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Conflict in Kosovo: NATO and the United States in a Convenient Partnership

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 1999 intervention in Kosovo responded to a growing ethnic conflict in the region. The intervention began as Operation Allied Force (OAF) on March 23, 1999, and lasted until June 10, 1999 when Slobodan Milosevic consented to a United Nations (UN) Resolution that mandated a NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo. OAF's goals were to "halt and reverse" the "humanitarian catastrophe" perpetuated by Milosevic-led Yugoslav and Serb forces, compelling the expulsion of Albanian Kosovars (NATO, 2012). NATO agreed to an extensive air campaign to accomplish its goals in the region, but abstained from sending in ground troops. This decision was reached like all other NATO decisions—by a full consensus of member states. To discern the dynamics behind NATO's intervention in Kosovo, this paper will examine three theories. Constructivism highlights NATO's role in shifting state preferences to internalize the organization's norms, and to participate in the intervention in defense of those norms. Neoliberal institutionalism highlights how NATO institutionally facilitated the cooperation of all member states, and discouraged their defection from the intervention. Finally, the theory that views International Organizations (IOs) as Hegemonic Tools highlights the role of the United States (U.S.) in NATO, and the U.S.' unique interests in this intervention.

Building upon the assumptions of these three theories, this paper will argue that viewing IOs as hegemonic tools provides a better understanding of the dynamics of a security organization with the U.S. as a member than constructivism or neoliberal institutionalism. This paper will further argue that this theory is most persuasive for highlighting the dynamics of NATO's intervention in Kosovo because of the U.S.' interest in advancing its power in Eastern Europe following the end of the Cold War. Ultimately, NATO was a tool for the U.S. to maintain its military dominance, deflect blame, and reinforce the legitimacy of its power, even in the absence of an initial UN mandate.

Theoretical Background: The Dynamics of Intergovernmental Organizations

Constructivism

For constructivists, the international system is anarchic; but rather than anarchy pushing states to act in a self-interested manner, states act in accordance with their socially constructed preferences and identities (Hurd 2008, 299). Central to the construction of these identities and state preferences are a state's internal social influences, rather than simply its *material* interests (Hurd 2008, 303). Moreover, external "intersubjective" and "institutionalized" ideas inform the state about the other actors and states in the international system, thus further influencing its behavior. These ideas are intersubjective because multiple actors acknowledge their existence, and they are institutionalized because this acknowledgement is reinforced through institutions (Hurd 2008, 304). IOs are therefore central to the formation of intersubjective and institutionalized ideas because they provide a forum in which these concepts get discussed (Coleman 2012a). Specifically, smaller IOs act as a forum in which persuasion takes place, whereas larger IOs socially influence state preferences by naming and shaming states that do not conform to the overarching norms of an organization (Johnston 2001, 494).

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When applied to NATO's intervention in Kosovo, constructivism highlights how NATO, as a collection of states, aligned its member states' preferences in favor of the intervention. Since NATO is a small organization, it could have acted as a tool of "persuasion," where member states internalized the organization's "normative core" (Johnston 2001, 499). NATO's "intersubjective" power of persuading states to internalize its norms comes from its ability to affirm appropriate interpretations of actions in the world, and to persuade states about how they should act (Gheciu 2007, 175). NATO would therefore have the institutional power, from its intersubjective decision-making structure, to classify the disaster in Kosovo as humanitarian. Since member states would have internalized NATO's normative core, they would be willing to intervene in Kosovo in defense of those norms and principles. Constructivism therefore highlights how NATO framed the crisis in Kosovo, and illustrates that the member states' responses and commitments to the intervention illustrated their internalization of NATO's norms and principles.

Neoliberal Institutionalism

This theory assumes that sovereign states in an anarchic world are rational egoists, making cooperation among states difficult, but possible—particularly if states are working toward a mutually beneficial goal (Keohane 1984, 65). Cooperation is difficult among states because one state can never be certain of another's preferences or intended actions. Even if states are working toward mutually beneficial ends, a state will have incentive to defect from contributing toward the outcome if they can free ride on the other states' contributions (Keohane 1984, 69). IOs can facilitate cooperation among states by providing a forum for negotiating a collective agreement (Keohane 1984, 107). IOs can then heighten the incentives for compliance to the agreement by acting as a monitor, and by extending the shadow of the future, so that the states' reputations would be held accountable in future interactions within the organization (Martin 1992, 770).

Neoliberal institutionalism highlights how NATO facilitated cooperation among all member states toward the mutually beneficial outcome of stabilizing Kosovo. The intervention in Kosovo represents a situation that Lisa Martin (1992, 770) calls a "collaboration problem," where the incentives for defecting result in an "immediate pay-off" (i.e. not having to go to war but still getting the protection). Smaller, weaker states would have the strongest incentives to defect because they could still receive military protection from larger states. These smaller states could defect by contributing fewer military troops or material than would be considered commensurate with their abilities. If every state defected, however, there would theoretically be insufficient military power to carry out the intervention. This theory can ultimately highlight if NATO institutionally enforced commitments to burden sharing.

International Organizations as Hegemonic Tools

The assumptions behind this theory are based on neorealism, where, in an anarchic world of self-interested states pursuing their material interests of wealth and power, a hegemon can emerge. A hegemon is a dominant power that has superior material assets in the form of wealth and military strength (Mearsheimer 1995, 12). Even when a hegemon emerges, anarchy persists because the hegemon is not the over-arching enforcer of state relations. IOs can act as a tool for the hegemon to advance its power because they lower the transaction costs of the hegemon cooperating with multiple nations, reduce the need for coercion in coordinating cooperation, and allow for burden sharing and blame deflection (Ikenberry 2003, 50). Of course, the hegemon is forced to give up some of its autonomy to an IO in this framework, but the benefit of such a tool to advance its interests, arguably, outweighs the costs.

This theory highlights best the dynamics of a security organization, where a hegemon is able to lower the transaction costs of coordinating a multinational force, but can remain confident knowing that it has enough military power and allies to work outside of the IO. Regardless of the other states' preferences or willingness to share the burden, this theory stresses on the hegemon's motivations to cooperate through the IO, because without its cooperation, a security IO would be constrained in its military abilities. This theory is thus less useful in highlighting the dynamics of IOs that do not rely on a hegemon's material assets. Ultimately, this paper argues that for any security organization with the United States as a member, viewing IOs as hegemonic tools can best highlight its dynamics. This explanation is superior to its rival constructivist and neoliberal institutionalist explanations because those theories do not consider the value and powerful influence of a hegemon in a security IO.

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NATO's intervention in Kosovo presents a case for testing this theoretical argument, as NATO is a security organization, and, based on its material assets, the U.S. is the largest, most influential power within it. Furthermore, as a security organization that recognizes "equality of status" among member states, NATO renders American power less "arbitrary," because it is technically equal to the power of all other members (Ikenberry 2003, 62). Thus, in this case the U.S. would have been able to advance its interests more legitimately through NATO, and share the burden of responsibility for the intervention's successes, but more importantly for the intervention's potential failures.

Case Study: NATO's Intervention in Kosovo

Constructivism

NATO's intervention in Kosovo provided an opportunity for the organization to affirm its normative values and its role in a world no longer divided by two superpowers. Gheciu has argued that NATO's post-Cold War focus was centered on spreading "Western-based norms" to a wider area of Europe (2007, 171). The ethnic tension and lack of liberal democracy in Kosovo presented a case through which NATO could spread Western norms and reinforce its role. NATO Secretary General, Javier Solana, affirmed in 1999 that, "the crisis in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is a challenge to the values that NATO has successfully defended for the past 50 years: democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law" (NATO, 1999). Constructivism presumes that NATO member states responded to the crisis in defense of these values and that they maintained unwavering support for the intervention because these values had been internalized.

In fact, few NATO members showed evidence of having internalized the organization's norms and they appeared unconcerned with the success of the intervention. The United Kingdom (U.K.) was one of the only states that evidently supported the intervention based on its normative motivations. Former U.K. Prime Minister, Tony Blair, admitted that while there were "big strategic interests that would have justified intervention in their own right," he felt compelled to intervene because "this was the closest thing to racial genocide that [he had] seen in Europe since the Second World War" (PBS, 2012). Furthermore, in an address to the House of Commons, Blair stated that the U.K. would act "until Milosevic chooses the path of peace" (PBS, 2012). Blair's clear justification for the intervention on a humanitarian basis suggests that the U.K. was committed to defending NATO's norms. Its ultimate commitment to the success of the intervention was evident in its willingness to increase the magnitude of the intervention by including ground troops (Erlanger 1999), further reinforcing the belief that the U.K. had internalized NATO's norms.

The broader trend among NATO member states, however, was a lack of commitment to the intervention's normative principles. Despite German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's defense of NATO's intervention on the grounds that it would "prevent a human catastrophe" (Rodman 1999, 45), for example, Germany was apprehensive about prolonging the air campaign in Kosovo (Peters et. al. 2001, 43). Thus, while Germany may have initially had an interest in OAF in defense of NATO's values, it was unwilling to increase troop contributions to heighten the chances of the intervention's success, which suggests that Germany had not internalized NATO's norms. Furthermore, Greece and Italy were similarly unwilling to increase the scope of OAF (Erlanger 1999). Unlike Germany's public defense of the intervention though, Greece and Italy publicly defended their unity to the NATO alliance, while speaking "more critically" about OAF "to reporters from their own countries for domestic consumption." (Apple 1999) If these states had internalized NATO's values, they likely would have publicly supported OAF's justifications and been willing to increase the scope of OAF in defense of its humanitarian values.

Internalizing NATO's norms suggests that a state would have likely willingly increased the magnitude of the intervention in order to defend the validity of those norms. Since some states showed reluctance to guaranteeing the success of the intervention, it is more plausible that their interests in OAF were a product of strategic considerations. Constructivism thus fails to highlight the dynamics behind, at least, Germany, Italy, and Greece's motivations in the intervention, suggesting NATO was an ineffective persuader.

Neoliberal Institutionalism

The conflict in Kosovo represented a regional security problem for the organization. There is an indication that

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member state preferences were aligned in favor of stabilizing Kosovo because OAF was decided upon specifically by the “silence procedure,” which gave states a set amount of time to study a proposal before they consented or objected. Ultimately, no state objected or attached conditions to their support (Gordon 1999). With this evidence of member states’ consent to work toward a mutually beneficial outcome, neoliberal institutionalism can highlight how NATO institutionally facilitated the coordination of OAF and discouraged defection.

In terms of state contributions to the intervention, OAF was successful in securing military contributions from 13 out of 19 members; and while the U.S. shouldered the greatest burden, most contributions were commensurate with state abilities. The only countries that did not contribute in any way were Luxembourg, Iceland, and the three new alliance members, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic (Drozdia 1999), though the lack of contribution from these members was commensurate with their abilities, as they all had small or non-existent militaries. The U.S. contributed 69.1% of the aircraft used in OAF; the other 12 contributing members together contributed only 30.6% of the aircraft (Larson 2003, 15). However, a U.S. Department of Defense Report on the intervention affirms that the “European allies aircraft that were committed to the operation were roughly as large a part of their total inventory of aircraft as was the case for the United States, and they flew a very substantial number of strike missions, facing the same dangers as U.S. aircrews.” The report also details how European alliance members supplied ground forces in Albania and Macedonia, and how their air bases provided essential logistical support (U.S. Department of Defense, 2000). Thus, while the U.S. shouldered a majority of aircraft, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, other member states’ military and material contributions were evidently proportionate to their abilities. At the same time, the intervention clearly would have not been possible without the U.S.’ contributions.

Apart from coordinating the contributions of member states, NATO also institutionally discouraged defection from the intervention in Kosovo by continually seeking decisions by consensus and by increasing the shadow of the future. While achieving consensus among 19 democratic states poses challenges, NATO sought consensus in decision-making throughout OAF in order to appease state preferences. However, despite continued consensus, some members still showed signs of defection. Germany, Italy and Greece, as discussed in the constructivist section, were unwilling to increase the scope of the intervention (Erlanger 1999), which could have led to defection because they were unwilling to change their contributions in order to reach a mutually desired outcome. Interestingly, the United States and the United Kingdom remained willing to increase the magnitude of OAF to guarantee its success, even if it involved going outside of NATO. U.S. National Security Advisor Samuel Berger stated that while, “a consensus in NATO is valuable,” “it is not sine qua non. We want to move with NATO but it can’t prevent us from moving.” (Erlanger 1999) Although NATO ultimately maintained its cohesion and succeeded in forcing Milosevic’s concession, the U.S. evidently did not consider itself bound to the institutional structure.

Finally, as NATO celebrated its 50th anniversary in its Washington Summit, held during the intervention, the organisation arguably increased the shadow of the future through the creation of the new “Strategic Concept.” This document, which was conceived before OAF, asserted that NATO would continue to “enhance the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic Area” (Sperling and Webber 2009, 500). Therefore at this summit, it would have been clear to all member states that NATO would continue to enforce its mandate in the post-Cold War era, assuring states that future interactions with the organization had no foreseeable end. Neoliberal institutionalism highlights that, with this knowledge, states would have been more inclined to maintain their commitment to NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, and thereby lost the incentive to defect, because this would effect their reputation in future interactions with the organization.

Neoliberal institutionalism highlights how NATO facilitated the military cooperation of the alliance members. It also highlights the unique dynamics of the organization’s consensus-based decision-making structure, as well as how the organization may have effectively increased the shadow of the future. However, although unrest in Kosovo represents a regional threat to the peace and stability of NATO’s European alliance members, this theory falls short in accounting for the U.S.’ interest and overwhelming willingness to contribute to the intervention and guarantee its success.

International Organizations as Hegemonic Tools

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By viewing NATO's intervention in Kosovo through this lens, the U.S.' interests in NATO, in the intervention, and its potential gains can be explained. Firstly, in the post-Cold War period, American policymakers viewed NATO as a tool for advancing U.S. influence. In a 1992 draft of the Pentagon Defense Planning Guide, policymakers asserted that it was vital for U.S. foreign policy that the country maintain a "substantial American presence in Europe, and continued cohesion within the Western Alliance [NATO]." (Tyler 1992) Although the intervention in Kosovo occurred ten years after the Cold War ended, it provided the U.S. with a platform to concretely expand its influence and reduce its insecurity in the region, or, as the document states, to maintain its "substantial presence" in the region. Slobodan Milosevic was the head of a socialist regime in Eastern Europe and was exacerbating ethnic tensions in the region (Cohn 2002, 90). The conflict was therefore a means for the U.S. to display its military power and to promote its ideology of liberal democracy and free markets.

With U.S. interests at play in the region, the U.S. military invested heavily in the intervention. The American military base that was central to the intervention, Camp Bondsteel, was the largest American base established since the Vietnam War (Cohn 2002, 81). NATO also presented the U.S. with an interesting command structure, where SACEUR General Wesley Clark was an American, as is customary, commanding both the U.S. and European armies. The U.S. capitalized on this advantage by keeping some of the operation's most "sensitive information" on U.S.-only channels, suggesting that a multinational force was more likely to leak information due to the increased "communication and coordination" among members (Peters et. al. 2001, 40). A 1999 French Ministry of Defense report confirmed this suspicion when it concluded that, "military operations were conducted by the U.S. outside the strict framework of NATO." (Whitney 1999) NATO's command structure thus allowed the U.S. to pursue its unique military goals in the region.

Furthermore, NATO specifically acted as tool for the U.S. to deflect blame. While some burden sharing did occur, as discussed in the neoliberal institutionalism section, NATO allowed the U.S. to deflect blame from OAF's potential shortcomings. From the beginning, U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen was clear that the U.S. was "not prepared to act unilaterally." Ultimately denying that the U.S. was taking a "tougher stand on the Kosovo crisis than its European partners," Cohen affirmed that the intervention was an "issue for NATO to act as an Alliance" (NATO, 1998). Additionally, at the Washington Summit, President Clinton "dramatized" that the air attacks on Kosovo were from a "broad international alliance," even though "Americans [flew] most of the aircraft and [fired] most missiles." (Apple 1999) Similarly, National Security Advisor Samuel Berger pointed out that because the American public's support for the intervention was wavering, it had to be "multilateral." A lack of public support made it "very important" to U.S. interests "that this [intervention] be done as a NATO action" (PBS, 2012). From the language of these prominent U.S. figures, NATO clearly allowed for the U.S. to engage in blame deflection and evade sole responsibility for the adverse outcomes of the intervention.

Finally, NATO arguably legitimized U.S. foreign policy by protecting it from a potential veto in the UN Security Council. The U.S. can exercise relatively unrestrained power through NATO because, unlike the UN, NATO's consensus-based decision-making ensures that no state can fully veto another states' aspirations. The U.S. assured NATO members that a UN mandate was unnecessary because any productive proposal to intervene in the humanitarian crisis would be vetoed by China or Russia (Peters et. al. 2001, 13). Undersecretary Solocombe indeed confirmed after a 1998 meeting of NATO Defence Ministers, that "the U.S. position" was that "a [UN] Resolution is not necessary" (NATO, 1998). A NATO mandate ultimately allowed the U.S. to bypass the UN, as it reflected the consensus of nineteen member states, not simply the preferences of the U.S.

This argument however does not highlight the dynamics behind the motivations of some of NATO's other member-states for the intervention. It also does not explicitly account for the continued cooperation of the members throughout the duration of the intervention. Still, this argument is most persuasive in explaining the dynamics of NATO as a security organization, because these other states could have been compelled to act with the hegemon. Kosovo indeed represented a *regional* threat to the European states of NATO and, thus, it would have been reasonable for them to bind themselves to the hegemon's power. As the U.S.' military contributions illustrate further, European states would have lacked the military capacity to stabilize Kosovo on their own. Thus, rather than its rival constructivist and neoliberal institutionalist explanations, this argument is most persuasive because it highlights the more nuanced dynamics of the U.S.' role in the intervention.

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Conclusions: Future Research

This paper has argued that studying IOs as hegemonic tools provides the most persuasive description of the dynamics of a security organization with the U.S. as a member. To test this theoretical argument, this paper examined the case of NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo. The analysis of this case suggests that NATO acted as a tool for the U.S. to spread its influence in Eastern Europe after the Cold War. Through the organization's command structure, the U.S. was able to dominate military control of the intervention. The use of a multinational force also allowed the U.S. to share the burden of the intervention. Finally, NATO's legitimacy as an organization rendered U.S. power less arbitrary in the absence of a UN Mandate. Ultimately, this theoretical argument can account for the largest power in NATO having motivations for an intervention in Kosovo over and above protecting humanitarian interests and stabilizing Eastern Europe.

To further test the theoretical argument presented in this paper, the cases of NATO's interventions in Afghanistan and Libya should be examined. Like the Kosovo conflict, these interventions occurred in areas of strategic interest to the U.S. Afghanistan was strategically important because of the American war on terror, and unstable Libya, although less obviously an area of strategic interest, fostered Islamic Radicalism and thus represented a threat to American security (Tisdale 2011). With American interests at play in these regions, this theoretical argument could, once again most persuasively highlight the dynamics of the organization.

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