

## Theorising the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

Joint Sessions of Workshops - Lisbon, April 2009

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NATO is commonly held to be a central institution of European security governance and the principal institution connecting Europe and North America (Webber et al., 2004; Sloan, 2003). Despite this status, theoretical attention to NATO in Europe is underdeveloped. Scholarship in Europe *has* applied theory to some aspects of NATO activity, for instance, enlargement (Schimmelfennig, 2003), policy-making (Bono, 2003), and socialisation (Gheciu, 2005). Broader questions of NATO cohesion (Tuschhoff, 2005), identity (Sjursen, 2004) and leadership (Rynning, 2005) have also been considered. Scholarship of this sort has utilised a number of International Relations theories including neo-realism (Hyde-Price, 2007), neo-classical realism (Rynning, 2005; Ratti, 2006), institutionalism (Tuschhoff, 1999; Siedschlag, 1999), social constructivism (Ciuta 2002; Schimmelfennig, 2003), and public choice theory (Sandler and Hartley, 1999). Some scholars have attempted theoretical synthesis – for example, the constructivist realism of Gow (2004) – while others have defended theoretical pluralism (Hellmann, 2006a).

This is, however, a slim body of work. In a European context, theoretical underdevelopment can be measured by reference first, to the concerns of NATO scholarship. Here, several problems are apparent:

- the majority of scholarship is policy and empirically focused. This is certainly true in the UK and to a lesser, but still significant, degree in France and Germany. Such work has intrinsic merit but carries with it unproblematised 'business-as-usual' (Booth, 2007) and normative assumptions;
- theoretical treatments of NATO are often subsumed under broader studies of transatlantic relations thus neglecting dynamics specific to the Alliance (Forsberg and Herd, 2006);
- theoretical treatments of NATO are often cursory and based on an ill-fitting attachment to 'alliance theory' (Cornish, 1997);
- conceptualisations of NATO are in evidence either by reference to its nested nature within a broader setting, notably that of security community (Risse-Kappen 1995; Webber, 2007), or in terms of its inherent character as a 'community organisation' (Schimmelfennig, 2003), a 'post-modern alliance' (Coker 2002a) or a 'multilateral arrangement' (Sjursen, 2004). This body of scholarship is the exception; the majority tends to address questions such as 'what is NATO for?' (Forster and Wallace, 2001-2002 ) or 'where is it going?' (Smith, 2006) rather than the more terse but elementary question of 'what *is* NATO?';
- a good deal of scholarship suffers from imprecision. Debates on NATO 'decline' or 'crisis', for example, are rendered almost meaningless by an unwillingness to properly define and operationalise these terms (Thies, 2007);

- there has not been a sustained theoretical dialogue or debate on NATO (consider in this respect, the lack of attention in the pages of theoretically-inclined IR journals such as *European Journal of International Relations*, *Critique – Internationale*, and *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*);
- innovative theoretical approaches developed in European academia – the 'Copenhagen school' of 'securitization' (Buzan et al., 1998) and the 'Welsh school' of Critical Security Studies (Booth, 2007) – have not engaged with NATO to any significant degree.

The study of NATO compares very poorly with the study of the EU. In both scale and scope, there is no equivalent in European NATO scholarship of the empirically-rich and theoretically-informed studies of EU policy-making, institutionalisation, inter-governmental bargaining and EU-domestic linkages. Similarly, the shortcomings of NATO scholarship alluded to above are not replicated in the study of the EU, where enormous effort has been dedicated to the task of conceptualisation, theory building and testing. Moreover, European scholarship has tended to defer to debates popularised by American scholars (the neo-realist/neo-liberal debate on the future of NATO played out in the pages of *International Security* and *International Organisation* most notably) while much theoretically innovative work done in Europe has been conducted by lone scholars on the edges of the discipline of IR (King, 2005).

Problems of this sort show just how limited a presence theoretically-informed NATO scholarship enjoys in Europe. Again, the contrast with the EU is telling. The study of the EU has given rise to dedicated journals, book series and academic associations (UACES and the ECPR's Standing Group on the European Union). No such equivalent exists in the case of NATO. Panels on NATO were absent from the fourth, fifth and sixth pan-European conferences of the ECPR's Standing Group on International Relations and, significantly, a good deal of scholarly activity among Europeans occurs in the US. More British scholars attend the ISA conference to discuss NATO than they do the annual BISA conference based in the UK (there was not a single paper on NATO at BISA's 2007 conference). A similar story exists in terms of recruitment and personnel. Throughout Europe, PhD registrations on EU topics vastly outnumber those on NATO. Similarly, while there are numerous lecturing posts and chairs related to the study of the EU, hardly any are dedicated to the Alliance. The upshot is that the balance between scholarship and advocacy in NATO publications has tended toward the latter. As an example, in the UK, journal articles on NATO tend to emanate more from think-tanks (the Royal Institute of International Affairs, home of *International Affairs*, and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, home of *Survival*) than from academic associations (*Review of International Studies*, the flagship journal of the British International Studies Association, has not carried a dedicated article on NATO since April 2003).

These deficiencies notwithstanding, there is considerable potential within European-based scholarship. Scholars such as Hellmann, Schimmelfennig, Risse, Rynning, Bono, and Webber have developed over time, a theoretically-informed body of work and have laid the ground for a nascent network of NATO-oriented researchers. Other scholars have made occasional, but nonetheless innovative contributions - see, for instance, the work of Coker (2002b), Rasmussen (2001) and Williams (2008) on NATO and the management of 'risk'. There is also promise in the as yet untapped work of the Copenhagen and Welsh Schools noted above as well as frameworks such as historical institutionalism and historical sociology (Hellmann, 2006b).

In light of the above, the purpose of the workshop is twofold: to further theoretically-informed work on NATO and to encourage the development of a European network of NATO scholars. The workshop will be open to papers which focus on NATO as an object of theoretical investigation and seek to:

- conceptualise the Alliance (to ask the question 'what is NATO?')
- encourage the application of theoretical frameworks as yet undeveloped in NATO's case;
- apply theoretical propositions to case-study examples of NATO activity;
- encourage a theoretically-informed analysis of NATO's internal procedures and development (decision-making, inter-governmental bargaining, burden-sharing, and policy formulation and implementation);
- undertake comparative theoretical investigation of NATO's institutional, ideational and functional development (can one, for instance, import concepts and approaches from the study of the EU into analysis of NATO?);
- explore the relevance of theory to practical problems of NATO operation (the status of NATO in relation to international law, defence 'free riding', decision-making, institutional reform etc.);
- develop theoretical insight into specific NATO institutions (as a corrective to the dearth of work on the function and development of specific NATO bodies, be this the North Atlantic Council, the Military Committee or the International Secretariat).
- explore the contours of new theoretical approaches to NATO distinct from the rationalist, 'neo-neo' tendencies of American scholarship.

The workshop will promote theoretical dialogue, and further conceptual, comparative and case-study analysis of NATO. It will thus appeal both to established scholars of NATO seeking to widen their engagement with the subject as well as younger participants wishing to refine their work and make contact with like-minded individuals. It will mark an important step in establishing an ECPR-wide network of scholars working on the Alliance with a view in the longer term to joint publications. Thus, in the first instance, an edited collection of essays addressing 'NATO theory' will be pursued based on the workshop proceedings. In the longer term, the workshop will engender a body of scholarship centred on theories of international politics with a European rather than a North American lineage and so counter-balance the American bias of literature on the Alliance.

### **Biographical note**

Mark Webber is Professor of International Politics and Head of the Department of Politics, International Relations and European Studies (PIRES), Loughborough University. His publications include *Inclusion, Exclusion and the Governance of European Security* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007); *Foreign Policy in a Transformed World* (with M. Smith et al) (Prentice-Hall, 2002); *Russia and Europe: Cooperation or Conflict?* (as editor) (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); *The Enlargement of Europe* (as co-author) (Manchester University Press, 1999); and *The International Politics of Russia and the Successor States* (Manchester University Press, 1996). Between 1999 and 2002 he was a joint fund holder for a project on 'NATO and European Security Governance' as part of the ESRC's 'One Europe or Several?' programme. He was a Leverhulme Research Fellow in 2003-2004 and is currently writing a book (with James Sperling) entitled *NATO: Regeneration or Decline?* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave

Macmillan, forthcoming).

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