Global NATO: AN IDENTITY BASED ACCOUNT OF THE ALLIANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: The present paper is interested in determining the extent to which the Alliance’s behavior in the 21st century has been driven by identity. Guided by the postulates of social constructivism, the paper builds an identity based narrative founded on four methodological benchmarks, developed by Erik Ringmar (1996), and aimed at accounting for an identity driven behavior. Thus, the paper will look to demonstrate that (1) interest based accounts of NATO have proven faulty or inefficient, (2) that 9/11 represented a turning point in the history of the Alliance, bringing about change, (3) that upon this formative moment NATO developed a new “self”, a new (global) identity and projected it to the world and (4) that this new image was somewhat rejected and undermined due to the difficulties encountered by the Alliance in Afghanistan and due to the war between Russia and Georgia. Finally, and also in line with Ringmar’s framework, the paper reveals the Alliance’s attachment to this global identity and its desire to project it even further, through the 2010 Strategic Concept and through the intervention in Libya.

Key words: NATO, identity, social constructivism, narrative construction, 21st century

The North Atlantic Treaty organization is probably one of the most enduring and complex entities on the international scene today. During its more than 60 years of existence, NATO has been studied, analyzed, reanalyzed and commented upon, but IR theorists are still struggling to understand and explain its character, behavior and functioning1. Either way, what has been commonly acknowledged is the fact that NATO has changed incredibly during the years, adjusting not only its purpose, but also its

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preferences, its needs and implicitly its behavior\(^2\). The reasons behind these shifts are various and quite complex. Naturally, the mainstream perception is that entities like NATO act and behave in accordance with their interests. Yet, as I attempt to reveal within this paper, that is not always the case. Actors do not only act according to what they want, but also according to who they are\(^3\). In other words, besides interest, identity should be taken into account as well.

Bearing this in mind, the present paper plans to investigate “the extent to which NATO’s actions in the 21\(^{st}\) century have been driven by such identity related impulses”. Along this ambitious venture I will be guided by the theoretical framework of social constructivism due to its particular emphasis on identity and its substantial focus on the way in which identities manifest themselves within international organizations.

**Identity and International Organizations**

From the outset, a paper dealing with identity and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization needs to provide at least a minimal explanation with regard to the way in which the idea of identity manifests itself within an entity as large and as intricate as NATO. Generally, we are used to conceive identity at the individual level (as advocated by sociologists and social-psychologists), where it may be characterized as “an individual’s theory of oneself”\(^4\). To have an identity is simply to hold “certain ideas about who one is in a given situation”\(^5\), to have an image of one’s individuality and distinctiveness\(^6\).

However, this self-image is not at all bound to the individual level. Groups of people or even larger entities can develop a common self-image

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and thus an identity of their own. Related to this, Kratochwill (who draws upon Freud) explains that “identity is obtained with reference to the structure of relations the individual desires, with respect to cherished persons and institutions (love objects). In other words, one identifies with those which one loves and cherishes, which are familiar and comfortable”, be it a group, a community, or even a state. In this sense, national identity is already a taken for granted term which encompasses “all of the spaces and spans, the specific cultural, ethnic, territorial contexts within which collective identities arise”. As such, a state may be considered just the “rational bureaucratic, institutional manifestation of societal collective identities”.

Consequently, if states can acquire identities, so should organizations, whether national or international. After all, if we are to judge it broadly, identity is nothing more than “the core of what something is, what fundamentally defines that entity”\(^7\). Thus, when referring to organizations, Albert and Whetten clearly point out that “an organizations’ identity consists of those attributes that members feel are fundamental to that organization, uniquely descriptive of it and persisting within it over time”\(^8\). Organizational identity is therefore considered the property of a collective, defining a more or less shared and collective sense of “who we are as an organization”\(^9\).

Consequently, if states can bear identities independent of the individuals that compose them, international organizations may also come to bear identities independent of the states that form them. As the Weberian logic states, the “rational-legal” authority which the international organizations embody due to their individual bureaucracy, grants them an

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8 Kratochwill, 1989, quoted in Hall, *op cit*, p. 35.
10 *Ibidem*.
13 *Ibidem*. 
independent status from the entities which comprise it, namely the states\textsuperscript{14}. Put more concisely, “international organizations are sites of identity and interest formation”\textsuperscript{15}.

**Theoretical Discussions**

The above mentioned statement is not commonly accepted within the field of International Relations. There are many theories which tend to ignore identity related issues and question their relevance and importance when it comes to the international environment. For example, neorealism, which may still be considered the leading theory in the field of IR, regards identities as exogenously given and stable\textsuperscript{16}. It assumes that all actors on the international scene are “like units”\textsuperscript{17}, characterized primarily by egoism and individualism\textsuperscript{18}. Because of this uncertainty, states can only assume the worst about each other, so the chances for cooperation are minimal\textsuperscript{19}. In addition, things are also not very likely to change, since the anarchical international system is constant and there are no possible ways to transform or to transcend it.

On the other hand, neoliberalism, neorealism’s main challenging theory within IR studies, promotes a more open-minded approach with regard to international institutions in general. Rather than considering them “creatures of the dominant actors” (states), with little autonomous power, initiative or effectiveness\textsuperscript{20}, neoliberals have fought to demonstrate that entities like NATO are to be viewed as instrumental associations, designed


\textsuperscript{15} Emanuel, Adler; “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations*, No. 3 September; 1997, p. 345.

\textsuperscript{16} Christopher Browning, *Constructivism, Narrative and Foreign Policy Analysis: A Case Study of Finland*, Peter Lang, Switzerland; 2008, p. 42.

\textsuperscript{17} Kenneth Waltz; *Theory of International Politics*, McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York; 1979, p. 76.


\textsuperscript{19} Waltz, *op cit*, pp. 105-106.

to maximize the welfare of their members\textsuperscript{21}, not just to balance against potential perils.

However, in spite of this more optimistic approach, neoliberals do not wonder very far off the neorealist path of individualism, egoism and instrumentalism\textsuperscript{22}. Actors remain egoists, but rational ones, with predefined identities and interests, constantly searching for ways of maximizing their gains\textsuperscript{23}. As such, although present in neoliberal accounts (states need not necessarily regard one another as enemies from the outset - they can also view each other as partners), identities still enjoy a rather limited role within this theory, remaining materially bound and stable, and being constantly overshadowed by the distribution of power in the international system\textsuperscript{24}.

By contrast, social constructivism, a rather novel approach within the field of international relations (I call it approach because it has not yet been fully accepted as a theory within IR studies) is more than equipped to tackle such an issue. In its original form, Social Constructivism (as it emerged within the field of social studies) emphasizes the idea that reality is not only conditioned, but also constructed and constituted through social phenomena\textsuperscript{25}.

Building on these beliefs, social constructivism entered into the field of international relations with the idea that the most important aspect of world politics is social, not material and that the arena of international affairs is a world of our making\textsuperscript{26}. Moreover, as a reaction to the over-determination of structure in rationalist theories, constructivists introduced

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Amitav, Acharya; \textit{Constructing a Security Community in South Eastern Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Edition, Routledge, New York, United States; 2009, p. 3.
\item Massimiano, Bucchi; \textit{Science in society: an introduction to the social studies of science}, translation by Adrian Belton, Routledge, London; 2004, p. 62.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the possibility of agency and have emphasized the process of interaction. It is not that actors are free to chose their circumstances, but rather that they make choices, not prior to the interaction as rational choice advocates would have it, but upon it or even in the process of interacting with others.27 For constructivists, agents do not act in respect to the rationalistic logic of consequence (what happens to me if I act in a certain way?), but according to the so called logic of appropriateness: how should I act in this situation?28 As Wendt points out, “people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them. States act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not”29

Therefore identities not only matter, but they are essential in grasping the interests and behaviors of actors on the international scene. For constructivists, identity is an inter-subjective notion. Its formation entails developing a collective sense of not only who one is, but also of how it differs from others.30 As Ted Hopf underlines “in telling you who you are, identities strongly imply a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of action in particular domains and with respect to particular actors”31. In other words, identities determine not only interests but also action: “an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is”32. And since this notion of self is to a large extent formed during or upon interacting with the “other”, identities cannot be fixed, but relative and relational33, always in the process of being formed or reformed34.

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27 Ibidem.
30 Acharya, op. cit., p. 28.
Methodology

By definition, the research methods adopted within a study should be aligned to the researcher’s style of reasoning\(^{35}\), namely to the theoretical framework adopted within the paper. As such, due to the fact that the style of reasoning of the present paper is provided by a moderate type of constructivism, the subsequent methodology has to be developed correspondingly.

This is not an easy task, as due to its novel approach, conventional constructivism does not necessarily possess a methodology of its own. As Jackson argues, “there is no such thing as a constructivist methodology and there probably never is going to be one”\(^ {36}\)…or, to put it milder, “methodology is the major missing link in constructivist theory and research”\(^ {37}\)

Yet, this may not necessarily be an inconvenience. On the contrary, constructivism has proved not only compatible with, but also quite successful in utilizing existing methods of research belonging to social and political sciences alike\(^ {38}\). As Adler explains, “constructivists use a large variety of methods: positivist, post-positivist, quantitative, qualitative and combinations thereof”\(^ {39}\).

Consequently, since the present paper concerns itself with investigating a succession of events - those of NATO in the 21\(^{st}\) century - and the extent to which identity was the driving force behind them, the explanatory endeavor should revolve around an evolutionary approach, in which the researcher performs a historical reconstruction of social facts\(^ {40}\), through the use of narratives\(^ {41}\). As Pouliot explains, no social realities are

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\(^ {36}\) Patrick-Thaddeus, Jackson; *The Conduct of Inquiry: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, Routledge, New York; 2011, p. 204.


\(^ {40}\) Ibidem, p. 109.

\(^ {41}\) Ibidem.
natural (only naturalized); they are the result of political and social processes, all being rooted in history. Thus, in order to trace them, “the analyst needs to build a narrative – a dynamic account that tells the story of a variety of historical processes as they unfold over time”42. Basically, what the researcher does is use the narrative as a retrospective device so that he or she is able to impose order on “what would otherwise be a confusing and chaotic world”43. More precisely put, the best way to make sense of something is to insert that something into the context of a narrative44.

In this sense, as already stated, one particularly interesting study with regard to this paper is Ringmar’s (1996) historical account of Sweden’s changing identities and interests in the 17th century. In his study, the Swedish scholar proposes a framework based on four essential instances (benchmarks), which (he argues) have to be met, so that a country could be considered to act in order to defend its identity and not its interest. Here they are below:

1. “Traditional explanations phrased in terms of interests should produce ambiguous, highly contested or perverse results. If there was no obvious interest to be defended, or if the scholars who have studied the case are deeply divided regarding which interest the action was designed to further, then we have an a priori reason to be suspicious of these explanations”45.

2. The period in which the action took place should correspond to what Ringmar has called a formative moment. According to him, a formative moment is a time “when meaning is up for grabs; a time when old metaphors are replaced by new ones; when new identities established and new social practices initiated”46. In other words, such formative moments can be summarized as “world historical events”47.

3. “The particular person or group whose actions we want to explain must be engaged in a process of identity creation. It must be someone who tells

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42 Pouilot, op. cit, p. 367.
43 Browning, op. cit, p. 67.
46 Ibidem, p. 85.
47 Browning, op. cit., p. 59.
constitutive stories and tries to establish a presence in both time and space; someone who constructs an affective geography of friends and enemies; someone who pays careful attention to the rules of the social system to which he or she seeks to belong”.

4. We must identify an occasion or a series of occasions on which recognition was denied under humiliating circumstances. We need to prove that our person or group suffered as a result and that the failure of recognition was indeed experienced as a loss of dignity.

According to Ringmar, “if we can fulfill these requirements we are justified in explaining the subsequent action undertaken by a person or the group as a defense of an identity rather than of an interest.”

As such, in the following pages I intend to apply these instances to the case of NATO and thus look to establish the extent to which identity was indeed the driving force behind the Alliance’s actions in the 21st century.

The Beginnings

In keeping with Ringmar’s model, the analytical part should begin by arguing for the inappropriateness of interest based explanations concerning the action under investigation (instance 1). Consequently, the following pages will look to highlight the general fallacy of gains related approaches, when it comes to accounting for NATO’s evolution and persistence through time, as well as to emphasize the appropriateness of identity-related approaches as a viable alternative.

For starters, the most appropriate moment to begin with would obviously be the overture of the story, namely the moment of NATO’s formation. For constructivists, the formation of NATO did not represent a grouping of individual states united by their need to balance against a common material threat (the USSR, as interest-based accounts would have it), but a self conscious coming together of like-minded entities in the name of a common idea, or better yet, a common identity greater then themselves:

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48 Ibidem, p. 91.
49 Ringmar, op. cit, p. 91.
50 Ibidem.
the western civilization\textsuperscript{51}. As one of the “founding fathers” of NATO explained, “NATO purports to be far more than a defensive arrangement. It is an affirmation of the moral and spiritual values which we hold in common”\textsuperscript{52}. Emphasis is added by Ernst Bevin (then British Foreign Secretary) who argues: “if we are to have an organism in the West, it must be a spiritual union. While, no doubt there must be treaties, or at least understandings, the union must primarily be a fusion derived from the basic freedoms and ethical principles for which we all stand.”\textsuperscript{53}

These statements are confirmed by the preamble of NATO’s founding document, the Washington Treaty, where the signatory states declared the protection of their values (not material gains or the balance of threat) as the basic purpose of the alliance\textsuperscript{54}. In fact, the Soviet Union is hardly even mentioned within this initial document (and if it is, its threat is regarded as ideological, not material) (McCalla, 1996: 446). Therefore, the purpose of the Alliance would be “…to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of its peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law”\textsuperscript{55}

Indeed, NATO’s identity has certain materialistic characteristics such as those of being an international military organization of the North Atlantic with a focus on defence; but what is commonly overlooked is the fact that (as shown above) the Alliance is aimed at protecting values rather than material capabilities or interests and is thus to be regarded as a security community (“a community of shared beliefs and norms”)\textsuperscript{56}, not an instrumental alliance, understood in rationalist terms.

This idea is best seen within the context of the post Cold war decade, an era that brought about the disappearance of the prominent “other” against which NATO had been used to project its identity\textsuperscript{57}. Thus, with the


\textsuperscript{52} Ibidem.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibidem. p. 241

\textsuperscript{54} NATO, The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., 4\textsuperscript{th} of April, 1949, available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm], accessed on the 16\textsuperscript{th} of May 2011;

\textsuperscript{55} Ibidem.

\textsuperscript{56} Schimmelfennig, 1998, op. cit, p. 221.

\textsuperscript{57} Flockhart, op. cit. p. 13.
Soviet Union collapsing the Alliance was left without a clear sense of belonging since there was nothing left (at least not that obvious) to defend from. As a result, NATO was forced to re-conceptualize its “self” in order to survive and in order to be able to continue projecting its identity, namely its beliefs, values, convictions and vision.

Related to this, according to interest based accounts, such an event would mark the dismemberment of the Alliance since, with the communist threat gone, it is no longer in the allies’ interest to maintain an alliance left without a purpose. Realists like Waltz (1990) and Mearsheimer (1991; 1994) postulated that NATO’s days are numbered while neoliberal institutionalists like Keohane (1989; 1993) and Nye (1993) were a bit more reserved by arguing that international institutions are important and that NATO will remain relevant only if its members are interested in keeping it that way. However, as it was becoming more and more clear that NATO was far from becoming extinct, both theoretical camps started developing arguments as to why this had happened. Realists argued that the soviet threat had not been completely abolished, so there was still need for some sort of collective defense, since the danger could reappear at any moment. Such an explanation was probably one of the simplest possible, but it was nevertheless very hard to counter; after all, although in decline, Russia was still Russia. Yet, this is exactly where the problem lies when it comes to realism, because every single choice that international actors make can be accommodated in one way or another by realist thinking. As Risse-Kappen exemplifies, if NATO would survive the end of the Cold War it would do so because the threat has survived with it; if it would disappear, then it means that the peril has “withered away”.

With regard to neoliberals, they managed to come up with several explanations, some of which were quite convincing. Their first attempt was based on Keohane’s famous 1984 work (After Hegemony: Cooperation and

Discord in the World Political Economy) where he argued that due to “transaction costs and uncertainty, it is easier to maintain than to create new institutions”\(^{63}\). Then, building somewhat on this argument, neoliberal institutionalists sophisticated their explanations and claimed that NATO survived after the Cold War, not only because it already existed, but because of the internal mechanisms and assets that NATO developed over the years, which proved to be not only functional, but also quite adaptable. As a result, once the Soviet threat disappeared (and with it NATO’s raison d’etre) the existing mechanisms within the alliance allowed it to adjust itself to new security missions\(^{62}\).

However, although much more valid than realist accounts, the neoliberal line of reasoning was perfected only when it was already clear that the Alliance would survive (the same as realist explanations) and it also presented sever difficulties in explaining why NATO decided to enlarge and get involved in operations outside of its boarders. According to neoliberals, NATO would want to expand only if it would be more profitable to do so than not to. In this sense, the only gains which NATO could possibly acquire through such a process would be the financial contributions of the new members to the NATO budget. Yet, the amount of money received (which was anyway not very large) could not adequately compensate for the fact that, by enlarging, the Alliance was entering unknown territory (Hungary had all of its borders with non-NATO countries), it was getting deep into the former USSR’s sphere of influence and it was integrating 3 national armies which were in pretty bad shape and needed development\(^{63}\). In other words, judging from a neoliberal perspective, the Alliance would have nothing to gain by expanding and therefore should not have been interested in performing such actions\(^{64}\). Still, if interest was not the driving force, what was?

Well, constructivists would have to say identity. In their view, NATO decided to enlarge as a statement with regard to its new identity, that of a

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\(^{63}\) Schimmellennung, 1998, op. cit. pp. 204-209.

\(^{64}\) Fierke, op. cit., p. 178.
security guarantor in Europe (“move towards a European security identity”)⁶⁵. Also, the desire was enhanced by the willingness and availability of the former soviet states from Central and Eastern Europe to become part of the Western family, to devote themselves to its values and norms⁶⁶, as well as the West’s own enthusiasm to receive them. Thus, the integration of the first three countries from the former Eastern bloc was highlighted as a sort of coming home on their behalf, as the first step towards the reintegration of the European whole which was unnaturally shattered by the totalitarian communist regimes⁶⁷. As such, it would seem that although there were maybe certain types of interests involved, an identity related account of NATO’s expansion proves much more plausible and probable than those offered by neorealists and neoliberals alike.

9/11 – A Formative Moment

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre conducted on September 11th 2001 came as a shock to people all over the world, be they politicians, scholars or just ordinary citizens. As Booth and Dunne put it, “it is curious how a specific date – not a year, but a specific month and a specific day – have almost universally come to define a world historical crisis”. They go on to explain that the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre were something “that we all shared”⁶⁸

As such, like any other event of this magnitude, 9/11 also brought about certain changes, especially in the realms of politics and security. According to Francis Fukuyama, “world politics, it would seem, shifted

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gears abruptly after September 11”69. Indeed, just like a formative moment should, 9/11 marked a time when new metaphors were launched, when individuals and groups told new stories about themselves and when new sets of rules emerged through which identity was classified70. In this sense we cannot ignore the redundant use of words or expressions like “terrorism”, “war on terror”, “clash of civilizations”, “good versus evil” and so on. But, besides the slogans, what was left in concrete terms was an international delegitimation of terrorism as a means of political action71. The factual conclusion of 9/11 was that mischievous non-state transnational actors were now able to acquire power, and could inflict serious damage on anyone, anywhere (unlike before, when terrorist groups were more nationally bound and orchestrated their attacks within those same borders).

Consequently, as a security community, NATO had to adjust itself to these new changes as well. After enacting Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the first time in history, the Alliance constantly highlighted that from then onwards, the most important security threats to the integrity of the allies were non-conventional and that such dangers needed to be handled72. In other words, 9/11 had a clear formative effect on NATO.

Relevant in this sense is NATO’s Prague Summit (2002), when, again for the first time in NATO’s history, the word “transformation” was at the heart of all negotiations73: “we commit ourselves to transforming NATO with new members, new capabilities and new relationships with our partners”74. In other words, the allies acknowledged the historical importance of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and their

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70 Ringmar, op. cit. p. 91.


severe impact on world politics. As a result, the new purpose of the Alliance in the 21st century would be that of adjusting itself to these changed circumstances.

**Projecting the New Identity: Global NATO**

The first steps in this direction were already taken at the Prague Summit mentioned above, when this new outlook was not only announced, but also joined by a more practical change, namely that of establishing a single, multinational, European-centered, NATO Response Force (NRF), trained and equipped to the highest standards and capable of acting quickly wherever it was needed.

When it comes to the external assertion of this novel identity, the first concrete actions were those of taking over ISAF and the training mission in Iraq as well as maintaining the desire to expand further to the East (by accepting seven new members - Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia - in 2004, and two others, Albania and Croatia, in 2009). These new members were already introduced to the global identity that NATO was projecting and immediately involved in the two out of area initiatives mentioned above. What’s more, besides this internal expansion, NATO also extended its external network of partners, way beyond the traditional boundaries of the Alliance, thus creating what Ringmar called “a new geography of friends” (see also instance 3). After establishing the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1994, the initiative was elevated at the Istanbul Summit (2004) to a genuine partnership, “to include more practical cooperation, especially in the fight against terrorism”, but also in order to enhance security and stability in the region. The same premises were behind the creation of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative which further expanded NATO’s geographical scope by adding four Middle Eastern countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates), to the Alliance’s list of partners.

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75 Schmidt, op. cit. p. 98.
76 Ringmar, op. cit. p. 91.
77 Trine, Flockhart; Kristian Søby Kristensen, “NATO and Global Partnerships: To Be Global or To Act Globally”, DIIS Report, No. 7; 2008, p. 18.
78 Flockhart, op. cit. p. 20.
However, the Alliance was not to stop here. Its desire to firmly
ground its new global identity was also revealed during the 2006 Riga
Summit, when NATO discussed the creation of a “Global Partnership” with
“likeminded” states (Australia, New Zeeland, Japan and South Korea) which
have always supported and even contributed to the Alliance’s operations
(most notably Australia and New Zeeland who took part in the ISAF
mission). Added to these we cannot overlook several smaller scale actions
which NATO took at a global level: launching an extensive humanitarian
relief operation for Pakistan after the massive earthquake in 2005, helping
victims of Hurricane Katrina in the United States, providing security
support to the 2004 and 2006 Olympics and the 2006 World Cup and
assisting the African Union with strategic airlift into Darfur and Somalia;
and if this multitude of actions are not convincing enough, NATO also
formulated an official document which would attest the Alliance’s new
direction upon 9/11, a document released at the Riga Summit, which is
formally known as the Comprehensive Political Guidance (CPG). The
document “provides a framework and political direction for NATO’s
continuing transformation”80. The reason the CPG was launched is because
the 1999 Strategic Concept, which was supposed to guide the Alliance
through the beginning of the 21st century became obsolete after 9/11 and
NATO’s shift. Basically, the new document stressed that the Alliance must
adapt to the post-9/11 world so that it could better handle and respond
quicker to the changes which occurred in the international system. As a
result, “NATO’s interventionist strategy of the 1990s has, at the start of the
21st century, become globalised”81

Contesting the Identity: Is NATO Really Global?
As a global actor NATO seemed (or better yet felt) as confident as
ever and its purpose of bringing peace and stability to troubled parts of the

79 Daniel, Hamilton; Charles, Barry; Hans, Binnendijk; Stephen, Flanagan; Julianne Smith;
James, Townsend, “Alliance Reborn: An Atlantic Compact for the 21st Century”, The
80 NATO, Comprehensive Political Guidance. Endorsed by NATO Heads of State and Government,
81 Flockhart; Kristensen, op. cit. p. 10.
world (especially those predisposed to terrorism) looked like it was running smoothly.

However, if we are to follow Ringmar’s framework, things should not have gone so well for the Alliance. In fact, this newly established identity should be challenged or even rejected by various (important) actors, preferably under humiliating circumstances (instance 4). Still, such a situation would be extremely unlikely given the difference between a powerful military alliance in the 21st century and a small North-European country in the 17th century (as in Ringmar’s case). Nevertheless, the Alliance’s global role was by all means contested and even undermined by certain international events which proved the Alliance’s own inefficiency in sustaining this global role.

**The War in Afghanistan**

The first problems appeared with regard to the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, an operation that was advancing at a very slow pace. The unexpected resistance of the Taliban, especially in the southern provinces, the lack of infrastructure, the persistent counter-offensives carried out by the Taliban and the difficulty with which the allies agreed upon a certain course of action transformed what was initially thought of as a simple crisis management operation, into a complex guerrilla war against a very impudent adversary.

Still, if the erroneous assessment of the situation on the ground is somewhat understandable, what came as a surprise was the lack of coordination and the disastrous efficiency on behalf of the Alliance (many states were operating under caveats, some of which prevented troops from engaging in military operations and thus created both animosities between the allies and practical inefficiencies).

Thus, due to all these obstacles it seemed that instead of solving problems NATO was adding to them, and as these problems grew both in number and in magnitude, the Alliance’s credibility as a global actor, as an entity able to reconstruct Afghanistan (the ultimate out-of area test for the Alliance), was doing the exact opposite, namely going down.

True, many problems stemmed not so much from NATO’s clumsiness, but from the unending strings of corruption and from the discontented warlords and drug traffickers who not only provided for the
Taliban but also undermined the already shaky Afghan economy which was poorly handled by the government anyhow.\textsuperscript{82}

Yet, regardless of who was responsible for what, NATO was not fulfilling its promise, it was far away from its declared purpose and with this, it was also distancing itself as well as its audiences from the global self it had adopted and proposed. In late 2008 or at the beginning of 2009, it was extremely hard to believe that the Alliance would indeed be capable of launching and sustaining “concurrent major joint operations and smaller operations for collective defense and crisis management, on and beyond alliance territory, on its periphery and at a strategic distance”\textsuperscript{83}. As Rynning and Rigsmose explain “the CPG tells us that NATO must at a minimum be able to do 2+2 (two large and two small operations)”. However, the reality is that since 2006, “NATO has operated with a formula of 2+6 (two large and six small operations), where strategic distance is defined as 15,000 km from Brussels”. Thus, judging in these terms, we cannot but acknowledge that, in 2009, NATO was “undertaking operations akin to 1+1 (Afghanistan and Kosovo) and it was already at the point of exhaustion”\textsuperscript{84}. Therefore, it was somewhat obvious that, for practical reasons, NATO was actually far from being a global actor.

**The Russo-Georgian Conflict**

If the war in Afghanistan undermined NATO’s global identity at a concrete, logistical level, another, often undersized event, weakened its validity even further, but this time on a more theoretical plane. I am of course referring to the small conflict between Russia and Georgia, which took place in August 2008.

Judging purely from the standards of modern warfare, the skirmish can hardly be called a war at all. At most, it can be considered a minor conflict since it was low in intensity, the fighting lasted for less than a week, there was no question of territorial gains and the casualties barely reached a

\textsuperscript{82} Vincent, Morelli; Paul, Belkin, “NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance”, *CRS Report*, February 3\textsuperscript{rd}; 2009, p.32.

\textsuperscript{83} NATO, 2006, quoted in Sten Rynning; Jens, Ringsmose “Come Home NATO?: The Atlantic Alliance’s New Strategic Concept”, *DIIS Report*, No. 4; 2009, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibidem.
few hundreds\textsuperscript{85}. Yet, its importance for European security was incredible as it marked the re-entry onto the European scene of traditional Realpolitik. Russia’s firm action reasserted its presence if not as a great power, at least as a regional one, keen on maintaining strategic control over former soviet satellites and their resources\textsuperscript{86}.

Necessarily, the unfolding of such events had a tremendously negative impact on NATO’s global and even European ambitions, even more so as the conflict basically happened in NATO’s backyard (Georgia being a potential candidate for NATO membership). And what was even more alarming was the fact that other than condemning the incident, NATO could do nothing. In fact “western diplomats and leaders could not even formulate a proper cease-fire document” – providing for Georgia’s integrity and demanding Russian troop withdrawals - let alone “devising an effective plan for action against Moscow’s aggression”\textsuperscript{87}.

As such, questions were raised with regard to the Alliance’s capacity of protecting its members (one of NATO’s fundamental desiderates), not to mention expanding even further or playing a significant role at a global level. Added to these doubts was a somewhat general curbing of enthusiasm when it comes to the Alliance as a global actor, on behalf of the Central and Eastern European members. This group, led by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia stressed that NATO should rethink its policy towards Russia and should include this aggressively resurrected power at the top of its threat list\textsuperscript{88}. If we are to say it bluntly, over the course of a few weeks NATO’s image as a global actor has been all but shattered and its security strategy severely challenged...and all this without mentioning the problems in Afghanistan, which, in 2008, were also at their peak.

\textbf{Re-stating the Identity}

As such, just like Ringmar would suggest, NATO did not feel too comfortable with the widely spread lack of faith concerning its


\textsuperscript{86} Hamilton et al., \textit{op. cit.}, p.17.


\textsuperscript{88} Rynning; Ringsmose, \textit{op. cit.} p. 17.
transformation. Even though “humiliated” (as in Ringmar’s case) would not be the most suitable word to describe the Alliance in the wake of the second decade of the 21st century, NATO was nonetheless affected by its tainted credibility on the international arena. Therefore, according to Ringmar, the Alliance would have three options: the first would be to accept the corrections that others suggested, to internalize them and to make them its own; the second would be to rethink its descriptions of itself and to come up with an improved story that better corresponds to the facts as they have been revealed. Yet, both these options entail recognizing defeat. Thus, there is the third and last option, which would entail standing by its own original story and trying to convince the audiences that the identity it chose does in fact apply to and best suits NATO.

According to Ringmar, the desired option would be revealed either through discourses, declarations or official documents, or through the more convincing gesture…of action. In NATO’s case, the Alliance did both, as it decided to go with the third option and impose its new identity to internal and external audiences alike; and what better way to do this than through a new Strategic Concept (launched in November 2010, upon the Lisbon Summit), a document which, as stated before in this paper, serves not only as a strategic guide, but also as a way of promoting the Alliance to the world.

Thus, being under an increasing wave of skepticism concerning its global presence, NATO used the 2010 strategic concept in order to reassert its out of area capacities and ambitions, emphasizing once more the Alliance’s importance and relevance on the international scene. In this sense, right from the outset, the strategic concept portrays a confident NATO, unwilling to give up its global status. From the first page of the document, the Alliance already talks about its openness to further enlargement in Europe, its commitment to international partnerships, its intention of continuing the reform “towards a more effective, efficient and flexible Alliance” and its availability of deploying its military forces wherever and

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90 Ringmar, op. cit., p. 82.
91 Ibidem, p. 83.
92 Ibidem.
whenever they are required. Also, what is more than evident all throughout the document is the fact that NATO’s emphasis when talking about itself is no longer placed on Europe or the Euro-Atlantic region, but on the international scene in general. In this respect NATO characterizes itself as “a source of stability in an unpredictable world” and then pledges its support to the UN mission of maintaining “international peace and security”.

In addition, NATO also highlights its capabilities in undertaking crisis management operations, post-conflict stabilization missions, reconstruction missions, conflict prevention maneuvers as well as engaging itself in actual ongoing hostilities, insisting on the Alliance’s “unparalleled” capacity “to deploy and sustain robust military forces”.

Moreover, the Alliance stresses its desire to deepen and extend both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. According to the strategic concept itself, “unique in history, NATO is a security Alliance that fields military forces able to operate together in any environment that can control operations anywhere through its integrated military command structure” (emphasis added).

In conclusion, the final paragraph of the Strategic Concept summarizes perfectly all that I have argued so far, revealing the allied desire of projecting a global security community (understood in constructivist terms).

“We, the political leaders of NATO, are determined to continue renewal of our Alliance so that it is fit for the purpose in addressing the 21st century security challenges. We are firmly committed to preserve its effectiveness as the globe’s most successful political-military Alliance. Our alliance thrives as a source of hope because it is based on common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law and because our common essential and enduring purpose is to safeguard the freedom and security of

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94 Ibidem, article 1.
95 Ibidem, article 2.
96 Ibidem, article 20-23.
97 Ibidem, article 36
its members. These values and objectives are universal and perpetual and we are determined to defend them through unity, solidarity, strength and resolve”98.

However, if this statement and the document as a whole were not convincing enough, then the Alliance made things crystal clear (with regard to its global intentions) when it took command over the operations in Libya (March 2011), following the raising tensions between the forces of president Muammar Gaddafi and the vast group of rebels contesting his rule99.

As people already know, the uprising in Libya came about as part of the revolutionary domino effect which swept North Africa and the Middle East at the beginning of 2011. Still, unlike the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, which were tense, but eventually brought to a peaceful end, the Libyan revolt took a violent turn when Colonel Gaddafi tried to brutally repress the protests100.

Nevertheless, this was a local problem which had no connection and did not pose any threat whatsoever to the security of NATO or any of its members. As such, NATO should not have had even the slighest interest to get involved in this internal strife let alone gain something from doing it. Still, in accordance with its identity as a global actor, as a global security guarantor, the Alliance could not simply remain indifferent, especially once the situation got out of proportion and the number of civilian casualties started growing. Seen from this perspective, NATO would have every reason to intervene, as it subsequently did.

However, the Alliance was not at the forefront of the operations from the beginning. The lead was taken by the United Nations’ Security Council which passed on two resolutions against Libyan leaders, the last of which, resolution 1973, invited “member states and regional organizations to take “all necessary measures” to protect civilians in Libya”101. It was only upon

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98 Ibidem, article 38
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this official decision that NATO began its involvement in the African country, following the stabilization attempts of an international coalition made up of voluntary states and led by France and Great Britain. In this sense, the Alliance showed great composure as it took over the operations only after it was invited to do so. Thus, through its responsible attitude, the Alliance proved that it is not only reliable, but also able to act wherever and whenever it is needed (just like the 2010 strategic concept argued). In addition, by offering its services when the international community was in need of help, NATO made its point even clearer, in the sense that, by seizing a favorable moment, the Alliance did not even have to impose its identity on others; instead it allowed the others to realize and recognize it on their own even more so as the mission turned out to be a success.

In this respect, NATO is now not only acknowledged as a global actor but also as a reliable and efficient global actor and all the drawbacks caused by the Afghanistan and the Russo-Georgian war seem to have withered away in the wind. Unlike Ringmar’s Sweden in the 17th century, NATO not only tried to impose its desired identity, but it actually succeeded.

Conclusions:

The primary task of the paper was that of investigating “the extent to which NATO’s behavior in the 21st century was driven by identity”. The overall idea stemmed from, and was subsequently based on, the constructivist belief that NATO is not merely an instrumental, military, power and interest anchored organization, but a security community, a community of shared values and beliefs, a community brought together by a mutual sense of belonging, by a common identity.

Thus, by building a narrative based on the four requirements of Ringmar’s model, the paper set out to show that even one of the toughest, most materialistic organisms on the international scene thinks about who it


is, before it acts according to what it wants\textsuperscript{104}. Therefore, when it comes to
the first benchmark - \textit{interest based accounts of the action to be explained should be
proved inappropriate or contradictory} - I tried to reveal that the North
Atlantic Alliance was thought of as more than just a military, interest based
coaition; instead, it was conceived as an actual security community of like
minded states, brought together by their common values and beliefs.

When it comes to instance number two - \textit{the action should be preceded by a formative moment in which the actor has to be engaged} – the paper
portrayed how the events of September 11, 2001 have changed international
politics (by introducing terrorism as a global threat and thus modifying
traditional ways of conceptualizing security). In addition, the study also
stressed the formative effect which these events have had on NATO in
particular, revealed by the Prague summit of 2002, when the Alliance was
for the first time and specifically employing the term “transformation” to
describe its direction forward.

Hence, as instance number three describes - \textit{the actor should be involved in a process of identity formation, coming up with new ways of identifying
and portraying itself} – the transformation which started at the Prague Summit
was to turn NATO, form a Euro-Atlantic alliance into a true global actor, an
identity that NATO presented to the world both within an official document
(the CPG, which highlights the Alliance as no longer geographically bound)
and through a series of self-explanatory actions: taking over the
peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan, undertaking the training mission
of Iraq’s security forces, expanding to the East with the acceptance of 9 new
European members, initiating the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and
strengthening its relations with non-European Contact Countries, to name
just the most important\textsuperscript{105}

Finally, just like Ringmar’s forth instance suggests - \textit{the newly, self-attributed identity should be rejected under humiliating circumstances} – NATO’s
identity, although not necessarily refused under shameful conditions, was
nevertheless undermined. The two main events responsible were (1) the
unforeseen lengthening of the Afghanistan campaign, which raised doubts
with regard to NATO’s capability of logistically handling out of area
operations and (2) the Russo-Georgian War, which revealed a humble

\textsuperscript{104} Wendt, 1999, \textit{op. cit.} p. 224.

\textsuperscript{105} Hamilton et al., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 21.
NATO, incapable of countering Russia’s re-assertion as a regional power and thus questioned NATO’s essential desiderate, namely its capability of actually protecting all of its member states (given that Georgia was a potential candidate for membership).

Consequently, the final part reveals how, as a response to these critics and as a token of its attachment to the new, global identity, NATO reiterated its global aspirations through the 2010 strategic concept, the Alliance’s “promoting document”, and through the intervention in Libya, which proved once and for all that the Alliance is not only willing, but also capable of sustaining such a global role.

As such, based on what has been presented above it would be safe to conclude that, NATO’s behavior in the 21st century was to a large extent influenced, if not particularly driven by identity related impulses.

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