

Revisiting the Neo-Neo Debate: NATO Involvement in the Refugee Crisis

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On 11 February 2016, ministers of defence of NATO member countries decided to launch an operation that would send NATO into previously uncharted territory: a refugee and migrant crisis. A brainchild of Germany, Greece and Turkey, NATO's involvement was conceived at the highest political level of the proposing countries, while at the same time negotiations of an EU-Turkey deal on refugees were also ongoing. The decision has seen immediate implementation, including the deployment of a fleet to the Aegean Sea.

In the weeks since, the maritime aspect of the mission – whose remit is still being finalised – has been expanded to Greek and Turkish territorial waters and more countries have offered additional assets. As of now, the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 tasked with the operation consists of five ships and is under the command of the German navy. Its role is defined as conducting “reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance of illegal crossings, in support of Turkish and Greek authorities and the EU's Frontex agency”.^[1] It is widely believed that, as opposed to Frontex and not without controversy, NATO ships will return rescued migrants to Turkey, which could have a deterrent effect on illegal crossings.^[2]

The more salient deployment of NATO naval assets in the Aegean Sea, however, represents only one strand of the yet-unnamed mission. The second component – details of which are also still under discussion – is constituted by the increasing of “intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance at the Turkish-Syrian border”.^[3] This decision complements the one made in December 2015 on reinforcing assurance measures for Turkey following the shoot-down of a Russian fighter jet on 24 November 2015 which has caused a rapid and dramatic deterioration in Russian-Turkish relations.

This paper analyses NATO's involvement in the refugee crisis through the lens of a classic theoretical debate in international relations (IR) – that between neorealism and neoliberalism. The objective is to assess and compare how the logic behind each school of thought could account for the unanimous decision of the Alliance to enter the crisis, bearing in mind the additional complexity of simultaneous EU-Turkey dealings and the Russian military intervention in Syria.

Neorealism and NATO

Theoretical perspectives structure thoughts in a way that attempts to make sense of a given subject. They elicit the question “of what is this an instance?” in order to identify patterns in the world. So what is the NATO's assistance for the refugee crisis an instance of? Balancing against a resurgent Russia, a natural outcome of institutional cooperation among allies or both?

Neorealism and neoliberalism (liberal institutionalism) are two schools of thought that have grappled with similar questions for decades. They are amenable to comparison in particular because they share a common set of assumptions: both subscribe to a rationalist ontology, both see the structure in IR as the key determinant and both agree on anarchy as being the principal structural condition in IR. However, as examples of ‘grand theories’, they are not immediately applicable to an analysis of a particular event. For that it is necessary to tease out some of the finer

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propositions that they make about NATO, balancing and international cooperation.

In the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the father of neorealism, Kenneth Waltz, famously proclaimed that while “NATO’s days are not numbered, its years are”.^[4] Although 23 years later, with NATO still around, Waltz’s prediction appears more wrong than correct, the organisation has undoubtedly faced many challenges in the absence of a unifying great-power threat that has provided the *raison d’être* and internal cohesion in the past.^[5] NATO has had to search for a new agenda and new threats to justify its enduring existence; some of those have led to internal division and the Alliance has become more political in the process. In view of NATO’s persistence, neorealists have had to reshape their arguments and some of the new focus has shifted to the role of the US as a hegemon, arguing that NATO action could strictly serve only US interests.^[6] The US does have an interest in European stability, but more importantly so do the countries participating in the operation, which drove the process of taking NATO action.

Arguably, neorealists are suspicious of NATO’s activities to the extent that they represent an add-on to the traditional collective defence role of an alliance. The case for NATO being more than just a narrowly defined military alliance has certainly been strengthened after the end of the Cold War when the Alliance – a confusing denomination in this context – played a central role in the reforms and transition of countries of Central and Eastern Europe.^[7] Adding to this the ‘community of values’ aspect and the institutional and bureaucratic capacity of NATO, it is not difficult to see why NATO’s continuing perseverance can favour liberal interpretations.^[8]

One candidate theory from the realist tradition that could be capable of explaining NATO’s decision to participate in the refugee crisis is the balance of threat theory of Stephen Walt.^[9] Walt’s is an updated take on the more conventional balance of power theory: it argues that states will balance (form alliances) against an emergent threat to their security. The level of threat posed by a state is a function of power, geographical proximity, offensive capability and offensive intentions.^[10] While Russia probably did not have offensive intentions against Turkey when its jet was downed, it still posed a threat to Turkey’s security interests in the region. It is interesting to highlight the difference between power and threat in this connection: Russia’s power build-up had been ongoing for a decade but it only became a threat to Turkey after it started to exercise that power in Turkey’s vicinity.

With respect to the other three variables Walt proposes, Russia scores sufficiently high to substantiate the threat vis-à-vis Turkey – after all, Russia’s resurgence elsewhere has been a thorn in the West’s side already prior to the incident. Russian air strikes in Syria have, furthermore, sent more refugees marching towards Europe, with many left stranded at the Turkish border; the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, Phillip Breedlove, has accused Russia of “weaponising migration”.^[11] All in all, Russian actions have negatively impacted the national interests of most of the Alliance members, thereby creating incentives for increased cohesion within NATO.

At this place it is necessary to also scale down Walt’s theory. Balance of threat is still an explanatory theory for general security developments and as such, it requires extrapolation to evaluate whether a singular decision follows the logic of balancing or not. A typical act of (external) balancing is alignment with other states against a threat. Turkey, however, is already part of *the* Alliance. How could balance of threat still be applied to the launching of NATO’s operation?

Balancing does not necessarily automatically follow from the passive existence of an alliance, even if it is tasked with collective defence. In the very real circumstances of NATO, member countries are geographically spread out, with Turkey being located at NATO’s outer edge and bordering the most unstable region in the world. Balancing thus requires the activation of the alliance and taking measures that signal it both internally and externally. In the case at hand, the deployment of NATO navy to the Aegean Sea “has the potential to be used as a deterrent against Russia’s Anti Access/Anti-Denial capacity in the eastern Mediterranean” and represents military posturing that could be signalling a balancing logic.^[12] Tracing the argument back to the more general level, this would imply that it is once again the existence of an external threat that prompts NATO to action and lends it at least some fresh validation, however regionally limited.

Liberal institutionalism

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The difference between neorealism and neoliberalism is often overstated. Instead of viewing them as demonstrating two extremes regarding the (im)possibility of cooperation in IR, Robert Jervis suggested that “neoliberalism believes that there is much more *unrealized* or *potential* cooperation than does realism”.^[13] Of course, the neoliberals also have a solution to tapping into the potential for cooperation: institutions, which constitute a key battleground in the neo-neo debate.

Neoliberalism predicts in general the persistence of institutions due to the high costs of setting them up and the benefits that they can offer. On the contrary, neorealism – which in any case treats international cooperation with scepticism – considers the significance of institutions to be marginal and completely constrained at all times by the whims of the member states.^[14] Institutional theory counters by pointing to concrete benefits of institutions, such as reducing transaction costs, improving information, linking issues and others.^[15] Ultimately, when it comes to NATO, neoliberals not only predicted that it will survive the end of the Cold War, but also explained military stability within the Alliance.^[16] In this regard, finding a new rationale or at least occupation for the organisation, such as the refugee crisis, is consistent with the neoliberal view that NATO would reinvent itself in order to persevere.

The theoretical aspect that is potentially the most important in the refugee operation is the institutional facilitation of issue linkage. Institutions have been found to be vital for successful linkages.^[17] In the present case, the two major players who came up with the plan have different priorities. Turkey wants NATO to provide assurance measures against Russia and generally commit NATO assets to its neighbourhood, while Germany (and Greece) seeks urgent measures to be taken in the refugee crisis in the face of mounting domestic and European pressures. The linkage between the two issues is in fact visible in the NATO decision, as the refugee issue gives an umbrella justification for the deployment of military assets in the Aegean Sea, as well as increasing surveillance south of the Turkish-Syrian border. On the other side, European countries led by Germany are happy to be seen as being proactive and putting dormant resources to a much-needed use, while hoping for the deterrent effect of the maritime presence to occur soon.^[18]

Another factor that reinforces the institutional argument is that the linkage entails close cooperation between Greece and Turkey. The two countries have long had strained relations and it is no small negotiating feat that NATO ships can operate in the territorial waters of the two countries. The institutional setting increases transparency, enables the involvement of other countries, decreases chances of cheating and thus ultimately makes collaboration possible even in a sensitive area. It is hard to imagine that cooperation of similar complexity is possible without an institution.

At the same time, what is possible on the NATO level is intimately linked with the state of EU-Turkish relations. As the maritime mission is geared towards aiding Frontex, the EU border agency, Turkey gained access through the Alliance to EU’s activities that have a direct impact on it. Put differently, the NATO framework allowed taking measures in a crisis that is threatening the EU (not NATO) but that requires the participation of Turkey, which is not an EU country. Finally, since the NATO operation was launched during ongoing negotiations between the EU and Turkey, it is very likely that the two deals were connected (the EU-Turkey agreement was clinched 18 March).

Assessment

The preceding paragraphs have attempted to outline how both neorealism and neoliberalism could explain the recent decision of NATO to assist with the refugee crisis. It was argued that neorealism could point to the balance of threat behaviour triggered by the rising tensions between Ankara and Moscow, while neoliberalism would focus on the way the NATO institution facilitates multilateral bargains and issue linkages. Glaringly, their weaknesses have not been properly assessed. This is to an extent a consequence of the theories analysing different aspects of IR which essentially creates room for their complementarity rather than competition. If this paper was written when the neo-neo debate was in full swing, someone would have said that neorealism is concerned with ‘high’ and neoliberalism with ‘low’ politics. Today, few would dare to call the refugee crisis a question of ‘low’ politics.

On the whole, liberal institutionalism appears to fare somewhat better in explaining the NATO decision, for a number of reasons. Both NATO and the EU have institutionalised inter-state relations to an unprecedented degree in Europe, including to a lesser extent Turkey. Many of the hallmarks of institutionalist theory, such as lowered transaction costs,

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transparency and issue linkage, are today taken for granted. With the possibility to use force within the bloc significantly decreased (if not removed), the states seem to have accepted that recourse to institutions – meaning international cooperation – when an issue arises is the standard *modus operandi*. Moreover, the persistence and constant remaking of the institutions continue to support the liberal position. Neorealism is in this part of the world in an unenviable starting position.

Nevertheless, neorealism's emphasis on the importance of the external threat should not be overlooked. Perhaps the escalation between Turkey and Russia had not reached sufficient heights to give neorealist theories the explanatory edge in the case of the refugee crisis but external threat remains doubtless a powerful variable when it comes to NATO's internal cohesion. The Russian factor thus at minimum dovetails the institutionalist account of cooperation. If seen as a joint rationalist paradigm, the neo-neo accounts still have a lot to offer to contemporary IR analysis.

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