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OZAYAZ, ASLI

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# Universiteit Leiden

## NATO TRUMPS TRUMP

How did NATO survive Trump's attacks?

ASLI OZAYAZ

3084779

MSc Political Science, International Organisation

Supervisor: Dr. Martijn Mos

Second Reader: Dr. Agha G. Bayramov

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## ABSTRACT

International organizations (IOs), like all other organisms, have a life cycle, and like any governance form, IOs need to adapt to the changes or become obsolete. NATO, a survivor of all threats that the global arena has thrown at it, faced a unique threat with Trump. This thesis explores IO survival with the case study of NATO during Trump's presidency<sup>1</sup>, focusing on *what explains NATO's survival of Trump's threats*. With the support of the broad academic literature on the IO survival and NATO's persistence, three factors, namely member state benefits, the structure of NATO and domestic politics were studied through the process-tracing method. Evidence showed that a combination of factors placated Trump from withdrawing the US from NATO. The member states' benefits and domestic politics factors had a significant impact, and NATO's structure factor supported them.

Key words: NATO, Trump, IO survival, domestic politics

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis builds on an original assignment completed for the course *Dynamics of International Organisation*.

## **INTRODUCTION**

2016 marked a new era in the United States (US) politics with Donald Trump's candidacy for the presidency race, who later became the 45th president of the US. In his interviews, speeches, and tweets, Trump publicly and repeatedly voiced his dissatisfaction with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the allies as well as other international organizations (IOs). In March 2016, Trump stated that NATO was becoming more costly to the US to protect Europe to Washington Post (CBS News, 2017). Trump (2016a) tweeted, "I said here's the problem with NATO: it's obsolete". When he was asked to comment on the US's involvement in NATO by CNN, Trump mentioned that he would need to consider whether they would be involved (CBS News, 2017). The alarm bells rang for NATO allies when Trump, in a New York Times interview said that the commitment to Article 5 of NATO could depend on the defense spending of the allies (Smith, 2017). His tweets were very critical and harsh on NATO, such as "My statement on NATO being obsolete and disproportionately too expensive (and unfair) for the US are now, finally, receiving plaudits!" (Trump, 2016b).

During his candidacy and presidency, Trump's hostile and harsh domestic and international politics, such as interfering with law enforcement, abusing the administration's power, and undermining allies caused crises and problems for the US and her allies. In addition to his verbal attacks, he blocked proceedings, appointments, and funding and terminated the memberships (Dijkstra, Allwörden, Schuette, and Zaccaria, 2021, p. 3). He challenged the benefits of the IOs, and he pulled the US support from some of these. Dijkstra et al. (2021,

p. 7) stated that NATO's future was unclear due to Trump's actions. Benitez (2019, p. 183) summarized three major accusations of Trump as NATO being obsolete, allies own money to the US, and the US's collective defense responsibility might depend on the allies' financial commitments. Following his presidency, Trump dropped his accusation of NATO's obsolescence however he took a different stance by threatening to leave NATO and badmouthing the European allies. Moreover, it was evident from his actions, speeches, interviews, and campaign rallies that Trump insisted on vocalizing NATO and the EU problems. Trump (2018a) tweeted his frustration as "...Germany pays 1% (slowly) of GDP towards NATO, while we pay 4% of a MUCH larger GDP. Does anybody believe that makes sense? We protect Europe (which is good) at great financial loss, and then get unfairly clobbered on Trade. Change is coming!"

This thesis takes the case study of NATO in the context of Donald Trump's presidency and seeks to answer *what explains NATO's survival of Trump's threats.*

This study draws on the broader literature on IO survival and NATO to answer the research question. Recent developments such as the rise of populism, member state withdrawals from IOs, resistance to political and economic international cooperation, international terrorism, and isolationist politics bring up questions on IOs' life expectancies. There are questions on whether the time of the IOs is over and whether it is the end of the liberal international world order (Dijkstra, 2019, p. 2). For NATO, its survival took a great place in the literature since the end of the Cold War, focusing on different types of crises.

This case should be considered a unique case from both NATO's and Trump's perspectives. On the one hand, NATO's survival of this crisis is puzzling for a couple of reasons. Trump's accusations and threats were a first for NATO. This threat was unique in that no president other than Trump questioned the validity of the Alliance and its value to the US (Benitez, 2019, p. 183), and this was a move shaking the core of NATO as the US is the biggest member state of the alliance. This was unexpected. Moreover, Trump's decisions and rhetoric towards the allies were interpreted as hostile. This damaged the supportive attitude of the member states towards each other. Also, it came when with the latest global concerns in security, many other IOs and formations with security functions emerged, such as Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the European Security and Defense Policy. This weakens NATO in the arena of security and poses challenges for NATO regarding funding, mandate complexities, and efficiency. Scholars anticipated that these organizations would take on NATO's responsibilities (Brown, 1995, as cited in McCalla, 1996, p. 446) which is one of the reasons for IO death.

On the other hand, it is puzzling that although his demands of increase in the burden-sharing and closer relations with Russia were not adequately met, Trump's rhetoric got milder towards NATO in time, and he did not follow upon his threat. In a joint press conference with the Secretary-General of NATO in 2017, Trump reversed his obsolete comment and confirmed the US support to NATO as "...I said it was obsolete. It's no longer obsolete....to reaffirm our commitment to this alliance and to the enduring values that we proudly -- and I mean very proudly -- share" (NATO, 2017). This raises the question of what placated Trump.

In this thesis, I argue that three factors explain what placated Trump about NATO. The first one advocates that Trump did not pull from NATO since member states met his demands on burden sharing, and this factor depends on the members' benefits from NATO. Several scholars, including Thies (2009), argued that all member states of NATO have significant benefits from NATO, therefore making it indispensable. The second factor is NATO's structure. Dijkstra and Debre (2021, p. 332) explained that as in uncertain times, member states prefer not to dissolve the IOs, secretariat staff can convince member states to cooperate, large bureaucracies enable IOs to adapt easier and are stronger against member state challenges. The final factor that placated Trump is domestic politics which is assessed as one of the important factors by scholars such as McCalla (1996) and Scheer (2009). Various domestic actors of the US took actions such as affirming the commitment of the US to NATO, trying to convince Trump of the importance of NATO, and taking measures to limit Trump's authority. What placated Trump from pulling the US from NATO is a combination of these three factors, member state benefits and domestic politics working together and NATO's structure assisting them.

This thesis studies these hypotheses by utilizing the process-tracing method. A combination of primary and secondary data sources is used, such as official NATO documents and official documents from member states as primary sources, and academic literature, news articles, interview notes, social media, and other relevant documentation as secondary sources.

This thesis aims to contribute to the literature on NATO, crises it endured, relationships between allies, and factors supporting its persistence. Furthermore, this work aims to

contribute to the literature on IO survival in the aspects of a hegemon threat. Understanding the factors enabling the survival of IOs and ones that lead them to dissolve is critical theoretically and practically. IOs and the policymakers can design structures that would avoid possible downfalls and equip themselves with factors that would support IOs persistence. Also, the knowledge might be used in times of crisis to save the IOs. An example could be that the findings might be utilized to revitalize the “zombies” (Gray, 2018, p. 1), which are IOs in an idle position.

The remainder of the thesis is organized as follows. The next section focuses on the theoretical framework detailing the methodology and operationalization. The third section presents the analysis of the case, and the last section concludes with the summary, findings of the thesis, and future research ideas.



## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### NATO's History of Crises and Transformations

NATO, set up as a military alliance in 1949, is an example of a longstanding IO that beat the expectations of neorealists such as Waltz and Mearsheimer. McCalla (1996, p. 447) takes it as a deviant case of Lijphart in his study for this reason. Since its foundation, NATO has gone through various crises such as the nuclear weapon debates, French threats of pulling out of the alliance, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the creation of other security IOs, and even though most of the scholars expected it to dissolve, it always managed to survive and validate its existence through transforming (Menon & Welsh, 2011). NATO moved from first Secretary-General Lord H. L. Ismay's definition as "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down" to become a collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security organization (NATO, n.d. (b)). According to Chiampan (2019, p. 3), the alliance was the defender of the international order of shared values and norms hence still relevant.

Thies (2009), who studied six crises NATO faced since the end of the Cold War, argued that NATO survived as the member states tend to compromise their demands and preferences to save it. According to Thies (2009, p. 296), liberal democracies tend to stick together even in conflicts, and NATO's unique quality was that its members act in accord despite their disagreements. Another scholar taking liberal democratic values to his work was Wallander (2018, pp. 72-74), who explained that once there was no shared external threat for member

states, and when some member states were backsliding from democratic and liberal values, the internal and political cohesion and the binding role of the liberal democratic values were significant for NATO's survival. Wallander (2000) also claimed that NATO developed general and specific assets during the Cold War- which supported it to adapt and persist later.

The crisis NATO faced with Trump was unique due to various reasons. NATO was threatened by the biggest member state of the alliance, which also happened to be a hegemon, and its impact was more salient and powerful. It was a first that the alliance's value for the US was questioned (Zandee, 2018, p. 3). Thies (2009, p. 136) argued that NATO members always had issues to agree on the burden-sharing of defense. Moreover, it was a first since *direct* threats were carried out *publicly* (Benitez, 2019, p. 183). Chiampan (2019, pp. 6-7) argued that before Trump, not one president used such a negative tone, used burden-sharing as an excuse to pull US's support from collective defense, and questioned the allies' intentions. Once realized, this threat would critically damage NATO's existence and lead it to dissolve without the US. The critical role of the US within the alliance's structure is evident from Treaty's Article 13, which requires informing the US as the first step of the denunciation process. Another reason I chose to focus on this case is that some surveys already support my argument on the gravity of Trump's rhetoric on NATO by showing that Trump's actions started to cause legitimacy issues for NATO. Two surveys in 2019, namely one by Pew Research and one by Ipsos MORI and Policy Institute at King's College London, found similar results regarding perceptions of the public and the member states on NATO showing a decline in the positive perceptions of NATO because of Trump's rhetoric (McGeoghean, 2019).

Scholars suggested various explanations for NATO surviving Trump, such as the existing challenges, NATO's different roles, the possibility of threats by Russia and China, etc. Ricketts (2020, p. 29) argued that NATO's role was more than a security organization: it also included safeguarding the liberal democratic values like the rule of law, free institutions, stability, economic cooperation, and liberty of the individual. According to Ricketts (2020, p. 30), there were various responsibility areas for NATO from civil emergencies, human security and resonating with the younger population's values. According to Zandee (2018), NATO continues to survive under the condition that Russia continues its foreign politics towards NATO, Europe, and Ukraine. Similarly, Welna (2019) quoted Alexander Vershbow, former NATO deputy secretary-general's views on the relevance of NATO against an aggressive Russia in an article on NPR. In one of Atlantic Council's articles, Luxner (2020) presented different views of Herbst, Vershbow, Mearsheimer, and Moller, and reflected Vershbow's vigorous argument that NATO supports the US with "a team of ready-made partners".

### IO Survival

The literature on IO survival gained momentum in recent years. In this thesis, for the definition for IO survival, I take Gray's (2018, p. 3) typology of alive organizations, which considers organizations that hold at least one meeting annually and make progress towards their mandates as alive. Hence, IO survival means the state of continuing to be alive and active. Different schools of theory offer different explanations. Some scholars bring attention

to internal factors such as staff quality, autonomy, international robustness, size, member state interests, and some scholars focus on external factors of exogenous shocks, major power shifts, the existence of other IOs in the same function or geographic area (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020; Gray, 2018; Dijkstra & Debre, 2021; Menon & Welsh, 2011). Nevertheless, none of them can successfully match all IOs or all crises. Also, as Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2021, p. 305) argued, IO death results from not a single factor but multiple factors.

Many different internal factors come up in various studies. Gray (2018, pp. 3-5) focused on two factors: staff quality and bureaucratic autonomy and argued that organizations attracting and retaining talented staff as well as secretariats with autonomy are more likely to be vital. Another study by Dijkstra (2019, pp. 10-12) debated that institutional flexibility and the size of the IOs are positively correlated with the longevity of the IOs. Dijkstra and Debre (2021, p. 331) tested these hypotheses against 150 IOs, and the results showed that IOs with large secretariat are better at coping with external pressures. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020) stated that IOs are more likely to survive if they are global, have multiple functions, and have a large membership. In the light of these studies, it is possible to assume that NATO's structure might have aimed to achieve these qualities to ensure its survival and used transformations such as enlarging the geographical area, adding different functions and responsibilities, and partnering with other security organizations like UN, OSCE, etc.

### Hypotheses

As I outlined above, there are various important explanations for NATO's persistence since the Cold War and Trump's impact. For this latest crisis of Trump's threats, namely withdrawal from NATO and questioning collective defense commitment (non-compliance with Article 5), I find that the arguments are broad and focus on different aspects. The below factors offer potentially relevant explanations, and therefore, I base my hypotheses around them.

### 1. Member State Benefits

All member states have significant benefits from NATO. According to McCalla (1996, pp. 457-461), NATO needs the resources from member states to operate; hence it has to consider member states' preferences, and member states' benefits is a determinant of survival as organizational behavior theory expects NATO to aim to survive.

From the perspective of the US, NATO provides several political, economic, and security benefits. Firstly, it was essential to keep states in check with the liberal democratic values to prevent them from falling into Russia's new method to derail states from these, in line with Ricketts (2020) and Zandee's (2018) arguments. Benitez (2019, p. 195) defended that NATO is unique for the US since it preserves its benefits and ideas. Chiampan (2019, p. 3) also focused on this benefit as promoting values of the liberal democratic order in other regions as well as NATO providing a gateway for the US to the three big European countries' industry and military. Moreover, I agree with Vershbow's opinion that the US has an established partnership through NATO that others do not have. This brings a substantial

advantage for the US even if the other member states might not be as strong as her in military perspectives; this still strengthens the US's hand against the risen China or any other adversaries. Schreer (2019, p. 12) argued that the allies provide the US with more advantages than costs. Secondly, the US has excellent economic benefits through the trades with the EU, having military bases with no cost and employment benefits as Thies (2009, pp. 126-127) and Chiampan (2019, p. 2) argued. Similarly, Benitez (2019, p. 184) argued that NATO critically benefits the US with strategically located military bases and brings security for Europe, North Atlantic, and the Mediterranean at a cost of only about five percent of the US defense budget. Moreover, the US bases in Germany are vital for drone communications and military services to the US troops wounded during the recent conflicts in the Middle East (McGee, 2020). Thirdly, the alliance and the military bases provide the US with easy access to Europe, the Mediterranean, and beyond. Lastly, NATO is a force and a symbol of the US's hegemonic power, and it is not likely that the US will prefer to lose it. Chiampan's (2019, p. 2) argument also supports this benefit of the US's strong military power and hegemonic power.

From the perspectives of the European member states, there are several political, economic, and security benefits for them. Firstly, as Thies (2009) and Chiampan (2019) put it, the European member states gained access to advanced technological and military resources through the US. The European member states had the friendship of the only hegemon globally. Secondly, the trade agreements supported them with employment opportunities, resource flows, and income. Thirdly, the alliance was another tool for the European member states to stick together rather than falling apart from their interests. The enabling force for

European integration has been the US security since the end of the WW, and Joffe (1984, p. 68) argued that American power ‘pacified’ Europe. Most importantly, all of these enabled them to recover after the war and pass the defense responsibility to the US. Thies (2009, pp. 126-127) recorded this as the Europeans preferred to claim the US resources for their defense.

Also, Chiampan (2019, pp. 7-8) pointed out that, due to the changes in the major powers, international terrorism, and global threats, the alliance is more important for all the member states. I agree with McCall (1996) that NATO will survive to the degree that it benefits the member states. The argument of Thies (2009) that the member states tend to compromise their demands and preferences to save the Alliance and overcome the crises strengthens my expectation.

The mutual benefits from NATO exist, and this will continue in the future even if major powers might shift. NATO members will continue to need each other. Taking this into account, I argue that all the member states, including the US, recognized their benefits from NATO, and they preferred that the US does not withdraw from it. To keep Trump from withdrawing the US from NATO, they worked to meet Trump’s demands of increased burden-sharing and convince Trump to abandon the idea.

*H1: Trump did not pull the US from NATO because member states met his demand to increase the burden-sharing.*

This hypothesis assumes that most member states tried to have a more positive attitude to find a way to compromise or meet Trump's demands, and at least most member states did not negatively respond to Trump. If this hypothesis is true, the observable implications would be the increase in the number of member states meeting the burden sharing, increase in the other member states' burden-sharing figures, military exercises continuing between the member states and the US as usual or increasing, and the head of the member states referring to the political, economic and security benefits of the alliance and the need to keep the alliance together. On the other hand, if there is no increase in the burden-sharing figures by any ally, no military activities between the US and the European member states, and no discourse from member states on the benefits of NATO, then the hypothesis would not be supported. The counter hypothesis could be that when Trump threatened to leave the alliance, the member states showed no interest in the rhetoric as they did not value the benefits from NATO. This can be considered a reflection of Menon and Welsh's (2011, pp. 90-91) study, where they question whether member states' willingness to keep NATO functioning is strong enough to neutralize the distributional conflict within.

## 2. NATO's Structure

Several scholars who focus on NATO's structure are Gray (2018), Dijkstra and Debre (2021), Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020), McCalla (1996), Dijkstra et al. (2021) and Schuette (2021). According to Dijkstra et al. (2021, pp. 8-9), NATO survived Trump because NATO had a leadership, organizational structure, competencies, and external networks that could develop a strategy, and its organizational structure is a secretariat hierarchically designed with



different substantive divisions and the Secretary-General has full authority to run it. For this hypothesis, NATO's structure is taken as the above definition emphasizing both on the organizational structure and the leadership of the alliance, and the hypothesis is derived from this approach.

Another study that centers around leadership is by Schuette (2021, pp. 8-14), focusing on the role of the Secretary-General in managing Trump's hostile attitude through various strategies such as agenda-setting and brokering, and coalition-building and shielding. Schuette (2021) aimed to show that even though NATO did not fully react per Trump's policies on burden-sharing and Russia, it was successful in getting Trump's support in the end.

Schreer (2019, p. 12) also drew attention to the high degree of institutionalism in NATO with its integrated political and military structures and implied that NATO can be considered resilient to political crises and can navigate its way out of internal and external pressures. I agree that it is in the nature of the organization and the bureaucracy to intend to survive; however, I argue that success depends on the effort, the conflict at hand, and the timing of the crises. For the case at hand, NATO bureaucracy successfully kept the tensions of the member states at a certain level to avoid further problems, negotiating with the member states to meet the demands of Trump as well as manoeuvring Trump's different demands.

*H2: Trump did not pull the US from NATO because NATO placated Trump with its strong leadership and secretariat.*

This hypothesis expects that the secretariat and the leadership worked towards keeping Trump satisfied and avoiding further conflicts. If this hypothesis is true, I would expect to find evidence such as the Secretary-General holding a neutral or a positive tone even when Trump declared that NATO was obsolete, secretariat and the Secretary-General holding spontaneous and closed-door meetings with the head of State Members during the Summits and other events of NATO to solve conflicts immediately as they arise between them, NATO summits and other events being postponed or canceled when there was a sign of conflict, the head of member states who, after Trump's negative rhetoric, presenting negative attitudes towards each other or to the alliance itself, starting to act more in unison or preferable towards the alliance and the allies, and Trump praising the Secretary-General on his attitudes and actions on burden-sharing. On the other hand, I would expect no public change of plans in the meetings or events, NATO bureaucracy to behave more defensive or even offensive towards Trump, and the relationship between NATO and the US would be more strained if the hypothesis is not valid. The counter expectation would be that NATO would pursue Trump's demands more diligently with the allies, and there would be no room for compromise from either end.

### 3. Domestic Politics

Domestic politics take various roles such as support or opposition to the alliance, the limits to the financial burden, and the stance of the politicians per constituents' preferences. McCalla (1996), who recognized the importance of organizational behavior dynamics, the interplay of member interests, and domestic political issues of member states, argued that the

determinant of NATO's survival would be in the hands of domestic politics. The domestic politics aspect McCalla (1996) considered not only argued that member states need to satisfy the domestic constituents' expectations for continued support, but also domestic politics determines the limits for support and opposition by member states to NATO.

The latest developments within the international arena, such as Brexit, underline the importance of domestic politics. Even though some scholars think it has a slight effect, such as Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019, p. 338), who argued that constituents' preference and the state's decision regarding the IOs might be different and domestic politics counts to a small portion of IO withdrawals, the recent events speak differently. Another relevant example is Trump pulling the US from particular IOs. Research showed that the US public had a positive perception of NATO before Trump's rhetoric began, and even though it has seen a fall, it did not become critically low. Moreover, the Senate and the military establishment favored and valued NATO. Schreer (2019, p. 12) discussed that multiple domestic actors influence the US and NATO politics, and NATO has support from both parties of the US Congress as well as the Pentagon and the US military.

*H3: Trump did not pull from NATO because domestic politics did not allow him to.*

This hypothesis expects that the domestic actors of the US, including the political ones, valued NATO and voiced their support to it through various speeches and publications. If this hypothesis is true, the observable implications would be that the Senate and the Army favored NATO and opposed the idea of withdrawal from NATO, the Senate acted to prevent

Trump using presential power to pull from NATO, Trump's advisors spoke highly of NATO and its importance for the US to convince Trump not to realize his threats. If this hypothesis were not true, I would expect to see no conflict between the rhetoric of Trump and other political institutions of the US; no action would be taken to change the limits of the president's power regarding NATO. Moreover, the advisors would not support NATO and not try to change Trump's decisions, and there would be a high drop in the public's perceptions towards NATO. The counter expectation would be that the political institutions of the US would support Trump's decision to withdraw the US from NATO.

It is also essential to note that some scholars expected NATO to dissolve due to the crises in the recent period. Due to word limitations, I will only name a few. Dijkstra and Debre (2020, pp. 28-29) argued that the stickiness of institutions does not always work for IOs, and when there is a decline in the hegemonic power, IOs are likely to die. However, I believe that even if China rises and the US declines, NATO will still be valid for the member states. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2021, pp. 281-305) argued that exogenous shocks are the main suspect of IO death, and even robust IOs that have withstood many crises and conflicts might be overthrown by one specific shock. Sauer (2019, p. 246), who argued that alternative security IOs would replace NATO, stated that NATO could dissolve due to major power changes, the US's focus change to China and leaving Europe by itself, and the non-existence of threats. Mearsheimer argued that the US needs to focus on the threats from China rather than Russia, which will render NATO invalid, and Moller suggested that NATO will perish as it does not have a strategic focus (Luxner, 2020). I argue these factors are not strong enough to dissolve

NATO. Furthermore, I suggest that the factors urging IOs or member states to stay alive are much stronger than these; therefore, NATO survived the biggest threat to its existence.

For this thesis, I test the hypotheses detailed above, focusing on the factors of member state benefits, the structure of NATO, and domestic politics through the research design outlined below.

### **Research Design**

For this qualitative case study, process tracing is used to find causal mechanisms to explain the outcome of NATO's survival. George and Bennett (2005, p. 206) defined the method as trying to "... identify the intervening causal process—the causal chain and causal mechanism— between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable". According to Collier (2011, p. 823), process-tracing involves taking a systematic approach to analyzing the evidence according to the research question and the hypotheses, making it a robust method for this case. Furthermore, Collier (2011, p. 823) argued that the method supports describing political and social mechanisms as well as assessing the causal mechanisms at play. This study uses the theory-testing variant of process tracing. Beach and Pedersen (2013, p. 3) argued that testing a theory from the existing literature against the evidence is adequate to see "hypothesized causal mechanism is present" and if the mechanism worked as hypothesized. The critical note here is that, as Beach and Pedersen (2013, p. 13) discussed, the aim is to explain in the best possible way. The method's limitations are that it does not provide a basis for comparison between rival hypotheses, and

it is not possible to judge whether the casual mechanism is required (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, pp. 15-16). To overcome this, I investigate the strength of the observable implications as evidence to validate or overrule my hypotheses.

According to Van Evera (1997, p. 55), case studies are the best method when the aim is to make inferences or test explanatory hypotheses. Van Evera (1997, p. 65) argued that carefully carried out process tracing is one of the strongest methods to testing a theory, and the process's prediction is unmatched by other theories. Van Evera (1997, p. 53) also pointed to the limitations as a single case study can miss the theory's background (antecedent) conditions, which would negatively affect the explanatory power. I have chosen the crisis NATO endured with Trump's rhetoric; therefore, the findings of this thesis will support the literature on NATO and be relevant for NATO under Trump. For this case, since there is a broad literature on NATO's survival of previous crises, and this is Trump's first presidency, this limitation should not present problems. However, this thesis also investigates an IO under the threat of a hegemon, so that the findings will feed to the broader literature with a path for further research.

I analyzed utilizing a combination of primary and secondary data sources to observe whether there is evidence to validate or overrule my hypotheses. These are official documents of NATO, member states, the White House documents as primary sources, and academic literature, news articles, interview notes, social media, and other relevant documentation as secondary sources. These sources were selected to ensure a reliable, relevant, and credible analysis. They were from trustworthy resources and were researched through search engines

and databases using keywords. Using multiple varieties of data sources, data triangulation is aimed and hence to increase the credibility of the analysis results.

## **ANALYSIS**

The 45<sup>th</sup> president of the US, Donald Trump's negative rhetoric towards the IOs, particularly towards NATO, started during his candidacy and continued with his presidency. Trump was also inconsistent with his rhetoric on NATO. In January 2017, Chatham House think-tank published a report that defined Trump's style as "brash, unpredictable, contradictory and thin-skinned" (Wickett, 2017). In April 2016, Trump commented on NATO as obsolete and members not paying fair shares (Parker, 2016), which raised concerns over member states. On the other hand, some did not believe he would follow up on his threats, such as Schreer (2019). Nevertheless, Trump displayed a change of rhetoric towards NATO; the object of his hostile rhetoric was now the allies. The below analysis aims to understand what placated Trump about NATO.

### **Member State Benefits**

This hypothesis argued that Trump did not pull the US from NATO because member states met his financial demand of increasing the burden-sharing, and it assumed to find evidence on increased burden-sharing figures. Trump's remarks created different reactions from member states; some were inclined to reaffirm their commitments, such as Estonia, and some

referred to the need for a stronger Europe responsible for its own security, such as Germany and France.

The financial contributions in NATO take two different forms: indirect funding and direct funding. Indirect funding, which is also known as burden-sharing, includes a defense investment from each member state's 2% of GDP (NATO, 2021). Direct funding is used for NATO's running costs, and it has a common funding principle from members (NATO, 2021).

In 2014, member states agreed to set the burden-sharing commitment to 2% of GDP and meet it by 2024. Since then, the number of member states that met the commitment varied each year, showing a slow rise. The rise had begun in 2015 before Trump, and in 2016, three member states (excluding the US) met the commitment (Richter, 2021; Kupchan, 2019). Kupchan (2019, p. 28) reflected the increase in the defense spending of European allies as 24 of NATO's 29 members.

In July 2018, Trump sent letters to NATO Allies stressing the burden-sharing commitment, and many defended their commitments, such as Norwegian Defense Minister Frank Bakke-Jensen, German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, Canada Defense Minister's chief of communications, and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel (Cook & Olsen, 2018).

During Trump's presidency, the number of member states meeting the requirement increased from 3 to 9, and other countries increased their burden-sharing commitments, such as Germany, one of the biggest scapegoats of Trump's accusations, from 1.2% for 2016 to 1.5%



for 2020 estimate. According to NATO's press release (2021) on Defense Expenditures of NATO Countries, in a comparison of 2014-2021 estimate of burden-sharing figures (with 2015 prices) showed that Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, Romania, and France met the requirement.

The second funding type, which is the common funding, was redistributed. The redistribution consisted of lowering the 22% US contribution and increasing the Germany contribution, which meant that both countries' cost share would be 16% (Widakuswara, 2019). The new distribution ensured an increase in the European member states, and Canada which can be considered as member states trying to meet Trump's expectations.

Third parties interpreted the reasoning behind these actions as placating Trump to pull the US from NATO. A NATO official commented on the issue as allies' commitment to NATO and the burden-sharing (Fritze & Jackson, 2019). Reuters also took this as an action to convince Trump; it stated that some of the allies would agree to increase their burden-sharing and to reduce the US contribution to placate Trump (Rose & Shirbon, 2019). Another news portal presented the news similarly as the changes were done to the common funding to meet Trump's demands (Brzozowski, 2021).

Similarly, Trump repeatedly expressed the increase in the burden-sharing of allies in his statements while taking credit to himself. Some of his comments from Twitter are "I had a great meeting with NATO. They have paid \$33 Billion more and will pay hundreds of Billions of Dollars more in the future, only because of me. NATO was weak, but now it is

strong again (bad for Russia). The media only says I was rude to leaders, never mentions the money!” (Trump, 2018b); “They were just upset that I demanded they pay their fair share for NATO. Their countries are delinquent. I raised \$530 Billion more from NATO countries! ...” (Trump, 2019a). His many other tweets focused on the increase in the financial obligations, increased billions of dollars, allies meeting their obligations, Trump’s role in it, and leaders of the alliance thanking Trump for all of this (Twitter, Trump, 2018c-2019b). Trump (2019c) also points out as “Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General, just stated that because of me NATO has been able to raise far more money than ever before from its members after many years of decline. It’s called burden-sharing...”. On 05 February 2019, in his State of the Union address speech, Trump mentioned his administration’s success over NATO as other member states were paying their shares, and a \$100 billion increase was secured (Trump, 2019).

These show that both the common funding redistribution and the increase in the defense spending of the member states placated Trump and stopped him from withdrawing from NATO. This hypothesis shows that Schuette’s argument of the critical role of the Secretary-General is not the only explanation in placating Trump to withdraw the US from NATO.

However, with this hypothesis, I expected to find evidence from most of the allies underlining the benefits of NATO and committing to increase their defense expenditures. However, there was not much of that kind of evidence. Furthermore, on the contrary, the statements of the strongest European allies could be taken as hostile. Hence, this hypothesis proves to be strong, however it is not the most robust hypothesis. The reason is that, even though Trump

took credit for the increases, his demands were not adequately met, and he was still considering pulling from NATO. Moreover, European countries moved their focus towards European defense initiatives.

### **Structure of NATO**

This hypothesis focusing on the efforts of the NATO secretariat and the leadership placated Trump from pulling the US from NATO relies on the active role NATO took to keep Trump satisfied and avoid further conflicts. During Trump's negative rhetoric towards NATO and his unexpected behaviors in the NATO meetings, NATO bureaucracy did not once voice any negative remarks about Trump. They repeatedly stressed the importance of the US in NATO. Moreover, NATO preferred to build a bridge between the allies and the US.

Another reaction by NATO was openly supporting Trump's expectation of fair burden-sharing. It makes sense to support the expectation since it was not a new commitment, however through this public support, NATO could stay on the ally side of Trump's list. Trump took notice of the supportive statements of the Secretary-General of NATO since the beginning. Trump (2016c) tweeted, "Wow, NATO's top commander just announced that he agrees with me that alliance members must PAY THEIR BILLS. This is a general I will like!". Another instance was when the Secretary-General of NATO, in the joint conference with Trump in April 2017, backed the fair burden-sharing expectations and praised Trump as there has been an increase in allies' commitments (NATO, 2017). In April 2019, around the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NATO, Trump and Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg had a meeting

where Secretary-General thanked Trump for his leadership and stated that Europe and North America were working together (NATO, 2019). Similarly, on 02 December 2019, the White House published NATO Secretary-General and Trump's press meeting transcript where Trump took the credit for the increase in the burden-sharing, and the Secretary-General thanked and praised Trump on this (NATO, 2019). Another indication of NATO bureaucracy aiming to manage Trump's expectations and lash outs is mentioned in the Foreign Policy's article, by Gramer (2017) where he noted how NATO tailored its meeting according to Trump.

NATO's bureaucracy and leadership worked on several other initiatives to placate Trump and to prevent him from making any rushed decisions. These were the prompt meetings in 2017 Summit where Trump was very furious with allies, joint press-releases with Trump, and redistribution of common funding (Schuette, 2019, pp. 1871-1876). The above evidence indicates the positive and supportive tone the Secretary-General displayed towards Trump, and he backed the fair burden-sharing commitment. Trump also praised NATO's leader for his hard work. Also, NATO's bureaucracy built a bridge between the allies to prevent Trump from pulling out of NATO, yet this hypothesis proved that it was not solely sufficient to placate Trump.

### **Domestic Politics**

The domestic politics hypothesis expects that the domestic political actors of the US valued NATO and voiced their support to it, and this placated Trump from withdrawing from

NATO. Trump's rhetoric received a lot of reaction from the various domestic actors of the US in addition to the international ones. Many state actors from former ambassadors, NATO commanders, president advisors to Congressmen made statements to solidify the US commitment to NATO and bring down the tone of Trump's negative statements on NATO.

According to Schuette (2021, p. 1870), certain political actors of the US were more influential on Trump, and these offered greater opportunities for building strategic coalitions to support NATO. The author (2021, p. 1870) noted that NATO had bipartisan support in Congress and the support of the key figures in the administration, such as Defense Secretary Mattis. Moreover, Chiampan (2019, p. 7) argued that the US's foreign policy and military elites were firmly committed to NATO. Also, even though Trump was publicly vocalizing withdrawal from the alliance, the US Congress and National Military Establishment would not support such action (Chiampan, 2019, p. 7; Benitez, 2019, p. 189). Domestic politics had a significant role in this crisis.

Furthermore, the actions and statements of various American officials were interpreted as an attempt to reassure the US's commitment to NATO to the Americans and the Europeans. One example is Hans Kundnani, Senior Research Fellow in the Europe Program at Chatham House, who asks to focus on the actions of the US rather than Trump's rhetoric, such as the military reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank (Widakuswara, 2019). In NBC News article, Vinograd (2016) collated the statements of several political actors to reporters in response to Trump's negative remarks on NATO as former US Ambassador to NATO Robert Hunter stressed that it is important aggressors should know the US would respond to any attack to

the allies; former NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis reminded that the US and the Europe allies share the same values; campaign chair Paul Manafort explained that Trump believes in NATO; spokesman Josh Earnest underlined that the US is committed to NATO, and the White House stated that “America's commitment to NATO’s principle of mutual self-defense was ironclad”.

Schuetz (2021, p. 1864) claimed that the domestic argument fell short to explain why Trump would change his opinion on the burden-sharing as major constraints such as Defense Secretary Mattis or Chief of Staff Kelly were no longer serving. I agree that certain figures like Mattis and Kelly were very important to Trump’s decisions however it is crucial to understand that there were other domestic political actors to placate Trump within the domestic politics arena. Trump’s staff declared that it was not easy to placate Trump from pulling out of NATO. One example was New York Times reporter Michael S. Schmidt’s book published in September 2020, stating that Trump’s former chief of staff John F. Kelly said that trying to stop Trump from pulling out of NATO was very difficult (Crowley, 2020). Another is Trump’s former national security adviser, John R. Bolton’s book. The New York Times noted that in the book, Bolton shared several instances where Trump declared he wanted to withdraw from NATO repeatedly, and Mr. Bolton and other officials talked the president out of it (Crowley, 2020). These examples show how political actors took initiatives to prevent the dreaded scenario from coming true.

Against Schuetz’s point of Mattis and Kelly’s resignation in December 2018 would lift the major constraints on Trump as mentioned above, I argue that other US political institutions

focused on ways to restrict Trump from making rash decisions regarding NATO. One of these was the US House of Representatives approving a bill named “No NATO Withdrawal Act – H.R. 6530” in July 2018 (Congressman Jimmy Panetta, 2018). Once the bill did not get to be voted on, the bill was reintroduced again in January 2019. The US Senator Kaine stressed that the bill had full congressional support for NATO, and it aims that no President could withdraw from the alliance without support (Tim Kaine, 2021). Moreover, in 2020, the National Defense Authorization Act that passed included some guideposts to stop the president from removing the U.S. from NATO, which is also interpreted as a reassurance to the allies (Gould, 2019).

Another one was that Congress worked to restrict Trump through different bills, such as the military spending bill, defense bill, etc. (Williams, 2020). For example, Trump had voiced to pull the troops from Germany, accusing Germany of not meeting the burden-sharing commitment. Trump (2020a) tweeted, “... Also, Germany is very delinquent in their 2% fee to NATO. We are therefore moving some troops out of Germany!”. Williams (2020) summarized that many mainstream Republicans in Congress did not agree with Trump’s withdrawal opinion, and the House was to stop lowering troop levels in Germany (Williams, 2020). Kupchan (2019, p. 27) gave examples of the support for NATO within the domestic politics of the US as Senator Jim Risch’s reaffirmation to the US’s commitment to NATO, and a first which is the invitation of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg to address a joint session by Congress of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. Moreover, the author stressed that the strong public support in the US and

Europe for NATO was the same as before Trump; 75 percent of Americans support the US's commitment to NATO according to a 2018 Chicago Council survey (Kupchan, 2019, p. 27).

Also, the US continued the military activities within Europe even though Trump has threatened otherwise. Ortega (2018) gave examples of this as deployed tanks and stockpiled military material in Eastern Europe and doubled its contribution to its European Reassurance Initiative.

I argue that this hypothesis proves true in light of the stated evidence. However, it is crucial to note that even if the Senate took all the precautions to prevent Trump from withdrawing the US from NATO, there could be other ways Trump could disable NATO from functioning. Considering this, it is important to note that this factor might not prove true or even vital in all cases to support an IO to survive, namely NATO for this case.

The three hypotheses investigated show that they successfully placated Trump from withdrawing the US from NATO. Nevertheless, neither of them proves strong enough to be a plausible standalone explanation for this research question. I argue that they worked together in a certain way and ensured that Trump did not follow his threat. Here, I agree with Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2018)'s argument that a combination of factors causes IO death or survival. For this case, it was NATO's survival, and it depended on the three discussed factors. These three factors worked together, and each held important roles. However, it is not as all three had equal impact. I argue that according to the evidence present in this thesis, two main factors placating Trump were the member states meeting his demands and the



domestic politics taking precautions to prevent him. Member states factor was crucial from the beginning; however, it had a limited effect as not all the member states met Trump's demand. Towards the end of his term, Trump was still expressing his preference to pull from NATO, and at this stage, the domestic politics factor came into play and stopped him. During his term, NATO's structure factor supported the other two by soothing the constrained relationships between the US and the allies and taking a stance to please Trump. I argue that if it were absent, Trump might have pulled from NATO. Hence, three factors worked together to secure NATO's survival.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this thesis, three factors were investigated by process-tracing to answer the research question of what placated Trump from pulling the US from NATO. The first one focused on the member states' valuing the benefits of NATO. Therefore, they met Trump's demands. The evidence showed that this proved to be mostly true, and Trump took credit for the increase in the burden-sharing by allies. The evidence on the second factor, NATO's structure, pointed out that the bureaucracy and the leadership actively worked to please Trump and avoid further complications. The final factor of domestic politics showed that the US political actors valued NATO and acted to prevent Trump from pulling from NATO. In the light of the evaluations and evidence above, I argue that there was more than one factor for NATO to survive and placate Trump. However, this thesis falls short of guessing how Trump would act if he ran for the second time and whether these factors that proved to placate him this time would work again as strongly as this case or even work at all.

Similarly, this thesis investigated an IO under the threat of a hegemon, so that the findings could be used for IOs of similar structure and in similar situations.

In conclusion, the factors that need to be present are the benefits for the member states, the support of domestic politics, and the strong leadership and the bureaucratic autonomy of the IO. Detailed analysis displayed that member states' benefits and domestic politics factors had a significant impact and the NATO's structure factor supported them. Thus, I conclude that these three factors worked together to placate Trump.

As with most of the studies, this thesis has limitations as well. One of them was that Donald Trump's Twitter account, through which he had made public accusations and threats, was suspended during the writing of this thesis. This limited the data I worked on, and I mostly relied on secondary resources, including Trump Twitter Archive which a programmer created. However, trying to overcome these limitations, I supplemented the data and information by extending my research. Another limitation was Trump's unpredictability. As Trump kept changing his rhetoric, it was not easy to pinpoint the reasons behind his actions. Also, it was very confusing to interpret the action-reaction chains and hence challenging to create a proper timeline for the process-tracing analysis. Also, it is important to add that another limitation of this thesis is on the applicability since Trump was a first in the US's presidential history per his behaviors and rhetoric. On the other hand, one can argue that it is not a significant limitation as there is a rise in populist politicians and heads of state all over the world. This brings the opportunity for future research in respect to populist leaders and the clash of the liberal order, effectiveness of

IO structure for their survival, the conditions for IOs to survive a hegemon's threat, and the role of domestic politics in IO survival.

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