The Survival of NATO in the Post-Cold War Era: A Comparative Analysis of Neorealist and Constructivist Theories

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Abstract

This scholarly article examines the continued existence of NATO after the end of the Cold War. Despite the disappearance of its primary adversary, the Soviet Union, NATO has continued to exist. The conventional neorealist explanation for the alliance's longevity, which states that NATO was established as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union and thus should have been dissolved upon its collapse, is challenged by the constructivist perspective. Constructivism argues that NATO persists as a result of the desire of liberal democracies to cooperate for the sake of peace and the influence of member states' collective identities. However, this constructivist explanation is criticized for being predicated on a specific understanding of NATO and for neglecting the crucial role of the United States in sustaining the alliance. This study contends that offensive neorealism, which takes into account the role of the United States in a value-neutral way, offers the most comprehensive explanation for NATO's persistence after 1991.

Keywords:

NATO; Cold War; neorealism; constructivism; international relations; Soviet Union; United States.

The end of the Cold War presented an existential crisis for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), whose raison d'être[1] for over forty years had been to safeguard Western Europe from a potential Soviet invasion. Despite this, NATO is set to mark its seventy-fourth birthday on April 4, 2023. This has posed a challenge to the conventional neorealist perspective on NATO's persistence, which maintains that the alliance was created as a means of balancing against the Soviet Union and could have thus dissolved with its collapse. Kenneth Waltz himself stated that *"NATO's days might not be numbered, but its years are"* (Waltz 1993, 71). The inadequacy of Waltzian neorealism to show why NATO has survived created a gap in the NATO literature, which constructivism has attempted to fill. From this perspective, NATO's survival is explained by the fact that it is more than a military alliance. NATO endures because of the "urge of liberal democracies" to cooperate for peace (Thies 2009, 238). The collective identities of the member states are a critical variable as they guide them to actions consistent with those identities (Risse-Kappen 1996). However, a good theory must be value-neutral. Constructivism's explanation for NATO's survival after 1989 derives from a particular conception of what NATO has been and therefore what it should be. By contrast, neorealism does not suffer from this bias. Crucially, constructivism is also criticized for overlooking the essential role of the United States in maintaining the alliance.

To provide clarity on the choice of neorealism and constructivism as the two theories for this analysis, it is worth noting that the persistence of NATO after the end of the Cold War is a complex issue that can be approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Neorealism and constructivism were selected for this comparative analysis because they offer fundamentally different explanations for why NATO has continued to exist, despite the end of the Cold War. Neorealism views NATO as a product of power relations and the balance of power, while constructivism focuses on shared values and collective identities. By contrasting these two perspectives, this analysis intends to contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the factors that have enabled NATO to persist beyond the Cold War.

This article aims to demonstrate that the theoretical framework of offensive neorealism is the most appropriate for understanding the continuation of NATO after the end of the Cold War. In order to accomplish this, the paper will proceed as follows. Initially, the literature that is influenced by constructivism in regards to the persistence of NATO will be examined. Subsequently, the primary counterargument to the thesis will be outlined and its limitations will be highlighted, specifically its narrow interpretation of NATO's history and disregard of the role played by the United States. Ultimately, the offensive neorealist argument will be developed to demonstrate that it is the theory that best explains the persistence of NATO after 1991 as it considers the vital role of the United States in a manner that is impartial and value-neutral.

Analyzing the Constructivist Approach to NATO's Survival: An Examination of its Assumptions and Limitations

Initially, it may appear that constructivism offers a more comprehensive explanation than neorealism for the persistence of NATO following the end of the Cold War. Constructivists argue that NATO, from its inception, has been more than a military alliance, with a specific design as an international institution that differentiates it qualitatively from previous military alliances (Risse-Kappen 1996).

Building on Karl Deutsch's concept of a "security community"[2], Thomas Risse-Kappen posits that the democratic nature of members' domestic politics has been externalized to NATO, mediating power asymmetries within the alliance and creating a self-reinforcing democratic identity (Ibid., 380). For instance, NATO's "consultation norm" which Britain and France did not abide by during the Suez Crisis in 1956 caused a rift in transatlantic relations because such actions disregarded the collectively shared principles of NATO (Ibid., 385). The United States was much more upset by the fact that core NATO partners had acted unilaterally without alliance agreement than the use of force itself (Ibid., 386). Therefore, from its very inception, NATO was designed to be more than a military alliance as the member states were predominantly democracies.

[2] Karl Deutsch defined the "security community" as a group of states that had become integrated to the point at which there is "real assurance that the members of that community will not go to war, but will settle their disputes in some other way" (Adler and Barnett 1998, 6).

In turn, how NATO has dealt with crises over the years is different from conventional alliances. Indeed, the history of NATO has been described as one of perpetual crises, the next always labeled as a greatest threat to date (Hoffman 1981).

The crucial difference with previous military alliances is the democratic identity of the member states. According to Wallace Thies, in democracies, changes of government are regular occurrence, thereby providing opportunities to examine old polices and develop new ones. Usually alliances collapse at first sight of disagreement, but NATO's shared values makes the bond stronger than a marriage of convenience (Thies 2009). The alliance has endured because of this understanding between the democratic member states.

Therefore, by 1989, NATO had developed an established democratic collective identity. This collective identity meant that what kept NATO together was not only the need to defend against the Soviet Union, but the common understanding between the member states. The ending of the Cold War was not the end for NATO, and it survived because, over the course of its existence leading up to 1991, it had developed a collective democratic identity that ensured its coherence. This meant that NATO had become entrenched into the social structure of international relations as an idea of what democracies can achieve when they work together.

However, this explanation of NATO's continual existence is hampered by several significant flaws. Firstly, by focusing on the domestic identities of the member states, this argument neglects the crucial role of the United States in keeping the alliance together. This distorts the role of the structure of international relations in NATO's persistence. Secondly, constructivism offers a particularistic reading of NATO's history, which means that the theory is no longer value-neutral. These critiques will be further examined in the following section.

The Flaws of Constructivism in Explaining NATO's Survival: A Critique of its Selective Reading of History and Lack of Neutrality

The theory of constructivism is flawed due to its biased interpretation of NATO's history prior to 1989. It fails to acknowledge the crucial role of the United States in maintaining the alliance. While it may be true that democracies treat each other differently, when the objectives of security and democracy clashed, the former certainly was more influential. For example, Risse-Kappen's claim that the United States was more concerned about the failure to consult with Britain and France during the Suez Crisis than the potential escalation of the Cold War in the Middle East ignores the severe realities of the bipolar struggle.

Additionally, the lack of consistency in regards to democracy within NATO is difficult to ignore. For instance, when Portugal joined NATO, it was initially not a democracy, and Greece and Turkey went through significant democratic setbacks in the 1960s (Best 2014, 150). Their geopolitical importance to the Western security order was clearly more significant than their domestic political systems, which led to their inclusion in NATO based on strategic considerations rather than democratic values. In particular, the need of the US to form a core set of allies against the Soviet Union during the bipolar struggle for dominance made maximizing Western security the chief objective of NATO. Therefore, it was the hegemonic leadership of the United States, not the democratic identity of the member states that held the alliance together.

From this, it can be inferred that constructivism's explanation for NATO's longevity ignores the role of the material structure of international relations. NATO is a product of the Cold War. The circumstances surrounding its creation prioritized security over a shared democratic identity. This trend continued into 1991, even after the Cold War ended, as states still prioritized survival over other objectives. To only focus on the externalization of member states' domestic identities is to overlook the fact that NATO is primarily a military alliance.

The perspective of the Cold War persisted even after it ended. The world remained uncertain and Europe remained a volatile region. Constructivism assumes that security

in Europe can be shaped by factors beyond material considerations. In reality, when it comes to security, values and identities have limited explanatory power.

Second, constructivism does not provide a neutral explanation for the survival of NATO. A sound theory must identify a dependent variable, the independent variable, and the mechanism linking the two. For constructivists, state behavior is caused by shared ideas about what democratic states should act like. Crucially, this constructivist explanation suffers from inconsistencies over the democratic identities of the member states. Its particularistic reading of NATO's history through the lens of democratic peace theory[3] endows it with a specific perspective of what NATO was during the Cold War and therefore what NATO should be after the Cold War. This explanation overlooks the inconsistencies in the democratic identities of the member states in order to justify a particular view of NATO. Therefore, the constructivist explanation is not independent of their beliefs about NATO. A good theory should be based on how the world actually is, not how it should be.

Having shown that constructivism is flawed on two fronts, it will now be demonstrated that offensive realism provides a more accurate explanation for NATO's survival after 1989 by properly accounting for the critical role of the USA and doing so in an objective manner.

Understanding the Persistence of NATO: A Neorealist Perspective

According to Kenneth Waltz, neorealism is based on three key concepts (Waltz 2010). The first is that the international system is characterized by anarchy, meaning that there is no higher authority governing relations between states. Second, because of this anarchy, states are constantly concerned about the potential threat of other states and must focus on their own self-preservation, which creates a security dilemma (Waltz 2010), given that security is a zero-sum game, where efforts to increase security for one state decrease security for others. The third concept is that the distribution of capabilities among states determines their behavior. For example, during the Cold War, the bipolar distribution of power led states to align with one of the two hegemonies or to try to balance against them.

Applying this theory to understand the creation of NATO, it becomes clear that it was a means for Western European states to ensure their own survival. During the Cold War, NATO played a central role in the American-led security strategy in Western Europe. Up until 1989, the main reason for NATO's existence was to deter a potential Soviet invasion from the East. By 1991, this reasoning became less obvious. From a neorealist perspective, NATO should have dissolved as there was no longer a need to balance against a threat.

[3] Wallace Thies explicitly refers to democratic peace theory in his explanation of NATO's survival (Thies 2009, 33). Democratic peace theory is the idea that democratic countries are less likely to go to war with one another and tend to have more peaceful relations compared to non-democratic countries.

However, NATO was not only created to defend Western Europe, it also served as a tool for American foreign policy. The shift from a bipolar to a unipolar world, in which the US was the sole dominant power, did not change the logic behind NATO. It remained a means to ensure the security of the American-led Western order. Therefore, the persistence of NATO after the Cold War and its subsequent use reflects a strategy of "offensive dominance" through which the US sought to maintain the status quo in Europe in its favor (Hyde-Price 2014). NATO continued to exist because it was in the interest of the new global hegemon for it to do so.

In an anarchical world, states make trade-offs between security (defensive neorealism) and power (offensive neorealism) according to their circumstances. While until the end of the Cold War, NATO can be understood as a means to counterbalance the Soviet Union, after the Cold War it became a means to dominate the European security architecture. Depending on their material position, states decide whether the chances of their survival are increased through security or power.

Importantly, this explanation addresses the bias towards maintaining the status quo in defensive neorealism. Waltz's neorealism suggests that states only need enough power to feel secure against rivals, so once the Cold War was over, maintaining NATO was not necessary.

According to offensive neorealism, hegemony is the best strategy to remain secure. When given the opportunity, states will prioritize power over security as a way to ensure their survival (Mearsheimer 2012). From this perspective, international institutions like NATO are secondary – they exist only to support the power of a dominant state (Mearsheimer 1995).

The theory of constructivism is flawed in its understanding of international institutions like NATO, as it argues that they can reflect something other than the interests of states, such as an identity. However, offensive neorealism posits that states will always prioritize power over security, and that international institutions like NATO are simply tools for the dominant state to further its own interests. This is evident in the United States' continued dominance of the European security architecture through NATO even after the end of the Cold War, as seen in the adoption of the 1991 NATO Strategic Concept[4] which emphasized the preservation of the strategic balance in Europe. This concept suggested the need to *"preserve the strategic balance in Europe"* as a fundamental task of NATO (Stent 2014, 6).

More importantly, in 1991, even though the Cold War had ended, there was still a sense of uncertainty about the future and what it would bring. NATO's importance did not disappear with the Cold War. It was important for American

[4] In November 1991, just days before the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO Heads of State and Government adopted The New Strategic Concept to guide the alliance's transition from the Cold War era to a post-Cold War world. This Concept confirmed the defensive nature of the alliance and the determination of its members to protect their security, emphasizing the continued importance of collective defence and deterrence, while also recognizing the need for cooperative security measures and promoting democratic values. Additionally, it called for contributing to conflict prevention and crisis management in areas of potential instability.

grand strategy because it consolidated the international primacy of the US. Simply because the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia were weakened, this did not mean that NATO should stop worrying about the potential of a resurgent Russia (Murginski and Tonkov 2022, 32). As Margaret Thatcher put at the time: *"You do not cancel your home insurance because there have been fewer burglaries in the last 12 months"* (Martin și Martonffy 2019). This is mirrored by Angela Stent who has suggested that *"The US-Russian agenda in 1992 was limited. President George H.W. Bush and his key advisors, General Brent Scowcroft and Secretary James Baker, were realists who generally viewed foreign policy through the prism of US interest"* (Stent 2014, 10). This sense of uncertainty about the end of the Cold War showed that the security dilemma had not been resolved and the potential for conflict remained.

According to constructivism, the alliance of democratic states within NATO has altered the balance of power and led to a collective decision-making process. However, this is unlikely as Table 1 quickly reveals.

TABLE 1. Military Expenditure by Country (1953-1991, US$ Billion)
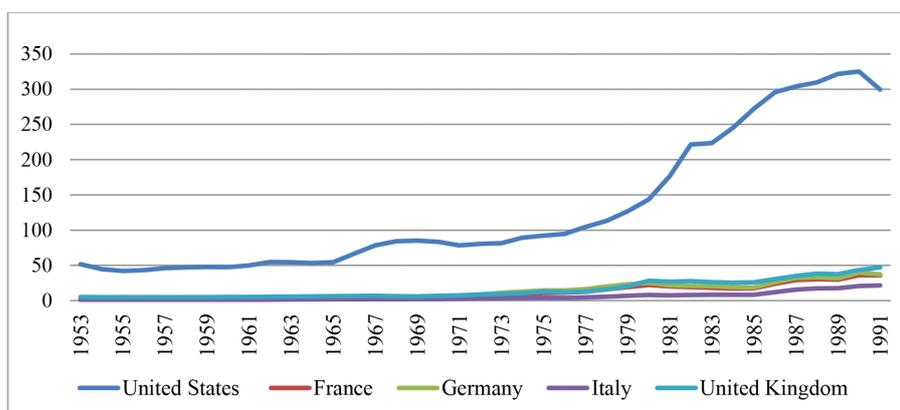
Source: SIPRI[5]

The data of military expenditure between 1953 and 1991 clearly shows that none of the key allies – United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy – came close to the military expenditure of the United States. The material structure of the alliance has a significant impact on the decision-making process, including the ending of the Cold War and the future of NATO, with the US being the dominant force in the alliance rather than an equal member.

Offensive neorealism explains the continuation of NATO in a value-neutral way, without attempting to theorize about what it should or could be. Instead, it is based on the historical context and objective realities of the Cold War and its end. Unlike constructivism, it explains the behavior of states based on the material structure of the international system. The American patronage was crucial for the development of NATO (Best 2014, 30) since its beginning

[5] *The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database* includes data for 173 countries for the period 1949-2021. The database has been newly extended, having in the past only covered the period beginning in 1988 (sipri.org n.d.).

and this guarantee the security of Western Europe during the second half of the 20th century. Even with the end of the Cold War, the security of these countries was still dependent on the United States.

Conclusion

In this scholarly article, I have examined the reasons for NATO's persistence in the post-Cold War era from the perspectives of constructivism and neorealism. My findings suggest that while constructivism provides valuable insights into the role of shared values and collective identities, it fails to fully explain the reality of international relations. On the other hand, offensive neorealism, which takes a value-neutral approach and considers power relations, offers a more comprehensive explanation for NATO's persistence after 1991.

It is important to acknowledge that different theoretical frameworks can explain NATO's continued existence. My comparison of constructivism and neorealism was motivated by a desire to explore different perspectives on NATO's survival and to assess their explanatory power. In this regard, I chose offensive neorealism as the most appropriate lens through which to understand NATO's continued existence, given its emphasis on power relations and its ability to explain the crucial role played by the US in sustaining the alliance.

In conclusion, this paper suggests that NATO's survival after the end of the Cold War is best explained through the lens of offensive neorealism, which emphasizes the role of power relations and the hegemonic leadership of the United States. While constructivism may offer valuable insights into the role of shared values and collective identities in sustaining the alliance, it falls short of providing a complete explanation of NATO's persistence in the post-Cold War era. This analysis aims to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex forces that have shaped the institutional order in Europe, and may provide valuable insights for policymakers and scholars interested in the ongoing evolution of the respected transatlantic alliance.

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