



***15 years of NATO membership of the Baltic States –  
What role does trust play amongst the members of the Alliance?***

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## Introduction

“Never again”. A common expression among European people after WWII which symbolised a universal desire to avoid another world war (Carlton University Centre for European Studies, 2019). In response, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was established shortly after to ensure collective security for Western Europe from possible Soviet aggression (NATO 2019). But even with the fall of this perceived threat, NATO still stands today, 70 years on. Despite disharmonies of interest occurring throughout its time (a problem that usually fragments alliances), NATO continues to overcome these conflicts and survive, with 29 current members. How? Trust.

In this essay I will attempt to demonstrate that the role of trust provides a firm basis upon which cooperation becomes achievable and can effectively be carried out among the alliance members. Firstly, I will provide an overview of the international background that NATO is set against to show that it is one which innately promotes distrust and uncertainty; both of which hinder interstate cooperation. Then, I will showcase examples of how NATO falls victim to disharmonies of interest due to such background yet survives because of trust. To provide reasoning that trust is a crucial factor in facilitating cooperation, I will feature international relation trust theories from different perspectives; psychological, rational and social. In doing so I will attempt to explain the dynamics of trust within NATO and demonstrate that trust is significant in ensuring persistent cooperation between alliance members.

## International Relations and Trust

The world requires international cooperation. Ruzicka and Keating (2015) endorse that the problems facing humanity today cannot be solved within the confines of individual states, whether it be climate change, nuclear proliferation or basic human rights. All these issues fundamentally depend on the encounters of interstate relations and cooperation. Such relations foreground the existence of trust and distrust among states which form an important basis of how they relate to and interact with each other. This has a direct effect on the level of cooperation, as trust (or lack of) can either facilitate or hinder state encounters (ibid.).

Unfortunately, the international environment presents a challenging setting for the establishment and sustenance of trust between states; labelled as trusting relationships (ibid.). The unique characteristics of the international system is often labelled as anarchy, based on international relations theory (Lechner 2017). This concept of an anarchic international system stems from the absence of an overarching authority which could act as a central arbiter for disputes and conflicts within the field of international relations. Where a domestic system has a recognised hierarchical order (the government), the global sphere does not. As a result, there is an immediate effect on how states view each other. Uncertainty about motives are strongly magnified in such a structural setting because (in essence) each state is equal to all others and thus entitled to act in its own best interest. As Kenneth Waltz (1979, p.88) summaries, “none is entitled to command; none is required to obey”. Consequently, the anarchic international system prevents or at least significantly hinders the formation of trusting relationships and in turn, cooperation. As Hoffmann (2006) explains, in the absence of a legitimate central power, expectations of trustworthiness are destroyed because of the possibility that another state might act opportunistically and have a good chance of getting away with it; should they choose. Accordingly, leaders are wary to trust in the first place which can mean that despite sharing a mutual interest in solving a dispute, states will not cooperate or cooperate effectively because they fear the other might take advantage for its best interests (ibid.). However, international anarchy, its nature and effects can be interpreted in different ways. This is because,

states do have some control over the characteristics of the international system by the way they operate within it. That is, depending on the actions of states, the possibility of forging trusting relationships is definitely possible. As Alexander Wendt (1992) puts it, “anarchy is what states make of it”.

Thus, the anarchic international environment does cause a preposition of uncertainty within international relations meaning there is a wariness to trust which negatively affects cooperation. But it does not mean that formation of trusting relationships is impossible. Following this, I propose that the role of trust specifically within the NATO alliance, has been to act as a foundation upon which the members have been able to establish effective cooperation, especially during conflicts of interest.

## **NATO and Trust**

Alliances are states coming together in pursuit of a shared goal, mainly preparing for and acting against a common rival in a military conflict (Synder 2000). George Modelski (see Keating 2015, p.2) outlines that this military objective is what makes alliances different from other types of associations or regimes. Even so, states coming together to act in uniform, most alliances do not function for a relatively long time given the anarchic international environment. Overtime, disharmonies of interest occur, and the problems of uncertainty begin to dissolve the alliance. Friedman (1970, p.10) acknowledged this problem of uncertainty present in alliances because “the mere existence of a relationship based on security is no guarantee of amity or exemption from international rivalry within one’s own immediate circle”. So, an alliance in itself is no remedy to the problem of diverging interests and possibility of defection. As such most alliances are temporary and unstable. Dr.Karl Lamers (2019) clearly pointed this out by stating that “alliances on average last about 17 years”, yet NATO has survived for 70 and still “today is fresh, powerful and full of energy”. Both NATO’s size and stability overtime are what differentiate it from other alliances. This makes it unique because the more states there are in an alliance, the more likely it is that interests will diverge within the concept of an anarchic international system and destroy the alliance.

Naturally, NATO is not exempt from the issue of diverging interests, particularly given the fact that some of the members have had conflictual pasts and antagonistic overlapping interests (Keating 2015). Even in its early years, this problem was noticed by Hotz (1953), who underlined that “NATO’s major problem has been to establish a reasonable harmony among dissimilar national interests” (p.126). This was distinctly evident after the fall of the Soviet Union; the primary opposition of the defensive alliance at the time. Many speculated that NATO would be open to dissolution (Liska 1962) because without the common Soviet threat, the strategic priorities of the members will diverge and fragment the alliance (Keating 2015). More recently, Hallams *et al* (2013) expressed that the United State holds a belief that NATO should deploy to more areas outside of member state territory or so called ‘out of area business’. On the contrary, European members remain focused on limiting business to operations within Europe.

It is clear then that NATO is also vulnerable to disharmonies of interest within the anarchic international environment it operates within. Such disputes have the potential to break up alliances, and the former US ambassador to NATO agreed that “the lack of coterminous interests makes it remarkable that NATO is able to make any headway at all” (Deni 2013). It is exactly in the potential for disharmonies of interest that trusting relationships are important, because trust among NATO members could be the significant factor that has held the alliance together during turbulences by facilitating cooperation. I base this reasoning on NATO’s outstanding track record during its 70 years; no member has ever been attacked (Lamers 2019). Furthermore, NATO continues today as an

alliance that is needed for the peace of Europe and for some members such as the Baltic States, it is considered as the only real 'hard' guarantor of security (Zajedova 1999). Lithuania (2019) strongly affirmed that "NATO is and will remain the most important and effective framework for collective defence, which guarantees national security and effective deterrence against potential aggression". Latvia (2019) likewise stated that "thanks to membership of the most powerful military alliance, Latvia has become more secure than ever before". Estonia (2019) agreed with its Baltic neighbours by expressing gratitude to membership in NATO stating, "Estonia's security is better ensured than ever before because NATO guarantees a reliable military deterrence and collective defence".

To better understand how the role of trust brings about cooperation in NATO, I believe it is necessary to consider some international relation trust theories. Such theories could provide answers about the behaviours and dynamics of NATO members; and in turn explain NATO's longevity. There are three discrete perspectives of trust theory that provide an appealing insight of trust within NATO; psychological, rational and social (Ruzicka and Keating 2015).

### **- Psychological Perspective: The Generalised Trustor**

The focus of psychological trust theory is based upon how trust affects decision-making of individuals in leadership positions (Keating 2015). The generalised trustor theory by Brain Rathbun (2012) stands out when considering the role of trust within NATO. This theory suggests that there are individuals who are psychologically predisposed to trust in any given situation. As such these individuals, labelled as generalised trustors, will be more likely to accept binding commitments within institutions than those who are not predisposed to generally trust. Rathbun further explains that a generalised trustor holds "a belief that others are generally and inherently trustworthy which provides the confidence needed to cooperate even when the gains from cooperation are inconsistent over a long period of time". The theory then goes on to propose that when key states of an alliance are made up of generalised trustors, a more cohesive and binding military alliance can be expected. Such theory therefore could potentially be applied to NATO, in particular to its key US member. There has been contention over the years from the US that it is over-burden sharing. In 2011, the former US secretary of defence, Robert Gates, openly accused European allies of being "willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden" (Lanoszka 2015, p.133). For instance, the NATO operations in Kosovo, the US was responsible for 70% of all air sorties (Deni 2013). In 2014, the NATO countries agreed on a 2% GDP threshold spending, but only 4 other members reached that 2% target in 2017, with US reaching 3.7% (McCarthy, *Forbes*, 2018). This signals that the US feels dissatisfied over the gains from NATO, as it has had to assume more of the burden. Yet, it continues to stay firmly within NATO implying that US leaders might be generalised trustors. Recently, the US Congress introduced a bill which could prohibit a US president from leaving NATO (Woody, *Business Insider*, 2019). Furthermore, president Trump himself stated that "we will be with NATO 100 percent, but as I told the other countries, you have to set up" (Gould, *DefenseNews*, 2019). Therefore, it would seem that the generalised trustor theory has applicability to the US. It would explain why the US continues to cooperate within the alliance, even if the gains might be perceived as inconsistent by it. The answer might be that the US is predisposed to trust; it is, a generalised trustor. In turn, this would provide reason as to how NATO has survived for 70 years. It has done so because it has a highly cooperative key state which continually contributes to the alliance.

However, the generalised trustor theory, as Keating (2015) identifies, is an individual level theory. This means that the degree of generalised trust in a state is dependent on those in key political power to continue to win and as such, the theory depends on the continuous character of a states leadership. Thus, it would be considerably difficult to prove the empirical validity of this theory with

the US and its 70-year membership in NATO. Nevertheless, this psychological perspective provides an interesting insight of the trust dynamics possibly present within NATO and how such can yield persistent cooperation.

#### **- Rational Perspective: Trustworthy or Not?**

Rational trust theories focus on the problem of uncertainty present in the anarchic international environment, and how trust can mitigate such problem within an alliance. Keating (2015) explains that understanding trust from the rational perspective has grounded reasonableness because when it comes to security politics, the costs of defection by an alliance member can be seriously high. For this reason, establishing whether an alliance member is trustworthy can be of the “utmost importance” (ibid, p.5). Andrew Kyd’s (2001) rational perspective of trust within alliances argues “that trust is related to uncertainty about the underlying motivations or preferences of the other side” (p.810). He bases his explanation upon Schweller’s (1998, see Kyd 2001) classic international relations theory which makes a distinction between status quo and revisionist states. Status quo states are those who are content with the way things are and continue to seek security. On the contrary, revisionist states are not satisfied with the status quo and want to modify or completely overthrow it. If a state can persuade another that it is also status quo orientated, then cooperation should be feasible as both would want to reciprocate it due to having general interests in common. As such conflicts can be overcome through cooperation. This is where trust can be applied. It can be used to mitigate uncertainty as the level of trust shows the probability that one state believes the other to have similar preferences, or as Kyd summaries, whether a state is considered as trustworthy. Indeed, if a state is deemed as untrustworthy, conflict cannot be overcome as cooperation is not seen as feasible. Thus, Kyd’s rational theory, suggests that trust revolves around resolving uncertainty over the other sides preferences so that cooperation can occur between those identified as trustworthy and avoided with those identified as untrustworthy (Keating 2015). Applying this theory to NATO, can help to answer how NATO members overcome disharmonies of interest within an anarchic international setting. It would propose that members of NATO deem each other as status quo orientated or in other words, as having similar overall preferences. Therefore, even when disharmonies of interest arise (as to be expected in an anarchic international setting), these conflicts can be overcome through reassurance and cooperation, as members continue to have an overall common view at hand and trust that the others do also.

#### **- Social Perspective: Respecting Norms**

A social theory shares the same emphasis as a psychological one, that trust is not simply a rational prediction; although it is agreed that trust cannot occur without some type of consideration about the intentions of the other party (Keating 2015). In particular a social theory focuses on the formation of trusting relationships, as these suggest the possibility of long-term stability (Hoffman 2002), something NATO has definitely achieved. Kegley and Raymond (1990) advance a theory, that there are pre-existing social norms against breaking agreements and that such norms are what facilitate the development and continuance of trusting relationships. They agree that the anarchic international environment promotes distrust but express that states do not consistently enter into binding agreements through deceit. Rather they suggest, that states enter into an agreement in hope of keeping their promises so as to benefit from what they negotiated. This becomes a norm which entails that states should honour their commitments. Such norm becomes reinforced when other states believe it to be important and trust will be something that can be relied upon in order to support the sanctity of an agreement. That is, a member of an alliance will not break an obligation because they believe it would be detrimental to their external reputation as all other members consider the norm (of honouring the negotiated obligations) to be important. As such, there is trust

present among the members that all will follow the norm, which develops a trusting relationship between them. Applying to this NATO, when a conflict of interest arises, instead of a member breaking obligations and leaving the alliance (as they would be entitled considering its own best interests within the anarchic international environment), they rather seek cooperation so as to allow them to continue to honour their obligations. In turn, this trusting relationship that cooperation will be the first option, is developed and continues in the alliance.

Thus, this social theory can explain the longevity of NATO because all members seek cooperation during times of turbulence as there is an important norm of keeping promises. This norm is trusted to be respected in the alliance.

## Conclusion

It is interesting to consider trust theories from different perspectives because they can help to understand the role of trust which directly facilitates cooperation in NATO. The different viewpoints from each theory could propose an explanation of the role of trust on member relations. Such role being, that members consistently seek to cooperate instead of abandonment. This may answer how NATO continues to survive today within an anarchic international setting, when other alliances usually fall.

The psychological generalised trustor theory (Rathbun 2012) allows to contemplate how NATO is a cohesive and distinguished alliance even when a key member becomes dissatisfied. This is due to them being a generalised trustor, whom will continue to seek cooperation. But this is an individual level theory that depends on the continuous character of changing leadership in a state and so cannot be seen as empirically valid. The rational trust theory by Andrew Kyd (2001) helps to understand how uncertainty present in the anarchic international environment can be mitigated by considering trustworthiness. For example, if a state is considered as trustworthy then the other trustworthy states will welcome cooperation with it due to being certain about its preferences. Applied to NATO, this theory would imply, that all the members deem each other as trustworthy. This can illustrate NATO's successful 70 years because alliance members constantly reciprocate cooperation to overcome conflicts. From a social perspective, the presence of a trusting relationship will mean that there is a trusting expectation that obligations undertaken by alliance members will be fulfilled, as this is seen as an important norm. This would lead to cooperation being sought first rather than abandonment, which again can reaffirm NATO's longevity.

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