATO as a whole had accepted the lead, the Alliance had gained ownership of the campaign. The Alliance had gained a Comprehensive Approach policy but, in spite of all its good intentions, was left holding the baby. A considerable number of the contentious issues inherent in crisis management policy were thus unresolved, notably the questions of how narrowly or broadly political objectives should be defined and how an effective command-and-control framework could be organized. The ramifications of unsolved problems were visible in the Libya air war that unfolded in 2011 (see the article by David Brown in this special issue; also Rynning, 2013), and they lingered as NATO moved through the Obama Afghan-surge and drawdown, the folding of ISAF by 2014 and into a new era of regional defense and deterrence.

Crisis Management Hangover, 2014-2019

NATO has in major ways returned to regional defense and deterrence following the simultaneous folding of ISAF and Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. NATO’s Wales summit of September 2014 offered a number of measures of assurance (enhanced rotational presence on the territory of exposed allies) and adaptation (a reinforced NATO Reaction Force (NRF)). Two years later, at the Warsaw summit of July 2016, NATO bolstered its frontline presence by establishing an Enhanced Forward Presence (multinational battalion sized contingents) in the three Baltic states and Poland along with a more flexible format of Enhanced Tailored Presence in the Black Sea region. Moreover, to enable the reinforcement of frontline troops NATO has begun an ‘enablement’ program to reinforce logistics and national infrastructure, capped the effort with
both a Joint Support and Enabling Command, being set up in Ulm in southern Germany, and a resurrected Atlantic Command located in the United States. To actually move its forces East, NATO has Graduated Response Plans (GRPs) that foresee how a layered force structure of high readiness and follow-on forces can be mobilized for regional defense. These GRPs are not as elaborate and drilled as the collective defense plans of the Cold War, but they are clearly a step beyond the loose contingency planning associated with crisis management. Therefore, where NATO still has to improvise—force generate from scratch—when it comes to crisis management operations, it is more ready to go in matters of collective defense.

The idea that this renewed regional defense and deterrence posture would henceforth define the Alliance is tempting, considering all the evidence hereof, but it is also wrong, as NATO’s Secretary General Stoltenberg argued in 2016. NATO was privileged to be able to focus on collective defense during the Alliance’s ‘first age’, the Cold War, and then privileged to be able to focus on crisis management operations in the post-Cold War years, but today this privilege of exclusive attention has gone and the Alliance ‘must do both [collective defense and crisis management] at the same time’ (Stoltenberg, 2016). In a way Stoltenberg’s neat phases were deceptive because, as we saw, NATO recognized already in the 2010 Strategic Concept that it needed to do several things at the same time—specifically, collective defense, crisis management and cooperative security. Yet there was truth to the claim that the need for balanced flexibility between these policy areas was more acute in the post-ISAF years, considering not least the concomitant rise of Russian revisionism and the Islamic State caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

At the Warsaw summit, therefore, NATO began talking of a ‘360 degree’ approach to its newfound framework policy of ‘projecting stability’ (NATO, 2016). Projecting Stability encompasses both East and South in the Alliance’s posture and thus along the traditional flanks of, respectively, collective defense and crisis management. Its basic premise is that stable neighbors make for NATO security. As a policy framework, it harks back to the 1990s when security interdependence likewise was on the agenda: like its predecessor policies, Projecting Stability is focused on (fragile) states and NATO’s ability to reach out to them via partnership programs. However, Projecting Stability is less ‘architectural’ in its ambition—less ambitious in terms of designing Euro-Atlantic security order, more global in scope and more attuned to pragmatic opportunities for security cooperation. Thus, where policy in the 1990s had democratic enlargement as a leitmotif, Projecting Stability eschews high-minded principles in favor of tailored cooperation (Berti and Díaz-Plaja, 2018).

Three broad observations follow with regard to NATO’s crisis management ambition. The first is that the Alliance has succeeded in translating its Kosovo and Afghan policy legacies into a new vocabulary. The Comprehensive Approach emerged as the key framework of thinking in reaction to Kosovo and the early Afghan campaign, reflective of a wider ambition to shift from an exclusive focus on national security to a broader one inclusive of human security, and to do so in close cooperation with partner organizations. NATO’s Comprehensive Approach Action Plan (CAAP) of 2008 defined the culmination point of this new thinking. However, these days CAAP is relegated to NATO filing cabinets: the international staff at NATO headquarters no longer speak CAAP language but has converted to a Projecting Stability vocabulary indicative of an engagement that is more limited operationally (fewer boots on the ground) but wider in terms of geography and diplomatic ambition (to prevent crises rather than managing them).
One driver of this change of vocabulary is the International Staff itself because, as one staffer remarked to the author (background interview, February 2017), staffers are socialized into revising policy concepts in order to advance consensus among the political principals. Another driver was by implication the eroding CA consensus among allies. ISAF had led to CA fatigue, which was bad enough, but the turn to regional defense and deterrence threatened to open a divide between allies demanding continuously reinforced collective defense measures to counter Russia and allies demanding crisis management engagement to manage unrest and radicalism along the southern flank. As observers of NATO know well, the number one priority of the allies has always been to avoid permanent sub-divisions of the Alliance, as this would erode the collective defense commitment and offer outsiders such as Russia opportunities to divide-and-rule. The United States thus tabled a food-for-thought paper outlining the contours of the Projecting Stability policy prior to the 2014 Wales summit. Later, when the concern among southern allies that NATO as a whole was giving exclusive attention to Russia had amplified, the International Staff and the Secretary General were able to pick up the new language of comprehensiveness—360 degrees and the projection of stability—and develop policy for political approval.

The second observation flows from here: policy concepts may serve to restore a modicum of political consensus, but this does not mean that national interests are substantially aligned. The crisis in Iraq and Syria is a case in point. The Islamic State caliphate announced in 2014 was the culmination of a war that had come to engulf the Syrian regime, threaten the Iraqi regime, pitch large segments of Syrian and Iraqi society against each other and cause the largest refugee flow of modern times. The refugee flow moved through Turkey, a NATO ally, and reached the European Union where it fed nationalist grievances against multinational institutions—mainly the EU itself—and multinational cooperation. The United States organized in 2014 a coalition—the Global Coalition—to strike against Islamic State, but, as the effort involved cooperation with Kurdish forces, de facto empowering these, it exacerbated Turkish-American differences. In short, as war and radicalism raged at its doorstep, the Alliance failed to establish a crisis management policy that could protect not only its frontiers but, importantly, the political centers at home, in the capitals, that stabilize strategic relationships within the Alliance.

NATO’s recent track record in terms of doing things along the southern flank is thus not impressive. In fact, Afghanistan remains NATO’s most visible crisis management footprint, as its Resolute Support Mission to ‘train-the-trainers’ through 2018 involved 17,000 troops from 39 NATO and partner states. How to evaluate NATO’s other minor engagements in the region is the question. From the perspective of the Alliance as a whole it is a small victory that it has managed to sow seeds of renewed political consensus: NATO agreed to so-called Defense Capability Building programs for Jordan and Iraq in the course of 2014-2015 (upon request from these countries), which involve a range of train-the-trainer activities (notably for counter-improvised explosive devices and demining) and security sector reform (good governance for the defense sector). NATO also managed to move beyond French and German concerns that NATO support for the Global Coalition could pull NATO into a wider crisis management role for which it was not prepared and thus NATO was able in May 2017 to offer to share certain surveillance data with Global Coalition countries (in many ways a French-German gesture to President Trump on the occasion of his first visit to NATO headquarters). In addition, NATO has moved to set up a
‘Strategic Direction South-Hub’ in Naples, Italy, to enhance strategic awareness and shape NATO decision-making. Finally, NATO runs a flexible maritime operation in the Mediterranean, Operation Sea Guardian, and a reconnaissance and monitoring mission in the Aegean. Each of these measures is limited, but collectively they form a ‘Projecting Stability’ foundation without which staff and country representatives would have a much harder time building consensus.

Still, and from the perspective of the heyday of big crisis management ambitions analyzed in the preceding section, it is also clear that NATO is limping through crisis management challenges. As argued by Kevin Koehler, Projecting Stability serves various political purposes within the Alliance, all related to cohesion, but ‘the concept has thus far not been translated into a coherent policy’ and activities under the concept ‘have therefore been rather haphazard’ (Koehler, 2018, p. 42). According to Jean-Loup Saaman’s penetrating assessment of the Strategic Direction South-Hub, it was the outcome of considerable organizational contestation and limited political guidance (Samaan, 2018). And this is then the third observation: that a good deal of conceptual work remains ahead of the Alliance if it is to move its crisis management ambition into a new era. Conceptual work refers to the basic building blocks of the policy—projection and stability—and to the sorting out of what these mean and how the Alliance can go about pursuing them.

This will be difficult, if only because crisis management contexts are complicated and the two concepts are slippery, but NATO at least has the advantage of having shed some of its grander ambitions that led it to have ownership of campaigns for which it was unprepared. NATO remains committed to cooperative security in a network of actors, from the UN and the EU to a range of country partners. In Afghanistan, this approach led to inflated ambition or the highest common denominator, poor command-and-control organization and eventually NATO ownership: however, NATO seems to have learned a lesson in this regard. Projecting Stability is pragmatic, problem-oriented and demand-driven. This gives NATO leverage. Iraq, Jordan, Georgia, Moldova and Tunisia—the countries currently involved in NATO’s DCB policy—must convince NATO they are serious if they are to attract NATO’s engagement and investment.

Of course, the question is why such countries should seek NATO’s engagement in the first place. The answer to this question will not be found inside the Projecting Stability toolbox, which is full of policy tools already alluded to: Defense Capability Building, Security Forces Assistance and Security Sector Reform. The answer is inherently political and will in particular emerge from the political attractiveness of NATO to the partner, which again has to do with the strategic vision of NATO and how it relates to the partner (Koehler, 2018). NATO has so far sidelined, if not discarded, the grandiose promoting-democracy vision that grew in size after the Kosovo intervention and which lent itself so well to Comprehensive Approach thinking in the wider international community. Partners thus know that NATO is not out to ‘project democracy’. Yet, for this very reason, the question of what NATO then wants imposes itself. It requires some hard thinking on what the Euro-Atlantic area represents in an age of globalized cooperation and competition and, by implication, what NATO can offer its partners that alternative powers cannot.

Conclusion
NATO’s Operation Allied Force in Kosovo in 1999 was a step in a process that had begun earlier, with the onset of political crises along the old Cold War frontier in Europe and the demand for effective organizations to manage these. NATO stepped into this complex of crisis management tasks at first timidly, on account of internal political differences, and then more boldly. Kosovo signifies the shift to bold approaches more than NATO’s enablement of the Bosnian peace agreement of 1995 because its 1999 intervention was markedly stronger and more sustained (for 78 days), and it was undertaken in spite of Russian and Chinese objections. In Kosovo, NATO’s crisis management ambition came of age.

The clear alignment of NATO with the cosmopolitan ambition to save strangers confronted NATO with two difficult questions: first, whether it should define its own narrow but clear purpose in such operations, or rather act in global or cosmopolitan interests; and second, whether it should apply military power to impose its will on an opponent, or rather lend its military force to a broader process of international conflict management. If NATO went with its own purpose and applied military power to coerce an opponent, it would largely stay within its collective defense remit. However, the cosmopolitan logic, along with the complexity of post-Cold War crisis, pulled NATO in the opposite direction—toward broad and comprehensive crisis management efforts where NATO would be perhaps the first responder but nonetheless just one among several responders acting to uphold global norms. At the end of this movement lay collective security, a principle historically associated with the UN, not NATO.

NATO’s move in the direction of collective security action was gradual, as we saw in the first section of this article. Kosovo lessons were multiple and therefore contested. NATO’s entry into the Afghan campaign in 2003 offered renewed direction, but NATO allies also secured—via the Alliance’s Crisis Response System—that every step of NATO’s involvement in such affairs would have to be paved by a political decision inside the Alliance. Still, as we saw in section two, the ambition grew and overwhelmed the political brakes built into the response system. The logic of propping up the institutions of the new Afghanistan, which had been stood up by 2005, was strong and, though NATO tried to insist that it would be in the security lead only, the timidity of other efforts along with political differences in the wider UN community effectively turned NATO into the campaign anchor. In spite of NATO’s theory of ‘unity of effort’, NATO was left holding the baby. The solution turned out to be not comprehensive action, which NATO turned into a doctrine, but a US-led surge.

Post-ISAF NATO has sought to scale its crisis management ambition back to manageable levels. It has shifted its priority, relatively speaking, from principled interventions to promote democracy or similar values such as human security and development to more pragmatic and often demand-driven opportunities for lesser and more practical stabilization efforts. NATO has thus re-emphasized political interest over cosmopolitan principle, but its move back toward its origins of North Atlantic Council supremacy, be it for collective defense or crisis management operations today, ran into the reality of poorly aligned internal political interests. NATO thus remained on the sidelines as civil war raged in Syria and Iraq and unleashed refugee flows that destabilized core strategic relationships within the Alliance. NATO is trying to bounce back with new ideas of ‘projecting stability’ and ‘360 degree’ security, but these remain works in progress.
Kosovo thus came to define the starting point of a rise in NATO crisis management ambitions that crested after about a decade and then went into decline. Though NATO today struggles to give substance to new policy concepts, the Alliance is in a way in a better place today than at the height of the crisis management ambition. Back then, in Afghanistan, NATO got profoundly entangled with collective security principles that it could not manage; at the present, its policy concepts lack political depth in terms of allied buy-in but the potential hereof is promising in so far as the concepts are drawn from the collective defense origins of the Alliance.

Independent International Commission on Kosovo et al. (2000) *The Kosovo report: Conflict, international


