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## **The Legitimization of NATO-led Military Operations: An Analysis of the Secretary General's Discourse**

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### **Citation**

Drijver, P. den. (2022). *The Legitimization of NATO-led Military Operations: An Analysis of the Secretary General's Discourse*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**The Legitimization of NATO-led Military Operations:  
An Analysis of the Secretary General's Discourse**



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Bachelor Thesis

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Word count: 7990

December 24, 2021

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## Introduction

During the Cold War, activities of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were centered around its task to provide deterrence against the Soviet Union (Huntington, 1983, pp. 47-48; Rupp, 2000, pp. 160-161). The deployment of military activities was avoided as much as possible, as the Soviet Union could perceive it as an act of aggression. After the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 1990s however, NATO increasingly engaged in out-of-area military operations on a global scale (Barany & Rauchhaus, 2011, pp. 296-99; Sperling & Webber, 2018). Nowadays, the alliance has developed into an extra-regional crisis manager and security provider (Bevir & Hall, 2013, p. 27).

The transformation of NATO's activities after the Cold War is an illustration of the increasing role international institutions play in global security governance (Krahmann, 2003, p. 6; Bevir & Hall, 2013, pp. 26-27). States increasingly rely on international institutions, like NATO, and other actors, to manage security issues. This includes outsourcing the usage and coordination of the military capabilities of states to these actors.

Regardless of this development, the literature surrounding the legality and legitimacy of the use of force continues to focus predominantly on state-level military activity, although a handful of scholars do pay attention to the legality of NATO-led military operations (e.g. Greenwood, 2000). Yet, even less attention is being paid to the issue of the legitimacy of these operations, even though it can reinforce or challenge their legality (Popovski & Turner, 2008). When scholars do note the legitimacy, they tend to limit their focus to narratives used by government leaders to attempt to gain legitimacy for these operations (e.g. Dexter, 2007). However, the role of actors within international organizations tends to be neglected. A systematic analysis on the manner in which actors within international organizations, like NATO, attempt to gain legitimacy for military operations is unexplored terrain.

This thesis aims to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the discourse used by the head of NATO, the Secretary General, to gain legitimacy for post-Cold War NATO-led military operations. The narratives included in the discourse are seen as a rhetorical tool used in order to attempt to gain legitimacy for military activities. The research will be conducted by attempting to answer the following research question: How does NATO legitimize its military operations post-Cold War? In order to answer the research question, the discourses used by the Secretary General during two NATO-led military operations will be analyzed. These operations are *Operation Allied Force*, which took place in Kosovo, and *Operation Unified Protector*, which took place in Libya.

The hypotheses that will be tested are extrapolated from existing theories and empirical evidence regarding the use of force at the state-level, in combination with theories surrounding NATO. This thesis contributes to the literature by extending the scope of research surrounding the legitimization of the use of force to the level of international organizations. In addition, it provides new insights upon which existing theories can build. Furthermore, it provides evidence that the NATO Secretary General functions as a norm entrepreneur regarding the attempts to gain legitimacy for certain actions.

The rest of this thesis is divided into six parts. Firstly, the current state of the literature will be reviewed. Secondly, a theoretical framework will be presented, including three hypotheses. Thirdly, the methodological approach will be set out. The research will be conducted through a discourse analysis of transcripts of speeches and press conferences by the Secretary General. Fourthly, the results of the analysis will be presented. Fifthly, a discussion of the results follows. Sixthly and finally, a conclusion follows.

## Literature Review

In this section, existing literature surrounding the research question will be discussed. NATO literature consists primarily of two dominant theories, namely constructivism and realism. Both provide explanations for the motivations behind NATO's behaviour.

Constructivism assumes that actions are based on socially constructed meanings, shaped by interactions (Wendt, 1992). These meanings are enshrined in norms, values and identities. Norms are "standards of appropriate behaviour" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). Like all actors, NATO's behaviour is shaped by its identity consisting of norms and values. NATO is not merely a military alliance, but it is "an organization of an international community of values and norms" (Schimmelfennig, 1998, p. 213). Core values and norms of NATO are democracy, the rule of law, individual liberties and political rights (North Atlantic Treaty, 1949, pmb1.).

Dingott Alkopher (2016) shows that NATO's norms have changed over the last two decades and provides evidence that these changes indeed affected NATO's behaviour. After the Cold War, NATO member states have started to regard themselves as liberal-democratic allies, uniting around common norms, rather than as states that balance against a threat (Ratti, 2006, p. 92). Moreover, the socialization of NATO's values was the core argument of supporters of NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe, as it would strengthen and spread democracy in this region (Barany, 2004; Schimmelfennig, 1998). Additionally, NATO staff see themselves as working on a moral, and thus normative, project (Von Billerbeck, 2020).

While constructivism assumes that norms and values shape behaviour, realism on the other hand emphasizes the importance of power relations, state interests and material resources in shaping behaviour (Mearsheimer, 2001). States are rational actors and are concerned with surviving and protecting their autonomy in the international arena, which is a self-help environment (Risse-Kappen, 2017, p. 59; Mearsheimer, 2001). States would only engage in military operations when their security is at stake (Bellamy, 2003, pp. 10-11). Any humanitarian response for instance, could

be seen as a strategic calculation to prevent instability caused by mass refugee migrations (Dixon, 2013, p. 146). Furthermore, international organizations are above all instruments of states, used to promote their national interests (Ratti, 2006, p. 98). Military alliances only form out of necessity, when states are not able to maintain their security independently (Schimmelfennig, 1998, p. 202).

According to Waltz (2000), NATO is merely an instrument through which the United States (US), as dominant world power, tries to prevent a balance of power forming in Europe and thereby retains its hegemonic position. Ratti (2006) argues that NATO is predominantly an instrument for the US to legitimize and exercise its power. After the Cold War, the US used NATO to secure its link to Western Europe, to protect European countries against the risk of Russia's resurgence, and to contain Germany. By engaging in various military operations in the 1990s, like the bombing in Bosnia, the US asserted that NATO was Europe's premier security institution. Furthermore, the expansion of NATO was an opportunity for the US to obtain geographical assets for the projection of its influence towards Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus. Concluding, realism asserts that security considerations and state interests, predominantly those of the US, are the driving force behind NATO's actions.

Hence, constructivism and realism are able to offer competing explanations for the motivations behind NATO's behaviour. Yet, both theories fall short of providing explanations regarding the manner in which this behaviour is legitimized. The manner in which an action is framed, with the aim of gaining legitimacy for said action, does not necessarily reflect the actual motivations behind this action. Legitimacy is a concept that increasingly receives attention in international relations (IR). Actions are legitimate when they are "perceived as normatively valid by the relevant audience" (Nuñez-Mietz, 2018, p. 727).

Several scholars view international organizations as sources through which legitimacy can be gained. International organizations may appear more legitimate than self-serving states, because they promote socially valued goals, like protecting human rights, and they carry out their missions

rationally, technocratically and impartially (Finnemore & Barnett, 2004, p. 5). More specifically, NATO is an instrument for states to gain legitimacy when they are interested in acting militarily (Michaels, 2011, p. 57). The level of legitimacy of military operations established by consensus of the member states through NATO can never be achieved by an operation of a sole member state, because a NATO coalition “indicates the mutual agreement of the leading free states of the world, and (...) it can even offer an alternative mandate to that of the UN” (Mowle & Sacko, 2007, p. 598). As these scholars have a limited view of international organizations as merely instruments through which legitimacy can be increased, they ignore the possibility that actors within these organizations can attempt to increase the legitimacy of their organization’s actions.

Legitimization is “the process through which actors attempt to render an action legitimate by strategically manipulating a legitimacy discourse to generate arguments that demonstrate the correspondence between the action and the discourse invoked” (Nuñez-Mietz, 2018, p. 729). In other words, legitimization is the justification of behavior (Reyes, 2011, p. 872). Political actors are able to use five strategies to legitimize actions, according to Reyes (2011, pp. 875-878). These are legitimization through emotions, a hypothetical future, rationality, voices of expertise, and altruism.

Actors use a legitimacy system to legitimize the use of force (Nuñez-Mietz, 2018, pp. 732-733). This system could consist of up to three different types of discourses, which function as linguistic tools to construct military operations as legitimate. The first discourse is a moral discourse. Actors legitimize the use of force by framing it as an enactment of a moral imperative, thus including moral values in their rhetoric (Van Leeuwen, 2007, pp. 97-98). The second discourse is a political discourse (Nuñez-Mietz, 2018). Actors legitimize the use of force by its political expediency or the desirability of its expected consequences. The third discourse is a legal discourse. When using this type of discourse, actors legitimize the use of force by its compatibility with international law.



Another central component of the legitimization of the use of force is the linguistic construction of positive self-representations and negative other-representations (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Further, Nuñez-Mietz (2018, p. 733) distinguishes heterogeneous systems, which distribute authoritativeness among competing legitimacy discourses and homogeneous systems, which concentrate authoritativeness in a single legitimacy discourse.

As previously concluded, NATO literature lacks explanations regarding the manner in which actors legitimize NATO's actions in general and military operations in particular. Yet, several scholars in the literature surrounding the use of force do offer explanations regarding the manner in which actors at the state-level legitimize the use of force. Nuñez-Mietz (2018, p. 734) introduces the legalization thesis, which posits that the legitimization of the use of force consists to a large extent of a legal discourse. This means that "the practice of legitimization under the discursive dominance of international law consists in the strategic manipulation of the law to advance claims and counterclaims about an action's lawfulness" (Nuñez-Mietz, 2018, p. 734). International law transformed from a set of rules that governs behavior into a discourse that constitutes actors and actions, and serves as a structure superior to political and moral discourses.

Another strand in the literature emphasizes the role of the moral discourse in the legitimization of military operations (Dexter, 2007, p. 1056). The Good War thesis posits that the use of force is re-legitimized after the Cold War by linking warfare to a moral obligation (Shaw, 2002). Nowadays, western military interventions are legitimized as actions neither in the interests of states nor as a response to insecurity, but in the name of values like freedom, democracy and human rights (Dexter, 2007, p. 1056). The extent to which an operation has legitimacy depends on the extent to which it serves a moral purpose. Military operations are seen as moral obligations, battling not just an enemy, but portraying it as a battle between good and evil, right and wrong.

A different narrative that receives attention in the literature is the narrative which presents the use of force as a rational and instrumental response to state insecurity (Dexter, 2007, p. 1055).

This type of narrative shows overlap with the political discourse in Nuñez-Mietz's (2018) classification. For instance, when Australia went to war with Iraq, policymakers emphasized the threat that Saddam Hussein posed to Australian security interests (Vinson & McDonnell, 2007, pp. 7-8). During the war, the Australian prime minister continued to address the duty of protecting the nation's security and its people. Another example is that the US intervention in Iraq during the 1990s was legitimized by addressing the threat of the Iraqi regime to international peace and security (Dixon, 2013, p. 149).

The literature thus offers plenty of alternative explanations regarding the usage of discourses and narratives to legitimize the use of force. Still, these explanations have some downsides in relation to the research question of this thesis. Firstly, the literature focuses on legitimization by state-level actors. Public officials, government leaders and policymakers are often the unit of analysis. This is problematic, because this thesis is aimed at the level of international organizations and not at the state-level.

Secondly, the literature uses interstate warfare as the focal point of research on the legitimization of the use of force. Although NATO uses force in its military operations, it does not necessarily mean that the purpose of the operation is full-scale warfare. Hence, it is unclear to what extent these theories are applicable to activities other than warfare.

Several scholars argue that beside state-level actors, heads of international organizations fulfill an important role. Böller (2018, p. 221) posits that heads of international organizations are able to function as norm entrepreneurs, because of the moral authority they derive from their position or the communality of societal norms. Finnemore and Barnett (2004, p. 5) argue that heads of international organizations derive institutional and discursive resources from the authority they possess. Yet, like all actors, they are constrained by the political and institutional context in which they operate (Johnstone, 2007, p. 137).

Regarding NATO, the head of the organization is the Secretary General. He is NATO's primary spokesperson as well as the chairman of the North Atlantic Council (Böller, 2018, p. 219). Hendrickson (2014, p. 124) argues that the Secretary General has "opportunities (...) to successfully act as a policy entrepreneur and internationalized actor who is turned to by the allies for guidance and leadership in shaping policy". Yet, it is not clear to what degree the level of authority the Secretary General has differs to that of state-level actors. Moreover, the role of the NATO Secretary General is mostly neglected in the literature (Böller, 2018, p. 232).

Hence, the literature contains a gap regarding the legitimization of the use of force by actors on the level of international organizations. Specifically regarding NATO, the Secretary General might be able to legitimize the use of force in the shape of NATO-led military operations, but the manner in which he would do this is unknown.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, the theoretical framework that will be used in order to conduct the research will be presented. As became clear from the literature review, several scholars argue that heads of international organizations are norm entrepreneurs, which enables them to challenge and influence norms (Böller, 2018, p. 221). Moreover, they are endowed with discursive resources, which they can use to frame or construct issues using language (Finnemore & Barnett, 2004, p. 5; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 897). This provides them the possibility of making an action be perceived as normatively valid or, in other words, legitimate.

This thesis will follow this body of literature, by exploring how the NATO Secretary General uses language to gain legitimacy for NATO's military operations. Consequently, the hypotheses are centered around the Secretary General.

Theories that specifically address the research question are missing. After all, the legitimization of military operations by actors within international organizations is an

underdeveloped field in IR. Yet, the literature does provide explanations regarding the legitimization of the use of force at the state-level. Extrapolating these explanations to the level of international organizations and connecting them to existing theories in NATO literature, if deemed necessary, would allow the establishment of theoretically sound hypotheses.

Moreover, this approach provides opportunities for theory building, as statements could be made about the applicability of these theories to NATO and international organizations in general. Hence, propositions of these explanations will be drawn and applied to NATO. The spatial domain of this framework is restricted to the post-Cold War era, as the theories are aimed at this period.

The legalization thesis by Nuñez-Mietz (2018, p. 734) posits that international law serves as the primary source of legitimacy. This implies that normatively valid behaviour is cast in terms of lawful conduct (Nuñez-Mietz, 2018, pp. 734-735). The power of international law is derived from the idea that it is a set of binding rules distinguishable from, and superior to, politics (Scott, 1994, p. 324). As lawfulness is the primary determinant of an action's legitimacy, this theory asserts that actors tend to legitimize an action to a large extent by its compatibility with international law.

When applying this theory to NATO, it would be expected that NATO's leader would legitimize NATO's military operations by referring to international law, as this is the primary source of legitimacy. Hence, a legal narrative would, to a large extent, be present in the Secretary General's discourse regarding a military operation.

*H1: The Secretary General legitimizes NATO-led operations to a large extent by referring to international law.*

Other scholars address the importance of (moral) norms and values in legitimizing the use of force. Constructivism asserts that NATO's identity, consisting of values like democracy, the rule of law and political rights, is a key determinant of its behaviour (Dixon, 2013, p. 135;

Schimmelfennig, 1998, p. 215). The Good War thesis on the other hand posits that military operations tend to be legitimized in the name of these (moral) norms and values (Dexter, 2007, p. 1056). Western populations are wary to use force, as it is seen as bad (Shaw, 2001). Thus, in order to render a military operation normatively valid, actors need to portray the operation as *good*, which they can do best by including moral and value-driven narratives in their discourse.

A synergetic approach would be fruitful in formulating a hypothesis, as both theories are complementary and would therefore be more applicable to the research question than the two theories separately. While the Good War thesis asserts that norms and values play a crucial role in the legitimization of actions, constructivism provides an answer regarding which norms and values are important to NATO. When applying this approach to NATO, it would assert that the Secretary General tends to use NATO's identity to legitimize military operations, as this identity contains (moral) values.

*H2: The Secretary General legitimizes NATO-led operations to a large extent by referring to NATO's identity, constituting partially of moral values.*

The third hypothesis is based on a synergetic approach consisting of empirical evidence and realist assumptions. Realism assumes that security concerns and strategic and material interests are the forces behind NATO's behaviour, while empirical evidence shows that these forces are indeed used to legitimize military activities, albeit at the state-level (Mearsheimer, 2001; Ratti, 2006; Vinson & McDonnell, 2007). Western democratic societies expect the state to protect its citizens, and to act in the national interest (Bellamy, 2003, pp. 10-12). As a state's responsibility is to its own citizens, it cannot be legitimate to risk the life of its soldiers to other causes than the state's security or the national interest. Hence, as only force to protect these causes can be rendered legitimate, this

approach expects government leaders or other state-level actors to address them when attempting to gain legitimacy for a military operation (Bellamy, 2003, pp. 10-12).

Because NATO depends on the military capabilities of its member states to engage in military operations, applying this approach to NATO would not be far-fetched. It would be expected that the Secretary General links the military operations to the self-interest and security concerns of NATO's member states and of NATO itself.

*H3: The Secretary General legitimizes NATO-led operations to a large extent by referring to the self-interests and security concerns of member states and NATO.*

## **Methodology**

In this section, the methodological approach that will be used in order to test the hypotheses will be presented. Firstly, attention will be paid to the case selection. Secondly, the data collection strategy will be discussed. Thirdly, the method of analysis that is used in order to answer the research question will be presented and motivated.

### **Case Selection**

The research consists of a small-N comparative study of post-Cold War NATO-led operations. This type of study allows for a detailed and in-depth analysis of the cases and provides opportunities for contextualization (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 218). It is the best fit to answer the research question, as it offers the most accurate design that is necessary to disclose the manner in which the Secretary General attempts to gain legitimacy for military operations. Other types of studies are less suitable for answering the research question, as they cannot provide the in-depth results necessary to uncover the manners in which legitimacy is sought, except a single case study. Yet, a single case study does not provide the ability to place the findings in a broader context.

Besides the advantages, a small-N comparative study requires extra attention for the manner in which the cases are selected in order to avoid the risk of selection bias (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 224). The type of case selection that will be used is the Most Different Systems Design (MDS). This implies that the only key similarity of the selected cases is that they are NATO-led military operations. Besides this similarity, the cases differ in terms of Secretary General, legal status, era, means that were used in the operation and purpose.

This type of case selection provides a framework to eliminate intermingling variables and thus enable the researcher to test the hypotheses and answer the research question without interference (Halperin & Heath, 2017, pp. 221-223). Hence, selecting only on the criterion that the case is a NATO-led operation prevents biased results and ensures that the applicability of the theoretical framework is examined. In addition, this type of case selection is consistent with the variety of operations NATO has engaged in after the Cold War (Sperling & Webber, 2018, pp. 895-898).

Two NATO-led operations will be used as cases in this comparative study. The first case that will be analyzed is *Operation Allied Force* in Kosovo in 1999, during which NATO conducted airstrikes against Yugoslav forces (Sperling & Webber, 2018, p. 896). The second case is *Operation Unified Protector* in Libya in 2011, during which NATO enforced a no-fly zone and an arms embargo, among other activities, in the battle against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi (Sperling & Webber, 2018, p. 898). These specific cases were selected, because they do not have anything else in common other than the fact that they were a NATO-led operation. Moreover, they are seen in the literature as illustrative for NATO's post-Cold War operations, and might therefore be more representative than other operations (Hodge, 2013).

## **Data**

In order to discover how the Secretary General legitimizes military operations, it is necessary to disclose the discourse he constructs regarding the operation. A discourse is used by an actor to render an action legitimate (Nuñez-Mietz, 2018, p. 729). The discourse of the Secretary General can be disclosed by examining his speech acts in relation to the operation he attempts to justify (Dingott Alkopher, 2016, p. 53). Therefore, transcripts of speeches and press conferences by the Secretary General during *Operation Allied Force* and *Operation Unified Protector* will be analyzed.

In order to ensure reliability and validity of the results, these speeches and press conferences are not necessarily addressed to the same audience. This will prevent skewed results from appearing, as the analysis will contain the overall discourse that is used to legitimize an operation, and not a discourse aimed at one audience only. Hence, the aim is to include all available transcripts of speeches and press conferences of the Secretary General during a particular operation in the analysis. The transcripts are publicly available (NATO, 2021).

## **Method of Analysis**

A qualitative discourse analysis will be used in order to disclose the discourse of the Secretary General. Discourses contain “ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is produced and reproduced” (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 335). By analyzing how the Secretary General constructs reality through his speeches and press conferences, the meanings behind these wordings and narratives can be disclosed.

Other methods, like a quantitative content analysis, are too insensitive to accurately disclose narratives in their respective contexts. Dragomir et al. (2020) for instance, used a quantitative content analysis as a research method to disclose the military discourse by NATO from 1949 to 2018. The scholars analyzed the differences in writing style of official NATO documents (Dragomir



et al., 2020, pp. 5-6). While this analysis revealed interesting details in the change of word choices between decades, it did not provide the nuances that a qualitative analysis would provide.

The textual expressions in the data are divided into different categories, in order to carry out the analysis in a systematic manner. Three categories, which are derived from the hypotheses, are used to classify the relevant textual expressions. The first category, corresponding with hypothesis 1, contains the links made by the Secretary General between the operation and its compatibility with international law. The second category, corresponding with hypothesis 2, contains references to NATO's identity with its norms and values, and morality in relation to the military operation. The third category, corresponding with hypothesis 3, contains references to the security and self-interests of NATO and its member states.

These categories intentionally exclude each other, in order to avoid distorting the results of the analysis. Moreover, while the categories are quite broad, there is enough space for nuances in the empirical analysis section. The coding scheme presented in table 1, which is based on this classification, will be used in the analysis. More information regarding the analysis can be found in the appendix below the references section.

Table 1. Coding scheme.

Category	Description	Keywords
International law	Links between the operation and its compatibility with international law	Lawfulness, UN Resolution, legal, international law, right, Security Council, mandate
Identity	References to NATO's identity	NATO, values, (liberal) democracy, morality, rule of law, freedom, normative language, protection of others
Security	References to security concerns and (self-)interests of NATO and its allies	Security, interests, protection (of the self), stability, peace, defense, threats to own territory

### Empirical Analysis

In this section, the results of the discourse analysis will be presented. The different narratives that Secretary Generals used to legitimize the NATO-led operations will be presented per case, in chronological order.

#### Operation Allied Force

NATO intervened in a war between Yugoslav forces and Albanian insurgents in the region of Kosovo during *Operation Allied Force*, which took place from March to June 1999. Javier Solana held the position of Secretary General during the operation. The allies conducted airstrikes against Yugoslavia in two ways (Sperling & Webber, 2018, p. 896). Firstly, the air defense system, the infrastructure and the military supply routes were attacked. Secondly, Yugoslav forces in Kosovo were attacked in order to isolate them.

The first category includes narratives that contain references to international law. *Allied Force* lacked a legal mandate. Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), even submitted a draft resolution to condemn the operation (Greenwood, 2000, p. 932). As a consequence, Solana's discourse did not include references to a legal mandate. However, the desire to obtain such a mandate played an important role in the legal narrative, as the following quote shows:

[The requirements] have been defended by NATO, defended by the European Union, defended also by the Secretary General of the UN and we would like to see the same points defended by Russia. If that were the case, and I hope it will be the case, we will be in a position to take that scheme to the UN Security Council [and] have a resolution. (Solana, 23 April 1999a)

The Secretary General justified the continuation of the mission without a mandate by addressing the urgency of the situation in Kosovo and the need for member states to act, with or without legal basis. Responding to a question on why *Allied Force* began without a mandate, Solana argued that NATO allies were not prepared "to see those things going on without action" and therefore could not afford to wait on a UN resolution to act (Solana, 23 April 1999a).

Despite the lack of a legal mandate, the narrative does include legal arguments attempting to prove the legality of the operation. Firstly, Solana referred to international actors to prove the legality of the operation. The Secretary General constructed the legal argument that NATO did not violate the sovereignty of Yugoslavia, as the Yugoslav regime failed to protect its citizens. Although there was no legal basis for this claim, he cited UN Secretary General Annan: "no government has the right to hide behind national sovereignty in order to violate the human rights or fundamental freedoms of its peoples" (Solana, 7 May 1999). Moreover, he addressed the duty of NATO to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Yugoslavs.

Secondly, Solana stated that “justice and right is on our side” regarding *Allied Force*, thereby constructing the legal correctness of the operation (Solana, 12 April 1999). Concluding, looking at the broader context, a legal narrative fulfilled an important role within Solana’s discourse.

Narratives that belong to the second category, which contains rhetoric surrounding NATO’s identity and the moral dimension of an operation, play a dominant role in Solana’s discourse. Solana often used moral and normative language in his speeches and press conferences. The president of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, was not constructed as an ordinary adversary, but as an evil power which NATO, acting out of moral considerations, had to stop. Solana used linguistic means to depict Milosevic and his regime as evil and criminal. He attributed much attention to terms like ‘the henchmen of Milosevic’, ‘barbarism’, ‘repressive policies’, ‘Belgrade’s criminal war machine’ and ‘the antithesis of all we value’ to frame the regime.

Another way in which Solana constructed the moral reprehensibility of the Yugoslav regime is that he related the behaviour of the regime to Europe as a civilization: “the Yugoslav government (...) is refusing to respect civilized norms of behaviour in this Europe at the end of the 20th century” (Solana, 25 March 1999). To emphasize the necessity of a NATO-led operation, Solana depicted the events in Kosovo as severe and urgent. The events were marked as ‘a humanitarian catastrophe’, ‘the brutal destruction of human lives’, ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘carnage’. They were, according to Solana, “a fundamental challenge of the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law for which the Alliance has stood since its foundation” (23 April 1999b).

The Secretary General constructed this challenge to NATO’s values as the rationale to engage in the operation. NATO and its members were framed as morally obligated to act, as they could not act indifferent to the violations of their common values. Solana emphasized the prevalence of upholding the norms and values on which NATO bases its identity over self-interests and material resources by stating that:

There will be no spoils of war for NATO: no territory, no sphere of influence, no oil, no trade routes. But when the dust settles we will be able to say, we did what we had to do to uphold human dignity in the face of barbarism. (Solana, 7 May 1999)

The third category includes rhetoric regarding the self-interest and security concerns of NATO and its member states. This narrative played a very limited role in Solana's discourse. However, it was not absent. Solana stated multiple times that it was NATO's desire to build lasting peace and stability in the region. He explicitly linked this desire to the increase of NATO's sphere of influence, as he wanted the countries in a stable Balkan region to join the Alliance in the long term.

Moreover, Solana related the operation to ensuring peace and stability in the whole of Europe. Although this would benefit the allies, no direct link was made between security concerns and the operation. A final manner in which he used the operation to promote NATO's self-interests, was that he called for more net defense spending by the allies, as the "tragedy on our doorstep keep reminding us the need for a stronger Europe" (Solana, 7 May 1999). However, beside these frames, the Secretary General was reluctant to make a direct link between NATO, NATO member states' interests and security concerns and *Operation Allied Force*. Furthermore, the importance attributed to the frames was severely restricted, regarding their frequency and relative power in the overall discourse.

### **Operation Unified Protector**

The NATO-led operation in Libya, codenamed *Operation Unified Protector*, took place from March to October 2011 under a UNSC mandate, namely Resolution 1973. *Unified Protector* was held during the peak of the Arab Spring, after a revolution broke out in Libya. The people of Libya wanted to depose their dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Gaddafi and his forces attempted to call the revolution a halt, which resulted in a civil war (Brahimi, 2011). The operation contained the enforcement of a no-fly zone over Libya, an arms embargo, air strikes against pro-Gaddafi forces,

and the protection of civilians (Sperling & Webber, 2018, p. 898). During the operation, Anders Fogh Rasmussen was Secretary General of NATO.

Rhetoric included in the first category, which contains references to international law in the legitimization of the operation, played a significant role in the discourse. During the operation, Rasmussen often referred to UNSC Resolution 1973 as the legal basis of the operation in his speeches. The legal narrative was primarily focused on ensuring that the activities of *Unified Protector* were carried out within the limits of the mandate. Rasmussen often underlined that NATO only did what it ought to do according to the Resolution. During the operation, he stated that: “we’re very careful in conducting our operation in strict conformity with the UN mandate” (Rasmussen, 5 September 2011).

Another important locus of the narrative was that NATO would only engage in the operation because it was being called upon by the UN to fulfill the mandate: “unless the government of a country asks for our assistance, or the UN requests NATO’s help – the Alliance will not intervene” (Rasmussen, 30 March 2011). Additionally, Rasmussen stated that: “I do not see a major role for NATO in Libya after we have completed our UN mandated operation” (1 June 2011).

The second category contains rhetoric in relation to NATO’s identity and the moral dimension of the operation, and is present in Rasmussen’s discourse as well. Using moral language, Gaddafi and his regime were not framed as ordinary adversaries, but as morally reprehensible and evil. Rasmussen framed Gaddafi’s regime and pro-Gaddafi forces with terms as ‘war machine’, ‘reign of terror’, ‘murder of his own people’, and ‘rule of fear’. Rasmussen constructed NATO, on the other hand, as having a duty to fight this evil, based on its identity, regardless of the legal mandate the operation possessed. Since NATO stands for the values of freedom and democracy, enabling the Libyan people to “decide their own future” and to “preserve their right to freedom” is the responsibility of the Alliance (Rasmussen, 30 March 2011; 14 April 2011).

Moreover, Rasmussen related the Arab Spring in general to NATO's identity. NATO supported the Arab Spring, because it corresponded to its identity, as Rasmussen stated in one of his speeches:

NATO member states form a unique community of values, committed to individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. We consider these to be universal principles that apply to all peoples of the world, including in North Africa and the Middle East. That's why NATO Allies support the legitimate aspirations of people throughout this region.

(Rasmussen, 1 June 2011)

Furthermore, Rasmussen saw an active role for NATO in supporting these people in their battle for freedom and democracy, as NATO has shown in Libya. In addition, Rasmussen framed the fulfillment of UNSC Resolutions in general as a moral responsibility, thereby underlining the moral status of *Operation Unified Protector*. Concluding, even though *Unified Protector* possessed a legal mandate, morality and references to NATO's identity and values are playing a crucial role in Rasmussen's discourse regarding the operation.

Narratives that belong to the third category, which includes rhetoric surrounding self-interests and security concerns of NATO and its member states, are widely present in Rasmussen's discourse as well. Firstly, Rasmussen underlined that conflicts in NATO's neighborhood, like the civil war in Libya, are security challenges for NATO. Therefore, *Operation Unified Protector* corresponded with the strategic and security interests of NATO and its member states. He stressed that the operation could prevent Libya from becoming a failed state. Being a failed state would cause Libya to become a breeding ground for terrorists and extremists, which would consequently harm the security of NATO allies. The general tenor of this frame can be made clear by means of a quote:

Our essential mission is to ensure that the Alliance remains an unparalleled community of freedom, peace, security and shared values. Allies have built a solid security home in which

we are prosperous and at peace. But how safe can we really be when a crisis breaks out on our doorstep? (Rasmussen, 1 June 2011)

Secondly, he linked NATO's strategic and security interests to the security of North African and Middle Eastern countries in general. Rasmussen advocated for better cooperation with these countries to deal with security threats like "terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, potential disruption to our energy supplies, and illegal trafficking" (1 June 2011). Because he related *Unified Protector* to terrorism, Rasmussen indirectly associated the operation to the common security interests of North African and Middle Eastern countries. Thus, he indirectly constructed the argument that operations like *Unified Protector* are in the interest of neighboring states.

Concluding, the Secretary General directly associated the operation to NATO's interests and indirectly associated the operation to the security interests of neighboring states. So beside normative and legal elements, Rasmussen constructed strategic and security interests as a rationale to engage in the operation as well.

## Discussion

In this section, the results from the study and its limitations will be discussed. The results of the analysis will be related to the theoretical expectations drawn up in the hypotheses. As became clear in the previous section, the analysis indicates that a legal narrative as well as a narrative with links to NATO's identity are playing an important role in the Secretary General's discourse during military operations. A narrative that includes security concerns and self-interests plays a limited role on the other hand.

The results are in line with the first hypothesis (*H1*), which posits that the Secretary General would legitimize NATO's operations to a large extent by referring to international law. During both operations, a legal narrative has been given a great deal of power in the discourse. When the operation contains a legal mandate, the narrative is especially aimed at ensuring that the operation



takes place within the borders of the legal framework of the mandate. When a legal basis is missing on the other hand, the Secretary General continues to address the desire to obtain a mandate and constructs arguments to prove the lawfulness of the mission.

Hence, regardless of the circumstances, a legal discourse is included to render NATO's operations legitimate. Remarkably, a legal narrative is less present in the Secretary General's discourse during the beginning phase of the operation compared to later phases of the operation.

Besides the first hypothesis, the results support the second hypothesis (*H2*) as well. This hypothesis expects that NATO's leader would legitimize military operations by referring to NATO's identity. The Secretary General attributes much importance to this narrative in his discourse. He tends to frame the adversary of the operation as morally reprehensible, and portrays its behaviour as a challenge to NATO's values. Furthermore, NATO's identity is depicted as the source of its duty to engage in the mission, regardless of the existence of a legal mandate. The analysis made clear that this narrative is especially used during the initial phase of operations, in order to construct NATO's reason to intervene.

In contrast with the previous hypotheses, the analysis contradicts the third hypothesis (*H3*), which is therefore falsified. This hypothesis expects that the Secretary General would refer to the self-interest of NATO and its member states and their security concerns when legitimizing an operation. The analysis has shown that this narrative is relatively unpopular in the discourse, regarding both its frequency and relative power. Although Rasmussen attributed much attention to narratives that related the self-interests and security concerns of NATO and its allies to *Unified Protector* and the Arab Spring in general, Solana did not even make a direct connection between *Allied Force* and security concerns of member states. Yet, NATO's leaders do tend to use this narrative when addressing representatives or subjects of member states.

Hence, the analysis builds upon Nuñez-Mietz's (2018) theory on the crucial role that a legal narrative plays in the legitimization of the use of force by providing evidence that the importance of

this role is not limited to the discourse of state-level actors only, but applies to the level of heads of international organizations as well. Furthermore, this thesis builds upon the Good War thesis by extending its scope to the level of international organizations and by introducing an organization's identity as a manner in which actors legitimize force. Additionally, it provides evidence that this narrative is especially used during the start of military operations. Yet, the data challenges the third approach, which is based on empirical evidence and realist assumptions. Hence, it must be concluded that this approach is not applicable to NATO.

### **Limitations**

It is essential to put these statements into perspective by nuancing the results of the analysis and its broader explanatory power, as the study contains a number of limitations. Firstly, the generalizability of the results is limited, as the analysis contains merely two cases. This is a small amount, compared to the numerous operations NATO has engaged in. Moreover, it is difficult to extend the results to international organizations in general, as NATO is a unique organization in terms of power, abilities and structure. Despite its limited generalizability, this research still is a valuable contribution to the literature, because it provides the first impetus for research on this topic, upon which other studies can build.

Secondly, the reliability of the results is limited by the fact that a qualitative discourse analysis is very interpretative in nature. Consequently, the results may be partially dependent on the person that analyzed and interpreted the text fragments (Aydin-Düzgüt & Rumelili, 2019, p. 301). Yet, this does not diminish the value of the study, as it is a characteristic of the analysis itself, which on the other hand allows detailed and in-depth insights into cases. Furthermore, an attempt has been made to maximize the reliability of the study by analyzing the transcripts in a systematic manner.

Thirdly, the cases have been selected on a scientifically sound criterion (MDSO). Yet, other cases could have been selected on the same criterion as well, which raises questions about the

existence of selection bias. However, as discussed before, these specific cases were selected because of their representability of post-Cold War NATO-led operations. Thus, this case selection offers more explanatory power to the study than other case selections would.

### **Conclusion**

This research aimed to discover how NATO-led military operations are legitimized by the NATO Secretary General. Based on a discourse analysis of the discourse of the Secretary General during *Operation Allied Force* and *Operation Unified Protector*, it can be concluded that NATO's operations tend to be legitimized by the use of a discourse which, to a large extent, includes a legal narrative, as well as a narrative that links the operations to NATO's identity, i.e. NATO's (moral) norms and values.

The literature contained a significant gap regarding the legitimization of military operations by actors on the level of international institutions, and especially NATO. This thesis aimed to fill this gap by exploring the discourse of the Secretary General during NATO-led military operations. Using hypotheses that are extrapolated from theories in the literature surrounding the legitimization of the use of force combined with theories regarding NATO, a discourse analysis was carried out. The analysis indicated that two out of the three hypotheses are corroborated. The Secretary General included narratives that addressed international law as well as NATO's identity in his discourse. The presence of a narrative that emphasized security concerns or self-interests in his discourse was negligible on the other hand.

This thesis contributes to the literature in several ways. Firstly, it fills a gap in the literature by providing the first impetus to discover how non-state actors legitimize the use of force, thereby extending the scope of research to the level of international organizations. Secondly, the thesis builds upon existing theories regarding the legitimization of the use of force. This thesis extends the applicability of Nuñez-Mietz's (2018) theory to the level of international organizations by providing

evidence that, beside at the state-level, a legal narrative plays an important role in the legitimization of the use of force at the level of international organizations as well. Moreover, it contributes to the Good War thesis by introducing the norms and values of an organization itself as a manner in which operations are legitimized, beside universal norms and values.

Thirdly, the thesis adds to the growing body of literature regarding the important role of heads of international organizations, by providing evidence that the NATO Secretary General acts as a norm entrepreneur, in the sense that he uses his discursive resources by engaging in the legitimization of actions.

The study does contain a number of limitations however. Firstly, the generalizability of the results is limited, as merely two cases are analyzed and because of the fact that NATO is a unique international organization. Nevertheless, the study contributes to the literature, as it provides the first impetus for research in this field. Secondly, the reliability of the research is limited, as the method of analysis requires interpretation by the researcher. Yet, an attempt has been made to conduct the research systematically. Moreover, this type of analysis allows in-depth results of cases.

Thirdly, even though the cases have been selected on a scientifically sound criterion, selection bias might be present, as different cases could have been selected on the same criterion. Still, these specific cases were selected because of their representativeness of NATO's operations and thus contribute to the explanatory power of the study.

Finally, suggestions for further research will be done. This thesis has attempted to broaden the scope of the legitimization of the use of force to the level of international organizations. As this thesis provides the first impetus, there are plenty of fertile areas for further research. A discourse analysis containing more than two operations would provide the literature with more generalizable results regarding the legitimization of NATO-led operations. Furthermore, extending the scope of research to other international security organizations like the African Union or the Arab League is a fruitful avenue for further research with enormous potential.

Additionally, while this thesis focused on the attempts of the Secretary General to gain legitimacy, it is beyond its scope to explore the actual success of these attempts. Hence, more research needs to be done to discover whether the attempts of legitimization were successful, and how the success rate differs between the different audiences that are addressed.

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## Appendix

This appendix contains information about the method of analysis. The analysis consisted of speeches and press conferences of two different Secretary Generals during Operation Allied Force and Operation Unified Protector. All the analyzed data is available at: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions.htm>. All transcripts of Javier Solana's speeches and press conferences during Operation Allied Force (March 23 to June 10 1999) were duplicated from the website and merged into one file.

Thereafter, in accordance with the coding scheme, which can be found in table 1a, all relevant textual expressions in the document were divided into the different categories by coloring them. The keywords used were not necessarily present in the categorized fragments, as the general scope and sentiment of a certain text fragment was decisive. Some keywords for the categories were added during the analysis, if a word or sentence would fit in a narrative within one of the three categories and the hypotheses.

Subsequently, it was examined how the rhetoric related to the operation and how the different statements within a category related to each other. Consequently, nuances and differentiations within categories took place to provide the most accurate representation of the narratives. This method was replicated with transcripts of speeches and press conferences held by Anders Fogh Rasmussen during Operation Unified Protector (March 23 to October 31 2011).

Three categories have been used to classify the relevant textual expressions:

- International law: contains references to the legal status of the operation, legal mandates, and other legal arguments.
- Identity: contains statements of the Secretary General about NATO's identity, including its values and morality.

- Security: contains statements of the Secretary General about the self-interest and security concerns of NATO member states and NATO itself.

Table 1a. Coding scheme.

Category	Description	Keywords	Color
International law	Links between the operation and its compatibility with international law	Lawfulness, UN Resolution, legal, international law, right, Security Council, mandate	Red
Identity	References to NATO's identity	NATO, values, liberal democracy, morality, rule of law, freedom, normative language, protection of others	Blue
Security	References to security concerns and (self-)interests of NATO and its allies	Security, interests, protection (of the self), stability, peace, defense, threats to own territory	Green