International organisations and the dilemma of hegemonic contestation: NATO's strategic responses to Trump

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Working paper prepared for BISA European Security Workshop

February 2021

Abstract: US President Trump's contestation posed an existential challenge to the survival of NATO. Given its extreme dependency on the US, state-centric theories would have expected NATO to be particularly adaptable to his demands to avoid potentially grave sanctions or even withdrawal. The empirical record, however, suggests that NATO only partially adapted to Trump's calls for greater on burden-sharing and largely resisted his calls for rapprochement with Russia. This article seeks to shed light on this puzzling response by zooming in on the often-neglected role of NATO's institutional actors. It argues that NATO actors strategically responded to Trump's contestation to navigate the dilemma of needing to placate Trump without allowing his demands to subvert the organisation's core purpose. Drawing on twenty original interviews with senior officials, the article finds that NATO's leadership used strategies of agenda-setting, shielding, coalition-building, and brokering to overtly support those demands that promised to generate most goodwill with Trump and were least harmful to NATO, while subtly resisting others that threatened to undermine the core of the organisation. Institutional actors thus exhibited agency, which helped NATO survive Trump's contestation.

Funding information

This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 802568).

Introduction

NATO has weathered the storm of the Presidency of Donald Trump, which was not a foregone conclusion when he entered the White House in January 2017. Both in tone and substance, Trump had differentiated himself during the campaign from virtually all US presidents since the Second World War in his active hostility to acting as benign hegemon of the multilateral order (Cooley and Nexon, 2020; Ikenberry, 2020). In particular, Trump placed his long-held criticism of NATO at the heart of his foreign policy platform, denouncing it as 'obsolete' and casting doubt on the US collective defence guarantees (Laderman and Simms, 2017; Rapp-Hooper, 2020). But whereas the President withdrew the US from the Iran Nuclear Deal, the Paris Climate Agreement, the WHO, UNHCR, UNESCO, and subverted the WTO and the Green Climate Fund from within, Trump eventually embraced NATO.

State-centric accounts would suggest that only radical adaptation to satisfy Trump's demands could have saved NATO given its singular dependence on the US (e.g. Hawkins et al., 2006; Lake, 2009; Martin, 1992; Moravcsik, 1999). At the dawn of Trump's election, the US accounted for 72% of overall allied defence spending, 42% of all NATO troops, and 22% of NATO's civilian and military budget (NATO, 2019). The US is the *de facto* indispensable power without whose military and financial contributions the organisation would cease to exist and also the only member state with a plausible outside option (Sperling and Webber, 2019; Stone, 2011). Surprisingly, a close examination of the empirical evidence suggests that NATO only partially adapted to Trump's burden-sharing agenda and largely resisted his calls for rapprochement with Russia. Indeed, NATO's most ambitious reforms during Trump's tenure related to its deterrence and defence posture vis-à-vis Russia including the Readiness Initiative or rotational Forward Presence (Tardy, 2020).

This article sets out to explain NATO's puzzling response to Trump by focusing on the role played by NATO's often neglected institutional actors – the officials in the International Staff and the Secretary General. Specifically, it traces *how* NATO actors responded to Trump's contestation, inquires *why* responses varied across Trump's demands, and evaluates *what* success institutional actors' responses had. Most extant accounts concentrate on the role of states in contesting international organisations (IOs) or responding to contestation (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2018; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020; Jupille et al., 2013; Morse and Keohane, 2014; Zuern 2018) or concentrate on structural drivers of contestation such as power shifts or changes in the normative foundation of societies (e.g. Kruck and Zangl, 2020). While identifying both macro-forces driving institutional change and the role that states play is necessary (see Pierson 2004), these accounts tend to be incomplete as they neglect the role that IOs play in mediating contestation (Bauer et al., 2017; Biermann and Siebenhuehner, 2009; Chorev, 2012; Hirschmann, 2020). Gray (2018), for example, shows that the quality of their bureaucracies is a key determinant of IO's vitality, while Debre and Dijkstra (2020) demonstrate that IOs with greater bureaucratic capacity are less likely to die when challenged and more likely to exploit crises as opportunities for organisational growth. Thus, the outcome of contestation is not predetermined in many cases but, inter alia, contingent on how the IO responds.

Drawing on twenty original interviews with senior NATO and allied officials, this article indeed argues that NATO actors strategically responded to Trump's contestation to navigate the dilemma of needing to placate Trump without allowing his demands to undermine the organisation. Trump's demands on burden-sharing were congruent with NATO institutional actor's own preferences for greater defence spending among allies. NATO actors sensed an opportunity to placate Trump while strengthening the alliance, and hence actively drove the adaptation process while going out of their way to sell success to the US President. Trump's calls for rapprochement with Russia, however, threatened the very purpose of NATO. Thus, NATO institutional actors could neither afford to openly resist Trump and risk his sanctioning or withdrawal, nor could they concede the most fundamental purpose of the organisation forged to protect European security against Russian aggression, which had been reinvigorated by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. To navigate this dilemma, they strategically resisted his demands by shielding NATO's Russia policy from Trump and building coalitions with US actors in favour of continued robust defence and deterrence policy to reduce the costs of sanctioning.

These findings of NATO's institutional agency are striking and counterintuitive because Trump's contestation of NATO is a least likely case for institutional agency. First, NATO remains a largely intergovernmental organisation operating in the sensitive field of security, where member states are particularly wary about sovereignty costs. Second, in cases of hegemonic contestation, the extreme dependency of the organisation on the contesting state should minimise institutional actor's room for manoeuvre. This paper therefore challenges the prevailing consensus among scholars who merely consider NATO an epiphenomenal instrument of, or moderating structure for, states (e.g. Hyde-Price, 2016; Wallander, 2000; Walt, 1997). Schimmelfennig representatively observes that 'strong versions of institutional theory [which emphasise the agential role of institutional actors] have not been prominent or supported in studies of NATO' (2016: 94). Accordingly, compared to other prominent IOs such as the European Union (e.g. Schuette, 2021) or the International Monetary Fund (e.g. Broome, 2015), NATO's institutional actors have hitherto received little attention and this article seeks to fill the lacuna (see Mayer, 2014; Dijkstra, 2016; Johnston, 2017).

To answer how, why, and with what success NATO institutional actors responded to Trump's contestation, the article is structured as follows. First, it theorises how institutional actors respond to hegemonic contestation. Second, it outlines NATO's institutional capacity, before, third, deriving Trump's and institutional actor's preferences on key NATO policy. Fourth, the article traces how institutional actors responded to demands for greater burden-sharing and rapprochement with Russia – cases of preference congruity and incongruity between hegemon and institutional actors respectively. Finally, it discusses whether, and if so how, NATO's responses contributed to the reversal of Trump's position on NATO, and thus its survival.

IO strategic responses to hegemonic contestation

Hegemonic contestation poses a grave danger to the continued survival of IOs. Hegemonic contestation here refers to public criticism by the hegemon accompanied by demands for

institutional changes and, implicit or explicit, threats of withdrawal (see Dassler et al., 2019; Morse and Keohane, 2014). IOs tend to be extremely dependent on, and thus vulnerable to, the hegemonic member state, who makes unrivalled material contributions and possess superior sources of influence (Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019). Even under hegemonic contestation, however, IOs can exert agency and protect their preferences if they respond strategically. *Strategic response* here denotes that IOs leverage their institutional capacity to exploit environmental opportunities. Strategic IOs thus deliberately tailor their response to the individual contestation in light of the availability of their internal levers of powers and the nature of the external opportunity structure (see Chorev, 2012). Astute leadership by actors within the IO, who recognise the nature of both contestation and environment and can mobilise internal power resources, is thus a prerequisite for such purposive and intentional behaviour. Strategic thus contrast with passive responses of simply following orders of the hegemon or trying to sit out the contestation. The ensuing theoretical model of IO strategic responses is therefore built on four causal factors: the *preference constellation* between hegemon and IO, the IO's *internal institutional capacity*, nature of the *external opportunity structure*, and the *leadership* qualities of institutional actors. Unlike rationalist and sociological accounts that view either member states or bureaucracies respectively as the dominant actors within IOs (Biermann, 2017), this model focusses on the nexus of member states and institutional actors.

Preference congruity and the choice of adaptation or resistance

The most fundamental causal factor shaping IO responses is the preference congruity between the hegemon's demands and the institutional actor's preferences. The premise of this theoretical model is that institutional actors can act on their autonomous preferences. While for realism, preferences of hegemons and institutional actors cannot diverge, since epiphenomenal IOs mirror the distribution of power (Mearsheimer, 1994/1995), institutionalist theory shows that IOs can develop preferences independent of the member states (Ege, 2020). Fundamentally, all IOs want to survive (Haas, 1964). Recent research demonstrates that IO mortality, or IOs descending into a zombie-like state, is more common than widely assumed (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020; Gray, 2018). Amidst the contemporaneously growing contestation of multilateralism, IO officials are naturally concerned about the looming spectre of IO decline and death.

Amidst hegemonic contestation there are two possible scenarios. First, preferences of the hegemon and institutional actors may overlap. While institutional actors would not usually be expected to share critique of their own organisation, they may have preferences in common with the hegemonic contestant if free riding of weaker states increasingly undermines the provision of public goods (Olson, 1965; Zuern, 2018: 97ff.). In such cases, institutional actors would benefit from the organisation's adaptation to the hegemon's demands. The ideal IO response would therefore be to *strategically adapt*, i.e. mobilising internal powers to exploit environmental opportunities in order to drive adaptation process forward against the potential opposition from other member states or outside actors. In line with realist expectations, if the institutional actors lacked institutional powers and/or faced severe environmental constraints,

they would play no discernible role as the member states would determine the future of the organisation.

Second, preferences of the hegemon and institutional actors may clash, which creates a dilemma for institutional actors (Heinkelman-Wild and Jankauskas, 2020; also de Vries et al. 2021). On the one hand, their natural desire for survival generates pressures to adapt. If hegemons sanctioned IOs, or even withdrew, the continued existence of the IO would be in peril. In IOs where the power distribution among member is balanced, institutional actors must weigh up the potential costs of inaction in the eyes of the contesting state against the costs of adapting in the eyes of the non-contesting states, which did not pressure for change and thus appear satisfied with the status quo. In IOs characterised by stark power asymmetry, such as NATO, outright resistance to the hegemon's demands is not a viable response for survival-seeking institutional actors.

On the other hand, hegemonic contestation often also creates pressures to resist. Hegemonic contestation is likely to address core rather than peripheral features of the organisations because hegemons tend to possess sufficient formal and informal powers within organisations to reform technicalities. Thus, adaptation risks undermining the very material or ideational purpose of the IO, which the officials tend to identify with. Thus, IOs are faced with either high costs of compliance if they adapt or high costs of sanctioning if they resist. Unlike passive institutional actors, strategic institutional actors may be able to navigate this dilemma by avoiding overt confrontation with the hegemon while subtly resisting and/or redefining the meaning of its demands. This form of *strategic resistance* thereby seeks to minimise the costs of sanctioning by the hegemon for non-compliance (Chorev, 2012; Oliver, 1991).

Institutional capacity, opportunity structure, and leadership as necessary factors for strategic responses

Faced with either preference congruity or incongruity, institutional actors will better protect the organisation if they can respond strategically. This ability is contingent on the interplay of three necessary factors. First, institutional actors must possess the formal or informal capacity to formulate and implement strategic responses, here referred to as *internal institutional capacity*. Otherwise, they are little more than toothless administrative bodies without agential qualities. *Internal institutional capacity* is thus a heuristic category that aggregates internal power sources necessary to formulate and implement strategic responses to contestation. Formulating a strategic response requires sufficient size of the secretariat so that enough policy-grade personnel is available to analyse the challenge and devise a response (Debre and Dijkstra, 2020; Heldt and Schmidtke, 2017). Larger secretariats also tend to have a designated policy planning unit that deals precisely with strategic challenges to the organisation. In order to subsequently implement the strategy, the IO needs to possess formal and/or informal powers. The level of delegated authority to proactively set the agenda or take decisions is the most formal and visible manifestation of institutional capacity (Hooghe et al., 2017). The greater the level of delegation, the greater the array of potential responses available to the IO. IOs without decision-making powers, for example, will not alone be able to adapt policies or institutions.

Furthermore, IOs with public communications units should be better able to promote their strategy, particularly given the increasing mediatised environment of international politics (Ecker-Erhardt, 2018).

Substantial institutional capacity is thus a necessary but insufficient factor for IOs to respond strategically to contestation. IOs operate in a complex environment where they are rarely the most powerful actor. Therefore, the second factor that shapes the extent to which institutional actors can respond strategically is the *external opportunity structure* (e.g. Barber, 1992). This theoretical model focusses on two components of the external opportunity structure which should most directly shape the behaviour of IOs: the domestic politics within the hegemonic state and the role of other member states. Relaxing the rationalist assumption that states are unitary actors opens the possibility for competition among domestic actors within the contesting state. In the US, a plethora of actors are involved in foreign policy making, including Congress, State Department, Pentagon, and the National Security Council as well as private actors including think tanks and business groups (Porter, 2018; Walt, 2018). The more heterogenous these groups, the more opportunities for institutional actors to resist pressure from the hegemon. Furthermore, the role of other member states, especially the big three European NATO members Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, should not be discounted even if the IO's dependency on the hegemon is pronounced. Should other member states be in broad agreement with the institutional actors, they will be more likely to mount a strong defence of their preferences and vice versa.

Aligning latent institutional powers and external opportunities, however, is not an automatic process but requires agency. Thus, the third necessary factor for strategic behaviour by institutional actors is astute *leadership* by senior officials, who need to acknowledge the existential nature of the contestation, recognise the external constraints and opportunities, and then mobilise the institutional capacity. Public administration as well as political leadership literatures (e.g. Boin et al., 2016) highlight the significance of leader's personal qualities such as intelligence, diplomatic talent, and empathy as well as the seniority in terms of their previous positions, and thus diplomatic network and reputation among heads of states and governments, for how effectively IOs respond to contestation. Mathiason (2007: 80) also emphasises that 'executive heads must get along with the United States'.

Four strategies and conditions for strategic responses

Institutional actors have at least four types of strategies at their disposal to respond to contestation, each of which depends on specific internal powers, external conditions, and leadership activities. While these strategies are analytically distinct, in practice they may overlap, or actors may employ a combination of these strategies. Distinguishing these strategies a priori allows identifying observable indicators, which subsequently serve as the basis for process-tracing the link between institutional actors' responses and the eventual outcome of Trump's contestation.

First, institutional actors can *set the agenda* in their favour. The extant literature suggests several agenda-setting mechanisms including venue shopping for the most receptive location (e.g Kingdon, 1984), raising public awareness and issue framing (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991), and shaping internal proceedings (Tallberg, 2010). Institutional actors may start their agenda-setting activities by selecting among several venues through which to pursue its agenda. In the case of NATO, these venues entail the formal meeting of the national ambassadors in the NAC, bilateral meetings, or meetings in another organisation. Effective venue-shopping presupposes the availability of different institutional routes, which is more likely in complex organisations (such as the EU). To change the public narrative surrounding the contestation of the IO, institutional actors also need to engage in public diplomacy efforts. Over the past two decades, IOs have been investing heavily in building up communicative capacities to engage with the increasing politicisation of international cooperation (e.g. Ecker-Erhardt, 2018; Tallberg and Zuern, 2019). Using among others press releases, social media campaigns, and interviews and speeches by prominent officials, IOs may thus be able to to set the agenda. Whether such efforts are successful depends, internally, on the resources dedicated to public diplomacy and the prominence of senior leadership in the public domain and, externally, on whether the media environment in the respective target state offers opportunities for such interventions. Furthermore, institutional actors can also set the agenda by shaping internal proceedings. This capacity depends on their competences, for instance whether institutional actors are in charge of organising summits and setting the agenda for meetings.

Second, institutional actors can *shield* proceedings. It is common practice to isolate international negotiations from domestic pressures in order to render compromises more likely (Kleine, 2013; Schuette, 2019). But shielding may also be employed to prevent the interference from individual states. Institutional actors can aim to deflect the hegemon's attention by keeping a low profile through, for example, scarce public communications (Hirschmann, 2020). Alternatively, institutional actors can use procedural tricks to exclude controversial policies from the agenda or precooking summit conclusions (Beach and Smeets, 2019). The success of shielding efforts is contingent on the procedural powers of institutional actors, the degree of politicisation of the organisation in the hegemonic state, and how much attention the hegemon pays.

Third, institutional actors can *build coalitions* with other actors who share their preferences in driving on the adaptation process or resisting hegemon's demands. Coalition-building thus aims to alter the balance of power between proponents and opponents in the institutional actor's favour (see Schattschneider, 1960). Institutional actors can variably collude with like-minded member states (Dijkstra, 2017), orchestrate affine intermediaries to pursue their objectives (Abbott et al., 2015), or bring non-governmental actors on board (Joenssen et al., 2013). What is missing from the existing literature is that institutional actors can also build coalitions with political actors from within the contesting state if the hegemonic demands are domestically controversial. Institutional actors' ability to build coalition is internally conditional on the leadership's recognition of the potential to harness the support of other actors and its networks beyond the organisation. Externally, it depends on the existence of like-minded actors that have complementary resources.

One of the central functions of IOs is to reduce the transaction costs of cooperation by devising solutions to protracted collective action problems (Hawkins et al., 2006; Keohane, 1984; Tallberg, 2002). Institutional actors can use this role to, fourth, *broker* compromises between contesting hegemon and other member states in a way that furthers their own preferences (Beach, 2004). Institutional actors frequently act as formal or informal chairs in member state negotiations to overcome deadlock (Tallberg, 2010). Through bilateral encounters and a reputation of being an honest broker, institutional actors receive privileged information about member states' distributional preferences, which may allow institutional actors to identify and subsequently push for possible zones of agreement. By, for example, convening member states to negotiate, establishing backchannels among officials, or offering a compromise text, institutional actors can protect their preferences through brokering. Whether brokering protects institutional actors' preferences depends on whether their senior leadership possesses the diplomatic qualities required to reach delicate compromises and a conducive preference constellation among member states that renders a landing zone possible.

In sum, this theoretical framework proposes that whether institutional actors resist or adapt to hegemon's demands and do so strategically or passively causally depends on the interplay of the preference congruity, internal institutional capacity, external opportunity structure, and leadership quality among institutional actors. These propositions guide the ensuing empirical section, which traces the distinct strategies of agenda-setting, shielding, coalition-building, and brokering in the case of President Trump's contestation of NATO.

NATO's strategic Trump management

After outlining NATO's institutional capacity and establishing the preferences of President Trump and institutional actors on central NATO policies, the empirical section analyses how NATO responded to US contestation between January 2017 and November 2020 on two cases with varying preference constellations: burden-sharing between allies and rapprochement with Russia. It demonstrates the striking agency of institutional actors in shaping and selling NATO's burden-sharing agenda and circumventing Trump's opposition to implement a robust Russia policy. Methodologically, the article relies on a combination of minimalist process-tracing and counterfactuals (Bennett and Checkel, 2014: 7). Twenty original interviews with senior NATO and national officials serve as the primary source of data, which is triangulated with publicly available information such as official documents, press statements, memoirs, and journalistic accounts.[1]

NATO's institutional capacity: more than a supporting body

NATO is not conventionally considered an autonomous actor. NATO's civilian institutional structure comprises the North Atlantic Council and the International Staff led by the Secretary General. The former is the main decision-making body and represents the member states, while

[1] The interview response rate was approximately 75%.

the latter is NATO's secretariat based at the headquarters in Brussels. The alliance remains a largely intergovernmental organisation, in which member states take decisions by unanimity in the North Atlantic Council and institutional actors – the International Staff and the Secretary General – possess very limited decision-making authority (Hooghe et al., 2017: 731-40; Mayer, 2014). In a formal sense, NATO's institutional actors are principally designed as supporting bodies that steer the 'process of consultation and decision-making' among the allies (NATO, 2017).

A deeper look, however, reveals that the Secretary General in particular has informal diplomatic and communicative powers at his disposal (Hendrickson, 2014). As the permanent chair of the North Atlantic Council, he (for only men have hitherto held this post) can set the agenda and facilitate compromises. He is also the organiser of NATO summits and acts as the spokesperson of the alliance. In terms of the size of the secretariat, NATO ranks among the largest IOs with 1000 civilians working in the International Staff in Brussels, almost 500 of whom are policy-grade officials (Dijkstra, 2016). The International Staff consists of seven divisions, including a dedicated Public Diplomacy Division, while the Secretary General's Private Office also includes a Policy Planning Unit, an internal think tank that offers policy expertise and strategic insights. Until recently, NATO's Secretary Generals have been experienced diplomats or former ministers but not heads of state (the sole exception was former Belgian Prime Minister Paul-Henri Spaak between 1957 and 1961). The last Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, however, was elected in 2009 as a sitting prime minister of Denmark and the incumbent, Jens Stoltenberg, was a former prime minister of Norway. Former heads of state tend to view themselves as equals rather than servants of what previously were colleagues in the North Atlantic Council and should have strong networks among senior politicians in member states. As such, the trend toward selecting former heads of state as Secretary General is indicative of stronger diplomatic prowess of the office (Hendrickson, 2014).

Despite the lack of decision-making powers, NATO institutional actors thus have some potentially powerful levers at their disposal. The Secretary General in particular can use the power of his office to set the agenda in meetings of the North Atlantic Council or in public in his role as spokesperson, steer summit proceedings, and utilise his network to build coalitions among allies, while the International Staff and Private Office should possess the necessary policy expertise to frame debates in favourable terms. Moreover, the International Staff tends to have extensive networks in Washington as both the deputy Secretary General as well as the Supreme Allied Commander Europe are always US citizens and usually former senior US officials. As such, NATO's institutional capacity is not negligible and may allow its institutional actors to strategically devise responses to Trump's contestation.

Preferences of President Trump and NATO institutional actors

The preference constellations between the Trump administration and NATO institutional actors varied across policy fields. Four key preferences crystalise from Trump's public remarks. The most central and recurring theme in his tirades was that of unequal *burden-sharing* since allies 'rip off' the US (Laderman and Simms, 2017). As early as 1987, Trump

complained that the US was 'defending wealthy nations for nothing' and that NATO members 'laugh at us because of [our] own stupidy' (Trump, 1987). During his presidential campaign and in office, he intensified demands for greater military spending among allies. Threatening to upend 70-yearlong US grand strategy towards Europe at a whim, he demanded that allies must 'pay up, including for past deficiencies, or they have to get out. And if that breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO' (Trump, 2016a). He also questioned the underlying logic of unconditional support for allies when positing that he would only defend Baltic allies against Russian aggression if they had 'fulfilled their obligations to us' (Trump, 2016b).

Second, Trump expressed great sympathies for *Russia*. He denied Russia interfered in the US election in 2016, lobbied to reintegrate Russia in the G7, and implicitly acknowledged Russia's annexation of Crimea. Moreover, his foreign policy team and trusted circle was stacked with Russophiles with close connections to Moscow (including Paul Mannafort, Carter Page, and Newt Gingrich) (see Belton, 2020 on Trump's connection to the Kremlin). Notwithstanding his later opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, rapprochement with Russia was Trump's declared foreign policy objective. Trump's third preference was for NATO to assume greater responsibilities in *counterterrorism* activities and alleviate the burden on the US in the Middle East. In January 2017, he infamously called NATO 'obsolete' because 'it wasn't taking care of terror'. Later during his tenure, he also demanded NATO aides the US in its rivalry with *China* as part of his wider agenda to contain Beijing.

Trump's preferences only partially overlapped with those of institutional actors. NATO actors had long been supportive of greater allied defence investment via better burden-sharing to meet the diverse security challenges in an increasingly hostile international landscape (e.g. de Hoop Scheffer, 2007; Rasmussen, 2011; Stoltenberg, 2015). Trump's election and his overriding focus on burden-sharing simultaneously offered an opportunity for NATO actors to further their preferences for greater defence spending among allies while posing a threat to the very survival of NATO should Trump's demands not be satisfied (Interview#7). On burden-sharing, preferences between Trump and NATO institutional actors were thus largely aligned. In contrast, NATO institutional actors' preferences on Russia were incongruous with Trump's desire for rapprochement. Several senior officials concurred in the view that continued deterrence of Russia was crucial for NATO's raison d'etre to protect its (Eastern) member states given not only Russia's aggressions in Ukraine but also cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and interferences in Europe's neighbourhood from Syria to Libya (Interviews#3,4,7,9). On China and terrorism, however, those NATO interviewed for this paper expressed no explicit evidence that they had distinct preferences beyond the desire to allow Trump to take cheap victories (Interviews#11,18).

In sum, the preferences of Trump and NATO institutional actors aligned on burden-sharing, collided on Russia, and were largely agnostic on terrorism and China. To probe the theoretical expectations that preference congruity is one causal force in shaping institutional actors' responses, the ensuing section juxtaposes the cases of burden-sharing and NATO's Russia policy.

Institutional actors and Trump's burden-sharing demands: strategic adaptation

Institutional actors' concrete objectives on burden-sharing were twofold. First, they desired to use the election of Trump and his vocal criticism on burden-sharing to push allies to invest more. Second, institutional actors needed to convince Trump that allies were responding positively to Trump's demands. They were aware that allies would not immediately be able to drastically increase defence spending, given the political complexity and long-term nature of budgetary spending plans. It was thus a balancing act of embracing Trump's agenda while selling moderate increases in defence spending as successes to please Trump (Interview #7). Institutional actors had no formal means to compel allies to increase defence spending. Hence, they principally pursued agenda-setting and, to a lesser extent brokerage and coalition-building strategies, to strategically adapt to Trump's demands and achieve their dual objectives.

Stoltenberg chose the public realm as his principal venue through which to pursue his strategy. He used his prominent position to publicly pressure allies to increase defence spending and credit the US President for allegedly achieving greater burden-sharing. As early as the day prior to Trump's inauguration on 20 January 2017, Stoltenberg expressed 'absolute confidence' that President Trump was committed to NATO and lauded Trump for his 'strong message' on defence spending, pledging to 'work with President Trump on how to adapt NATO' (Stoltenberg, 2017a). On Stoltenberg's first visit to Washington in April 2017, he embraced Trump's criticism of allies' insufficient defence spending. The Secretary General also expressed gratitude to Trump for his 'strong commitment to Europe' (Stoltenberg, 2017b). Appeasing Trump and playing to his ego seemed the purpose of Stoltenberg's visit to the White House in May 2018, when he thanked the US President for his 'leadership […] on the issue of defence spending [which] has really helped to make a difference' (Stoltenberg, 2018a), a sentiment he echoed at the Brussels Summit in July 2018 (Stoltenberg, 2018b).

In 2019, the Secretary General intensified his tailored communicative efforts aimed at Trump and repeatedly referred to what emerged as NATO's new mantra on burden-sharing: 'Before they were cutting billions. Now they are adding billions. By the end of next year, that figure will rise to one hundred billion' (Stoltenberg, 2019a). In January, he appeared on Trump's favourite US news channel, Fox, crediting Trump for an 'extra $100 billion' allies will have added to their defence spending by the end of 2020 (Fox, 2019).[2] When invited by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi as the first Secretary General of any IO to speak in front of both Houses of Congress in April 2019, he lauded President Trump's positive impact on the alliance and again referred to the burden-sharing slogan (Stoltenberg, 2019a). Prior to the London Leaders summit in December 2019, Stoltenberg reiterated to Trump that 'your leadership on defense spending is having a real impact', citing new defence spending figures that showed a $130 billion increase to the defence spending budgets, which is expected to rise to $400 billion by 2024 (Stoltenberg, 2019c).

[2] Indeed, national defence budgets have been on the rise. In 2015, defence budgets among European allies and Canada increased by 1.6%, in 2016 by 2.9%, in 2017 by 5.8%, in 2018 by 4%, and in 2019 by 3.9% (NATO, 2019). However, only 15 out of 29 countries have set out plans to reach 2% of GDP of overall defence spending by 2024.

Thus, the Secretary General strategically purported that Trump had prevailed over the opposition from other member states. Importantly, the Secretary General always chose to compare the spending figures to 2016 – the year of Trump's election – rather than 2015 when the allies' budgets first showed increases to obfuscate that reasons beyond Trump could be responsible (NATO, 2019). One interviewee (#7) adds that Stoltenberg would always present the defence spending figures in very simple bar charts to capture his attention and cater for Trump's alleged short attention span and inattention to detail.

Stoltenberg also used his procedural powers as chair of the North Atlantic Council to set the burden-sharing agenda. During the tumultuous 2018 summit, Trump hijacked a working meeting that was originally aimed at fostering relations with Ukraine and Georgia and reportedly ranted for 20 minutes about European's inadequate defence spending and threatened to 'go its own way' (Trump, 2018). In response, the Secretary General turned the working meeting into an impromptu crisis meeting on burden-sharing, which allowed Trump to vent his frustration and pressured Europeans to make concessions. In the end, the crisis meeting appeased Trump and let him walk away with a sense of victory, which proved critical in smoothing tensions in the medium term (Interviews#3,10).

Complementing the agenda-setting strategy, Stoltenberg also sought to exert diplomatic pressures and broker compromises among other member states. He regularly toured the capitals to persuade Europeans and Canada of the need for greater defence spending. He tended to explicitly invoke the threat of US withdrawal to strengthen his case (Interviews#2,13,18). In private he would accept that overall defence investment was only one measure of the Wales investment pledge, with investment in major equipment the other. But in public, he sided with Trump in concentrating on overall spending relative to GDP, even though it is a brute and largely meaningless measure of burden sharing (Cordesman, 2019). Some European allies consequently criticised Stoltenberg for being Trump's mouthpiece (Interview#2).

A final expression of NATO's strategic response was the agreement on a new Common Funding formula reached in November 2019, which involved a combination of brokerage, coalition-building, and subsequently agenda-setting by NATO actors. In order to alleviate Trump's criticism of allied, and in particular German, underspending, Stoltenberg's office worked behind the scenes with officials from the German chancellery and the US National Security Council to increase Germany contributions to match the reduced US contributions to NATO's budget (Interview#17; see also Bolton, 2020: 135). While this was largely symbolic given the relatively insignificant sums involved, it subsequently allowed Stoltenberg to publicly tout another victory for Trump's burden-sharing agenda.

Case	Preference constellation	IO response	Institutional strategies	Necessary factors
Burden-sharing	Congruence	Strategic adaptation	• Agenda-setting • Brokerage • Coalition-building	• Stoltenberg leadership • Trump's character • US media
Russia policy	Incongruence	Strategic resistance	• Coalition-building • Shielding	• Divisions in US • Stoltenberg leadership • Procedural powers

Table 1: Summary of findings. Own illustration.

In sum, this section demonstrated that NATO institutional actors strategically adapted to Trump's demands on burden-sharing. In particular, they used agenda-setting strategies, and to a lesser extent brokerage and coalition-building, to actively support Trump's demands while simultaneously working tirelessly to convince him that other allies were heeding his call to prevent US sanctions. Stoltenberg not only understood the power of the media for public discourse in general and the US President – a reportedly avid consumer of US television – in particular, but also consciously tailored his simplistic and servile communication style to flatter the egocentric Trump (interviews#2,7,11,12,18). Secretary General Stoltenberg's astute agenda-setting strategies proved consequently critical in placating Trump, who eventually reversed his position on burden-sharing and expressed satisfaction with the way NATO had satisfied his demands (Trump, 2019). Thus, Stoltenberg's astute leadership, the susceptibility of the US President to flattery, and the attention granted Stoltenberg by the US media were critical factors.

Institutional actors and NATO's Russia policy: strategic resistance

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO has shifted back to its original purpose of providing territorial security to its member states against Russia. Indeed, a robust deterrence and defence posture vis-à-vis Russia is deeply ingrained in the organisation, whose function was famously described by the first Secretary General Lord Ismay as 'keep[ing] the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down'. NATO and national officials, however, worried that Trump would reduce the US investment in Europe and subvert NATO initiatives aimed at bolstering the defence and deterrence posture (Interviews#2,13,14). Trump's contestation of NATO's Russia policy thus epitomises the aforementioned dilemma IOs face amid hegemonic contestation: overt resistance risked frustrating Trump and fuel his desire for withdrawal, while passive adaptation to his demands would subvert the very purpose the organisation. As a result, NATO institutional actors set out to strategically elude overt resistance to Trump's demands by employing strategies of coalition-building and shielding.

NATO institutional actors sought to exploit the divisions among US foreign policymakers to build coalitions with supportive actors. NATO institutional actors worked through two channels in the US system rather than the White House: 1) the traditional transatlantic

establishment in the State Department, Pentagon, and in parts the National Security Council and 2) Congress. After Trump's initial appointments of NATO-sceptical officials and foreign policy advisers proved short-lived (e.g. Michael Flynn as national security advisor or Stephen Bannon who also served on the National Security Council), transatlanticist establishment figures took over. General McMaster was appointed national security advisor in the summer of 2017 (later replaced by NATO-supporting John Bolton) and swiftly brought in experienced foreign policy experts such as Fiona Hill, while General Kelly became White House chief of staff. Together with Secretary of Defence Mattis, they formed a strong alliance that sought to tame Trump's anti-NATO instincts (Porter, 2018: 43-4; Walt, 2018: 221ff.). Indeed, one interviewee confirms that there were consistent backchannels between Stoltenberg's office and supportive US officials for most of Trump's term to coordinate policy and circumvent the White House as much as possible (Interview #17).

General Mattis in particular emerged as a particularly strong supporter of NATO's eastern policy and became the institutional actor's main point of contact (Interview#7,20). It was General Mattis who devised NATO's Readiness Initiative, eventually agreed in 2018 with limited involvement of the White House, which committed allies to have 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons, and 30 naval combat vessels ready to use within 30 days (Interview#3). NATO, with active support from the US, also implemented the Enhanced Forward Presence initiative in 2017, agreed at the Warsaw summit in 2016, by deploying four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to bolster its deterrence. Throughout Trump's term in office, the Secretary General also cultivated relations with US parliamentarians, regularly hosting them in Brussels. This coalition-building between NATO institutional actors and non-White House actors proved instrumental pushing through reforms on NATO's deterrence and defence posture by generating domestic pressure on Trump and minimising his direct involvement.

Beyond cultivating relations with supportive actors in the US, NATO institutional actors also played a critical role in shielding NATO's Russia policy from Trump. In an attempt to keep the issue beneath Trump's radar, Stoltenberg prioritised burden-sharing over Russia policy in his public communications with Trump (Interview #17). In the press conferences or remarks following their six bilateral meetings between April 2017 and December 2019, Stoltenberg always emphasised the need for greater burden-sharing and often agreed with Trump that NATO needed intensify its counterterrorist activities. However, he did not mention Russia policy in three of the press conferences, while in the others he only addressed Russia cursorily (see White House, 2019; Stoltenberg, 2017b, 2018b, 2018c, 2019b, 2019c). By selectively engaging with Trump's demands in public, the Secretary General sought to focus his attention on the agenda NATO's institutional actors supported and were least harmful to the organisation, which illustrates that NATO's response to Trump's demands on burden-sharing and Russia were intimately connected.

In addition, NATO institutional actors leveraged their procedural powers to shield its Russia policy from Trump. Senior NATO officials used their competences as summit managers to precook the critical communique of the 2018 summit. A few weeks before, Trump had refused

to sign the final communique of the G7 session, and officials were concerned that in his anger about burden-sharing, he would derail what became the most substantial NATO declaration in years. Together with US diplomats, the Secretary General successfully pressured ambassadors to agree upon a declaration prior to the summit to avoid last-minute interferences from Trump (Interviews#3,9,10,17,19; also Bolton, 2020: 137). Allies agreed on the Readiness Initiative, criticised Russia, invited North Macedonia to join, and established an Atlantic Command post to facilitate swift response to a potential war in Europe.

Further manifestations of NATO actor's shielding efforts were their decisions to re-organise summits where Russia policy was a central discussion point. One of the first decisions of the Secretary General was to postpone Trump's first visit to NATO's headquarters to May 2017. Officials in the International Staff hoped that Trump's anger would dissipate over the months and that he would be taught the value of NATO by the adults in the room, i.e. General Mattis and his then chief of staff John Kelly (Interviews#1,4,7,16). In an attempt to prevent Trump disrupting celebrations, the Secretary General also downgraded NATO's 70th anniversary summit in April 2019 in Washington D.C. to a foreign ministerial meeting, which was attended by Secretary of State Pompeo instead who was much more critical of Russia than Trump (Interviews#3,4).

Thus, this section showed that NATO institutional actors strategically resisted Trump's calls for rapprochement with Russia. They used a combination of coalition-building and shielding strategies, which were deliberately tailored to exploit the divisions among the US foreign policy establishment and their position as summit organisers. Stoltenberg and his office again played a critical leadership role in implementing these strategies. The most consequential moment of agency of NATO actors was their shepherding of the 2018 summit, which proved to be among the most consequential in years in terms of new policy measures on Russia and beyond.

Success and causal relevance of NATO's strategic responses

This article has hitherto traced how NATO institutional actors responded to Trump and explained the variant responses across the two cases. The final ambition is to assess whether NATO institutional actors' strategic behaviour actually succeeded in protecting their preferences. The success of NATO institutional actors' response to Trump can be assessed against the twin objective that emanates from the dilemma of hegemonic contestation: 1) placating Trump to prevent US withdrawal and sanctions and 2) protecting the core purpose of the organisation.

NATO has not suffered the fate of most other IOs which Trump contested: he neither withdrew the US nor substantially sanctioned the organisation. After continued criticism during the first two years in office, Trump even began to publicly embrace NATO in 2019. In his state of the union speech in February, he described his tentative change of mind: 'For years, the United States was being treated very unfairly by NATO — but now we have secured a $100 billion increase in defense spending from NATO allies' (Trump, 2019) – citing a figure Stoltenberg

had given in his interview on Fox shortly before. At the London Leaders meeting in December, he declared that 'NATO serves a great purpose […] especially with the fact that NATO is becoming much more flexible' (White House, 2019).

Indeed, short of withdrawal, Trump could have been much more destructive from within. Trump's initially belligerent rhetoric had never matched US NATO-policy on the ground (Interviews#7,12,14). The US steadily increased the budgetary allocation for the European Deterrence Initiative[3], actively participated in military exercises (20 000 US troops participated in the Trident Juncture exercise in 2018), and took command of one multinational battlegroup in Poland under the umbrella of the Enhanced Forward Presence (Sperling and Webber, 2019). However, in June 2020 Trump announced plans to withdraw almost 12 000 troops from Germany, which, if executed, would seriously undermine US and NATO operational capacity (Interview#11), even if the decision merely continues a trend that predates Trump of US withdrawal of troops from Germany. Nevertheless, contrary to most gloomy predictions, Trump did not substantially undermine NATO's operations (Ringmose and Webber, 2020).

Furthermore, the alliance was stronger militarily at the end of Trump's tenure than prior, with greater defence investment by member states, stronger capabilities, and more effective institutional structures (Interviews #4,5,6,7,8,9,12,13,14,15). The alliance also expanded its counterterrorism activities, began the process of developing a China strategy, and strengthened its cyber capabilities. Support for NATO in the US beyond the White House remains strong. In January 2019, Congress passed the NATO Support Act, which reaffirmed its unwavering backing of NATO by prohibiting Trump to use federal funds to withdraw from NATO. On the political level, the picture is bleaker. The greatest collateral of Trump's contestation is that he has planted seeds of doubt about the American long-term commitment to NATO. NATO may have temporarily overcome Trump's contestation, but a US withdrawal in the future is no longer unthinkable (Interviews#10,11). Moreover, Trump's unilateral foreign policy beyond NATO – such as repudiating the Iran deal, withdrawing US troops from Syria, or terminating arms control deals – and insults against fellow NATO leaders have widened existing rifts among allies (Interview#12). NATO's unity has suffered from Trump's contestation. However, it was also a wake-up call that forced allies to grapple with the consequences of unfolding geopolitical changes such as the rise of China and the US reorientation from Europe to Asia. In sum, NATO's responses to Trump appear relatively successful on both accounts. Structural challenges for NATO remain but it has survived one of the gravest contestations in its history.

This paper has sought to illustrate that the active and strategic response by institutional actors was one causal factor in NATO's survival of Trump. Some scholars claim that Trump's chest thumping was never more than a negotiation tactic to extract concessions from fellow allies rather than a serious threat of sanctioning or withdrawing (Dassler et al., 2019; Sperling and Webber, 2019). In such a reading, the role of institutional actors would be epiphenomenal. A brief counterfactual thought experiment, however, refutes this view (Levy, 2015). It is indeed

[3] The funding increased from $800 million in 2016, to $3.4 billion in 2017, to $4.8 billion in 2018, to $6.5 billion in 2019, to $5.9 billion in 2020.

reasonable to assume that Congress would have prevented Trump from formally withdrawing from NATO, an idea he toyed with as late as 2018, regardless of the role of institutional actors. However, Trump's conversion on burden-sharing was arguably highly contingent on Stoltenberg's persuasive powers. Increases in defence budgets remained less than Trump demanded. Several interviewees confirm that Trump only began to change his mind after encounters with Stoltenberg, which his references to Stoltenberg's figures also testify to (Interviews#5,6,13). Indeed, while defence spending had started to increase before 2016, adroit diplomacy and flattery by Stoltenberg convinced Trump that he had successfully imposed his will onto NATO. Without senior officials' astute handling of the 2018 summit, it is also likely that Trump had derailed the meeting (like the G7 meeting before) and prevent NATO from taking crucial decisions on, inter alia, Russia policy that would have left the organisation in a significantly weaker state. When President Trump assumed office, NATO entered into survival mode and without the actions of institutional actors, it is thus likely that Trump's opposition to NATO had not waned and that he would have consequently be much more subversive from within (Interview#20).

Nevertheless, the paper makes no claim for mono-causality. NATO would not have been able to placate Trump had it not been for strong US domestic support – the central external opportunity – which NATO institutional actors deliberately cultivated. Continued support from the Pentagon in particular was crucial to maintain NATO's policy on Russia, while Congress raised the costs of withdrawal and exerted pressure to maintain US funding for NATO activities. Widespread public support for NATO also implied little electoral benefit for Trump in bashing NATO (Interviews#3,5,10). Moreover, Trump's idiosyncratic character was susceptible to Secretary General strategy of playing to his ego. Other presidents may not have been convinced by Stoltenberg's astute use of statistics on defence spending or been sufficiently distracted to properly engage with NATO's Russia policy. The role of other allies can also not be ignored. Ultimately, it was their decision to increase defence spending, even if it was more motivated by Russian aggression than Trump's and Stoltenberg's cajoling, which allowed Stoltenberg to sell NATO's progress to Trump. Countries like Germany and the UK also continued to work with NATO institutional actors and allies in the US system to protect NATO's Russia policy from Trump (Interviews#5,15), while most allies sought to de-escalate bilateral tensions and tolerated Stoltenberg's charm offensives.

Conclusion

NATO has survived Trump's contestation relatively unscathed. This article has demonstrated that often-neglected institutional actors were instrumental in placating Trump while simultaneously preventing his demands from undermining the core of the organisation. NATO actors strategically embraced the White House's burden-sharing demands, which were not only central to alleviating Trump's contestation but also shared by the institutional actors. They set the agenda, brokered deals among member states, and built backchannel coalitions to pressure allies to increase their defence spending while working tirelessly to credit Trump for any progress achieved. In contrast, institutional actors could not heed Trump's calls for rapprochement with Russia, which threatened the very raison d'etre of the alliance. To

minimise the costs of sanctioning, they strategically, rather than overtly, resisted reorienting NATO's Russia policy by shielding Russia policy from Trump and building coalitions with supportive actors in the US foreign policy establishment. These strategic responses depended on Secretary General's Stoltenberg's astute leadership, NATO actor's procedural powers, divisions among the US foreign policy establishment, President Trump's character, and the nature of US media landscape.

The analysis thereby broadly vindicates the theoretical claim that strategic IOs can protect their preferences even amid hegemonic contestation. It demonstrated that the interplay of the four causal factors – preference congruity, internal institutional capacity, external opportunity structure, and leadership – shapes institutional actors' responses. Moreover, the article also highlights the multi-level network of actors in which IOs are embedded. NATO's institutional actors' complex relationship with the Trump administration, domestic US actors, as well as non-contesting member states highlight the significance of analysing the nexus between these actors rather than viewing them in isolation.

A central question is whether this paper's counterintuitive findings on NATO's agential qualities possess external validity. Some insights are probably Trump-specific; his particular susceptibility to flattery and inattention to policy details, which helped NATO's strategic behaviour, appear seldom if not unique among heads of state or government. However, many conducive conditions for institutional actor's agency remain in place in the US and beyond. The increased politicisation of international cooperation may allow senior IO officials greater influence in public debates while divisions among foreign policy establishments in the US and beyond will continue to offer IOs with sufficient internal institutional capacity and effective leadership opportunities for building coalitions. More generally, NATO's successful response to Trump buttresses wider claims that amid the crisis of the liberal international order large and substantially institutionalised IOs are more resilient than feared. When their very survival is at stake, institutional actors can exhibit striking agency in fending off contestation (see Schuette 2021). Sounding the death knell for NATO specifically and institutionalised cooperation generally is thus premature. Future research should therefore use the widely applicable theoretical framework developed here to analyse other incidences of contestation of IOs to test the general ability of IOs to respond strategically.

Interviews

1. NATO official, 28 May 2020
2. NATO official, 4 June 2020
3. NATO official, 4 June 2020
4. NATO official, 4 June 2020
5. National official, 4 June 2020
6. National official, 5 June 2020
7. Former NATO official, 8 June 2020
8. NATO official, 9 June 2020
9. Former NATO official, 15 June 2020

10. National official, 17 June 2020
11. NATO official, 18 June 2020
12. NATO official, 23 June 2020
13. NATO official, 9 July 2020
14. National official, 13 July 2020
15. National official, 23 July 2020
16. NATO PA official, 24 July 2020
17. Former national official, 26 October 2020
18. National official, 11 January 2021
19. EU official, 26 January 2021
20. National official, 8 February 2021

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