NATO in Kosovo and the logic of successful security practices

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The momentous events that occurred in Kosovo in 1999 and their international repercussions arguably make that year a watershed both for NATO's post-Cold War evolution and for the transitional international order. NATO's military operations in Kosovo and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, undertaken without the direct authorization of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), were ostensibly aimed at ending and preventing egregious human rights abuses, but this narrative remains highly controversial.[1] The subsequent UN administration of Kosovo facilitated its path to independent statehood, albeit without universal recognition. NATO's intervention brought into focus some of the defining international challenges of the post-Cold War era, and it continues to shape the geopolitical and normative friction and contestation which destabilize international politics.

This article explores NATO's engagement with Kosovo in retrospect and in relation to the future outlook for European and global peace and security. We seek to understand what explains NATO's involvement and the evolution of its security practices in Kosovo and how this engagement has shaped its strategic and global relations. Drawing on practice theory, we offer a novel interpretation of the logic of NATO's involvement and transformation in Kosovo. NATO's evolution and transformation in Kosovo were guided by what we call the 'logic of successful security practices'. We define this as the political decisions and practical actions that are designed to reconcile the diverse interests of NATO's member states, the host authorities and other challenging forces. The logic of successful security practices aims to engage with the divergent strategic interests of its members and respond to the changing security environment, while ensuring that the organization retains its relevance, legitimacy and role within and beyond the Euro-Atlantic community.[2] It is a core feature of NATO's quest for cohesion as a 'polycentric' alliance and contested global security actor.[3]

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[1] See Hilaire McCoubrey, 'Kosovo, NATO and international law', *International Relations* 14: 5, 1999, pp. 29–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/004711789901400503; John Norris, *Collision course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005); Aidan Hehir, 'Introduction: intervention and statebuilding in Kosovo', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3: 2, 2009, pp. 135–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970902829903.

[2] Helene Sjursen, 'On the identity of NATO', *International Affairs* 80: 4, 2004, pp. 687–703, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2004.00411.x.

[3] NATO, *Strategic foresight analysis, 2013 report* (Norfolk, VA: NATO, 2013), https://www.act.nato.int/

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At the strategic level, NATO's involvement in Kosovo has undoubtedly shaped and exacerbated the broader friction associated with the shifting international order, and has played a key role in the strategic, political and operational development of NATO and its evolving identity. This theme has received close attention in the past,[4] but it has attracted renewed urgency and significance since 2022 in the context of heightened geopolitical conflict, including the broader impact of the Ukraine war. This provides a compelling case for revisiting this challenge. In turn, NATO's ongoing engagement with Kosovo has not only generated friction but has also shaped the norms and institutions of international order. As a contested case of human protection, the 'illegal but legitimate' humanitarian intervention of 1999 was undertaken without UNSC authorization, but had a significant degree of support within western societies and other parts of the 'liberal bloc'.[5] NATO's intervention proved to be pivotal for a re-evaluation of if, when and how military force should be used to prevent or stop serious human rights abuse. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle, agreed by all UN members in 2005, is a central part of this legacy,[6] but so too is the controversy surrounding the Kosovo intervention, which is viewed outside western circles as a demonstration of hegemony and an abuse of power, which exposed the geopolitical polarization that has become increasingly acute in the twenty-first century.

The forms of NATO's engagement with Kosovo—in terms of humanitarian intervention, the recognition of a de facto state and the expansion of NATO's sphere of operations—remain active subjects of controversy as the relative balance of power and influence in international relations shifts.[7] NATO's controversial intervention in Kosovo and its role in Kosovo's disputed independence were in many ways a demonstration of the 'unipolar moment'—the heyday of post-Cold War liberal internationalism. This engagement exposed divisions with respect to norms related to human rights, international recognition, territorial integrity and state sovereignty, and also in terms of the relationship between the western liberal alliance and the rising and resurgent non-liberal powers in the context of a shift towards multipolarity. This has put NATO at the heart of a fractious political conflict about the norms and institutions which define international order: where they come from, who leads and sponsors them, and who is represented in the organizations which administer and uphold them.[8] NATO's engagement with

wp-content/uploads/2023/05/sfa_security_implications.pdf. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 28 Nov. 2023.)

[4] For example, see the special issue of *International Affairs* on 'The war over Kosovo: ten years on', *International Affairs* 85: 3, 2009, https://academic.oup.com/ia/issue/85/3.

[5] The Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *The Kosovo report: conflict, international response, lessons learned* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Steven Haines, 'The influence of Operation Allied Force on the development of the *jus ad bellum*', *International Affairs* 85: 3, 2009, pp. 477–90, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00809.x.

[6] United Nations General Assembly, *2005 World Summit outcome*, A/RES/60/1, 2005, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf, para. 138–9.

[7] Edward Newman and Gëzim Visoka, 'Kosovo 20 years on: implications for international order', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 26: 1, 2019, pp. 215–31.

[8] Albrecht Schnabel and Ramesh Chandra Thakur, eds, *Kosovo and the challenge of humanitarian intervention: selective indignation, collective action, and international citizenship* (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2000).

Kosovo has therefore made the country a focal point for broader political rivalry between some western supporters which promote the idea of a resurgent liberalism in international relations, and rising powers which seek to contest western power and influence.[9] The Ukraine war has exacerbated this; as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov suggested, any solution to that conflict must focus on creating a 'new world order' which is detached from United States hegemony.[10]

At the operational level, NATO's intervention and engagement with Kosovo helped to forge a reinvented vision for the alliance orientated around new political and military challenges, as the post-Cold War 'honeymoon' gave way to renewed geopolitical friction. During the 1990s, an era defined by liberal internationalism under the hegemony of the US, the role and relevance of NATO had come into question.[11] Kosovo injected momentum and new relevance into the transformation of NATO's security and crisis response apparatus, and its political mission. In some areas this activity has defined the practices and challenges of international stabilization: Kosovo was a key case of international administration and post-conflict peacebuilding that has informed debates about the challenges, ethics and controversies of major interventions aimed at building or rebuilding institutions and peace following armed conflict.[12] The alliance embraced and promoted the widening and deepening security agenda, and an operational focus on stabilization and conflict prevention, effectively moving NATO into the humanitarian space. NATO's approach to peacekeeping in Kosovo and the proclaimed success have been by-products of a repertoire of practices assembled in conjunction with other international missions in Kosovo, as well as broader political, legal and social discourses and events which shaped the meaning of security, statehood and the role of international community in Kosovo.

We argue that NATO's broad mandate to maintain safety and security in Kosovo was essential to its successful security practices. This mandate allowed the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) to change its mission and strategy in Kosovo and transform itself into a multifaceted operation capable of preventing, mitigating and transforming conflicts through diplomatic, political and military means. In this sense, NATO in the post-Cold War era is a quintessential case of organizational adaptation and strategic evolution with far-reaching repercussions for European and global peace and security.[13] Kosovo has been the incubator where NATO has shifted from a defence alliance into a multinational peacekeeping force

[9] Newman and Visoka, 'Kosovo 20 years on'.

[10] 'Peace talks must have "Russian interests, concerns", says Lavrov', Al Jazeera, 7 April 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/7/peace-talks-must-have-russian-interests-concerns-says-lavrov.

[11] Jonathan Clarke, 'Replacing NATO', *Foreign Policy*, no. 93, 1993, pp. 22–40, https://doi.org/10.2307/1149018; Sam Nunn, 'Challenges to NATO in the 1990s', *Survival* 32: 1, 1990, pp. 3–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339008442504.

[12] Gëzim Visoka, *Shaping peace in Kosovo: the politics of peacebuilding and statehood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[13] Jef Huysmans, 'Shape-shifting NATO: humanitarian action and the Kosovo refugee crisis', *Review of International Studies* 28: 3, 2002, pp. 599–618, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210502005995; James Sperling and Mark Webber, 'NATO: from Kosovo to Kabul', *International Affairs* 85: 3, 2009, pp. 491–511, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00810.x.

with partnerships with the European Union, the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In particular, Kosovo has helped NATO take a multifaceted approach by adopting the UN's peacekeeping principles of neutrality and impartiality, the EU's diplomatic ambiguity with regard to Kosovo's political status, and the conflict management tactics of other regional organizations.

Organized around the above themes, this article proceeds as follows. In the first part it examines the two phases of NATO's quest for performing successful security practices in Kosovo, focusing on its transformation from humanitarian intervention to UN-authorized peacekeeping. In the second part, the article explores the legacy of NATO's engagement in Kosovo for international norms related to intervention, secession and peacekeeping in contested states. It then concludes by exploring the implications of this case for NATO in the context of renewed great power geopolitical rivalry. This article relies on an analysis of the NATO-related literature, policy documents and other sources which capture both the discursive as well as the praxiological aspects of NATO's role in Kosovo and its implications for adaptation in the transitional international order. Conceptually, the article draws on practice theory and constructivist security perspectives to develop the argument about the role of the logic of successful security practice in shaping NATO's involvement in Kosovo.

NATO and the logic of successful security practices

NATO's engagement in the western Balkans has been subject to wide discussion in security studies and international affairs. As the discourse and practice of security have constantly changed, so has the conceptual lens through which the practices of states and collective alliances and organizations are studied.[14] Yet, we still have an incomplete account of NATO's involvement in Kosovo and its shift from a military intervention—considered widely as legitimate but legally flawed—to a UN-authorized peacekeeping mission. Realist and strategic studies scholars have interpreted NATO's involvement in the region from a geopolitical perspective, exploring power projection, alliance politics and the primacy of the security of NATO members. Liberal scholars have considered NATO's strategic expansion as crucial for safeguarding the liberal international order and for complementing the efforts of the UN in maintaining regional peace and stability. NATO thus provides benefits for its members, not only through the collective defence clause but also indirectly in advancing economic, diplomatic and political interests. Liberal institutionalists have focused on the institutionalist 'stickiness' that organizations such as NATO develop over time, where path dependency and adaptive learning determine the endurance of such organizations.[15] This evolution also provides a platform for maintaining intra-alliance peace (for example between

[14] Mark Webber and Adrian Hyde-Price, eds, *Theorising NATO: new perspectives on the Atlantic alliance* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015).

[15] G. John Ikenberry, 'Institutions, strategic restraint, and the persistence of American postwar order', *International Security* 23: 3, 1998–9, pp. 43–78, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539338.

Turkey and Greece) and reduces external hybrid threats (as in the case of NATO's newest members, Montenegro and North Macedonia).

Normative scholars have approached NATO's engagement with Kosovo both from the perspective of a challenge to international law, given the circumvention of the UNSC in relation to the intervention, and from the perspective of upholding humanitarian norms, such as the protection of civilians and the prevention of atrocities. Constructivists have highlighted the changing referents of security and provided an explanation for NATO's fusion of kinetic and non-kinetic security as well as for the diffusion of territorial defence and human security.[16] They also question the normative justification for intervention and the norms and practices which have guided the doctrinal and operational aspects of NATO's involvement in out-of-area situations.

While there are many interpretations as to how NATO evolved and changed to fit the post-Cold War international system, all agree that NATO's goal is to maintain its relevance in relation to both its internal structures and members as well as the external environment, which includes rivals and transnational threats.[17] NATO, as with any other military alliance, is prone to justifying its existence through the production of positive and successful results that benefit its members and improve its standing. In other words, it is only through tracing discursive and performative practice that we can make sense of NATO's security logics and its transformation over time.[18] Putting the emphasis on practice is crucial, as it helps explain how actors or organizations interact, generate knowledge, implement rules, interpret norms and create symbolic orders of power. Practices, according to Adler, are 'knowledge-constituted, meaningful patterns of socially recognized activity embedded in communities, routines, and organizations that structure experience'.[19] As Græger shows, from the perspective of practice theory 'agents develop specific dispositions for acting and thinking in a particular way that is not based on a logic of consequences (instrumental), a logic of appropriateness (rule based), or a logic of rhetoric (communicative), but on a logic of practicality'.[20]

In particular, practice theory shows how social interactions and shared knowledge create communities of practice which configure their fluid actions, commitments and relationships. Such situated networks, and such meaningful patterns of routines, play a crucial role in shaping the response of actors and organizations to different events and situations. As Adler and Pouliot argue, practices are formed as a result of 'instances … of formative interactions' which are due to 'either material

[16] Edward Newman, 'Human security and constructivism', *International Studies Perspectives* 2: 3, 2001, pp. 239–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/1528-3577.00055.

[17] Thierry Tardy, 'The risks of NATO's maladaptation', *European Security* 30: 1, pp. 24–42 at p. 26, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2020.1799786.

[18] Alexandra Gheciu, 'NATO, liberal internationalism, and the politics of imagining the Western security community', *International Journal* 74: 1, 2019, pp. 32–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702019834645.

[19] Emanuel Adler, 'The spread of security communities: communities of practice, self-restraint, and NATO's post-Cold War transformation', *European Journal of International Relations* 14: 2, 2008, pp. 195–230 at p. 198, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066108089241.

[20] Nina Græger, 'European security as practice: EU–NATO communities of practice in the making?', *European Security* 25: 4, 2016, pp. 478–501 at p. 480, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2016.1236021.

or ideational reasons, or both'.[21] Practices are temporarily stable and repetitive patterns which are prone to change over time.[22]

Seen from the vantage point of practice theory, military alliances such as NATO are prone to change and the adaptation of their strategic focus, identity and interests to evolving security challenges. Despite dilemmas, NATO has been able both to modernize its deterrence and defence system and to adapt to out-of-area and regional crisis management.[23] To a large extent, NATO's adaptation in crisis management operations has been shaped by events on the ground, such as landmark conflicts and interventions, which became reference points for the development of new security rationales, doctrinal changes and material change. Specific cases of intervention make and unmake alliances, determine their interests and shape their identities. Material considerations, norms and rules are important features, but they are mobilized and utilized contextually depending on the likelihood of success and security utility. So are the efforts for demonstrating credible coercive diplomacy.[24]

Building on the above, we argue that the quest for the legitimation of NATO's successful security practices has been key to the alliance's military and political existence. Successful practices tend to boost the internal and external legitimacy of military alliances such as NATO and also counterbalance less successful and controversial interventions. There is wide consensus that NATO's interventions in the Balkans have been largely a success.[25] While some interventions have divided NATO, those in the Balkans have served to unify it. The intervention in Kosovo is 'generally regarded as a NATO triumph rather than a debilitating crisis'.[26] As Smith maintains, 'NATO's 1990s Balkan interventions have (thus far) proved to be the most effective and successful of all its major post-Cold War "out-of-area" operations, certainly when compared to either Afghanistan or Libya.'[27] In particular, the value of NATO's presence in Kosovo has been manifold. Beyond the regional security benefits and the prevention of conflict spillover to neighbouring EU member states, NATO's presence in Kosovo has helped the alliance remain united on a vital security issue: it has helped it utilize a non-sensitive matter to generate goodwill and cooperation among members.[28] For NATO, Kosovo represents a crucial case to justify its regional role and to demonstrate that it is committed to preventing crises and stabilizing post-conflict situations as well as

[21] Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices: introduction and framework', in Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, eds, *International practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 24–5.
[22] Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International practice theory* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[23] Tardy, 'The risks of NATO's maladaptation'.
[24] Frank P. Harvey, 'Getting NATO's success in Kosovo right: the theory and logic of counter-coercion', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 23: 2, 2006, pp. 139–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/07388940600665842.
[25] Niall Mulchinock, *NATO and the Western Balkans: from neutral spectator to proactive peacemaker* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 233.
[26] Wallace J. Thies, *Why NATO endures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 9.
[27] Martin A. Smith, 'Taking stock after twenty years: the mixed legacy of Kosovo', *Comparative Strategy* 38: 5, 2019, pp. 483–96 at p. 494, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2019.1653044.
[28] Mulchinock, *NATO and the Western Balkans*; Simon J. Smith, Carmen Gebhard and Nina Græger, *EU–NATO relations: running on the fumes of informed deconfliction* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019).

cooperating and coordinating with the UN and other regional bodies such as the EU and OSCE.[29]

Kosovo has also represented a positive counter-case to the internal and external criticism that NATO has received over the years. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been constantly depicted as being on the verge of collapse, and that NATO's normal state of affairs is 'one of crisis'.[30] Such crises are frequently made worse by unilateral military actions by individual NATO member states, like the US occupation of Iraq and Turkey's involvement in Syria, or by external and rival threats, like Russia's aggression against Georgia and Ukraine and attacks against western targets by Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Even though such claims can be regarded as often exaggerated, according to Thies, both insiders and outsiders can benefit from the concept of a crisis.[31] It aids the alliance in creating internal cohesion and exposes outsiders' reactionary intentions, but it can also obfuscate strategic decision-making and action.

The politics of measuring effectiveness and impact is central to the making of a successful security practice. The success of interventions is often measured by three overarching criteria: the ability to end, limit or prevent the return of hostilities and armed conflict (negative peace); the ability to implement the mandate; and the promotion of conflict resolution and reconciliation (positive peace).[32] Other measures include how missions are executed (enforcement criteria), and the extent to which they are accepted and respected by stakeholders in the course of mandate implementation (legitimacy criteria).[33] Yet, since the success of international military and peacekeeping operations remains context-specific, episodic and prone to reversal, from the logic of successful security practices, the broader the mandate the wider the scope for framing the operation as successful. Kosovo has provided NATO with a unique mandate and manoeuvrability both to frame its actions as successful performances and to adjust its security conduct on the ground to produce successful outcomes. NATO's interpretation of mandates, its duties, and its conduct of security have been developed and transformed as a result of institutional and operational adaptation and social conditioning on the ground.

In contrast to grand meta-theories on strategic and inter-organizational relations, practice theory offers a more nuanced and fluid account of how security organizations operate.[34] Seen from this perspective, at the ground level the securitization approach is not only determined by speech acts or strategic decisions by NATO headquarters, but is also shaped by the discourses, practices and interactions of stakeholders in context—both elites and ordinary citizens. In other

[29] NATO, 'Relations with the United Nations', 25 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50321.htm.

[30] Anand Menon and Jennifer Welsh, 'Understanding NATO's sustainability: the limits of institutionalist theory', *Global Governance* 17: 1, 2011, pp. 81–94 at p. 82.

[31] Thies, *Why NATO endures,* p. 14–20.

[32] Daniel Druckman and Paul F. Diehl, eds, *Peace operation success: a comparative analysis* (Leiden and Boston: Nijhoff, 2013).

[33] Jennifer Kavanagh et al., *Characteristics of successful U.S. military interventions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).

[34] Nina Græger, 'Grasping the everyday and extraordinary in EU–NATO relations: the added value of practice approaches', *European Security* 26: 3, 2017, pp. 340–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2017.1355304.

words, the practice of securitization can emerge from both political decisions and remote actions of other actors. Practice theory offers a better explanation of why KFOR was shielded, for the most part, from the criticism that NATO as a whole has received from European states as well as rivals such as Russia, China and other regional powers. It has been the specific constellation of KFOR's operation under the UN umbrella, its successful adaptation on the ground, and its status-neutrality towards the independent state of Kosovo which have given the force its distinct character.

NATO's strategic evolution in Kosovo: from humanitarian intervention to UN-authorized peacekeeping

NATO's strategic evolution in Kosovo offers useful insights into its security culture and quest for performing successful security practices and thus for retaining its relevance in a transitional international order. The nature of political conflict in Kosovo has compelled NATO to evolve into a multifaceted security provider. While NATO's military engagement in Kosovo in 1999 was crucial for ending violent strife, ongoing debates about the legality of this intervention have left a lasting impact on the alliance and its strategic trajectory.[35] The alliance's efforts to address criticism stemming from Operation Allied Force in 1999 significantly influenced its alignment with the objectives of the EU and UN on the ground, as well as its robust measures to safeguard the Serbian population and their cultural and religious heritage in Kosovo. Consequently, KFOR assumed a less visible yet still influential role, operating as a support arm for the UN and other international bodies in Kosovo and shaping the region's political dynamics. Hence, a comprehensive understanding of NATO's strategic evolution in Kosovo necessitates a clear distinction between its initial military intervention and its subsequent on-the-ground presence. This distinction is all too often neglected in analyses of this case.

NATO's 'Operation Allied Force'

Contrary to the Russian and some other non-western narratives on NATO and its 'hegemonic' conduct, the Yugoslav wars demonstrated that NATO was always reluctant to intervene in the region, and for most of the 1990s Slobodan Milošević was the West's main regional interlocutor, despite his recalcitrance. NATO was particularly reluctant to be involved in a conflict which challenged the fundamental norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity. As noted by former German diplomat Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, 'NATO intervened militarily without the intention of the international community to recognize the territory as independent'.[36]

[35] See for example Aidan Hehir, 'Introduction: Kosovo's symbolic importance', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 13: 5, 2019, pp. 539–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2019.1663986.

[36] Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, *Diplomacy on the edge: containment of ethnic conflict and the Minorities Working Group of the Conferences on Yugoslavia* (Washington DC and Baltimore, MD: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 543.

It had a preference for preserving its deterrence and defence mandate and avoiding out-of-area engagements. Moreover, Kosovo's struggle for independence in the context of the dissolution of Yugoslavia was essentially sidelined by the international community, because, as diplomats involved in the region would later record, western stakeholders were mostly unwilling to open another front in the region and antagonize the Milošević regime while seeking to resolve the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[37] The alliance was arguably forced to intervene by the evolving circumstances on the ground and concerns about the escalation of humanitarian crises, full-scale ethnic cleansing, and regional instability.[38] Thus, NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was both strategic and moral, aimed at upholding its image as a successful military alliance but also demonstrating its normative commitment to defending human rights and peace in Europe.

NATO's reaction to the Kosovo conflict was initially rhetorical, and entailed elements of both preventive and coercive military diplomacy. By September 1998, the UN Secretary-General reported that Serb forces had destroyed over 6,000 buildings in 269 villages by shelling and deliberate burning, constituting 'an indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force against civilian populations'.[39] From late 1998 onwards, NATO started to issue regular press statements warning about the escalation of the Kosovo conflict and the potential military options.[40] The NATO Atlantic Council even formulated hypothetical plans for air and ground operations in Kosovo to impose a ceasefire and support peace enforcement.[41] Serbia rejected the Rambouillet peace proposal in early 1999 and instead escalated its military offensive against civilians. According to the Independent International Commission on Kosovo, reporting in 2000, numerous egregious violations of international humanitarian law were committed against Kosovo-Albanian civilians in 1998 and 1999.[42] Before NATO launched its operation it is estimated that around half a million ethnic Albanians were forcefully displaced either internally or into neighbouring countries.[43] By the time NATO's ground troops entered Kosovo, the OSCE estimated that more than 863,000 ethnic Albanians had been forcibly expelled from Kosovo.[44]

[37] Christopher R. Hill, *Outpost: a diplomat at work* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 112; Louis Sell, *Slobodan Milošević and the destruction of Yugoslavia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 274.

[38] McCoubrey, 'Kosovo, NATO and international law'. See also: Paul Latawski and Martin A. Smith, *The Kosovo crisis and the evolution of post-Cold War European security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

[39] UNHCR field operation report, April 1998, quoted in Marc Weller, ed., *The crisis in Kosovo 1989–1999: from the dissolution of Yugoslavia to Rambouillet and the outbreak of hostilities* (Cambridge, UK: Documents and Analysis Publishing Ltd, 1999), p. 259.

[40] Mulchinock, *NATO and the Western Balkans*, pp. 103–5.

[41] Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning ugly: NATO's war to save Kosovo* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), pp. 34–5.

[42] Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *The Kosovo report: conflict, international response, and lessons learned* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[43] Tony Weymouth and Stanley Henig, *The Kosovo crisis: the last American war in Europe* (London: Pearson Education, 2001), p. 105.

[44] OSCE, *Kosovo/Kosova: as seen, as told* (Chapter 14: Forced expulsion) (Vienna: OSCE, 1999) p. 1. See also: Stephen T. Hosmer, *The conflict over Kosovo: why Milosevic decided to settle when he did* (Arlington: Rand Publication, 2001).

US special envoy Richard Holbrooke engaged intensively with Serbia's President Milošević as part of international efforts for conflict de-escalation, and NATO arguably exhausted all diplomatic channels and means before it proceeded with the military operation 'Allied Force'. NATO's three months of military operations against Serbian military and political targets in Kosovo and Serbia compelled the Milošević regime to capitulate and withdraw all police and military forces from Kosovo. NATO presented the intervention as a means of preventing atrocities on the same scale as Serbia's previous actions in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in recognition of Serbia's unreliable commitment to peace processes.[45] As NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana put it, the objective was 'to reverse the Belgrade regime's horrific policy of ethnic cleansing and allow the displaced Kosovar Albanians to return to their homes in peace and security'.[46] NATO did not occupy Serbia's territory, nor did it pursue a policy of regime change. The subsequent deployment of NATO ground troops took place as part of UNSC Resolution 1244 (1999), which placed Kosovo under international administration. Moreover, NATO's campaign did not initially aim to destroy Serbian infrastructure; it was a targeted campaign against military and dual-use premises which were used by Serbian army, police and paramilitary forces against civilian ethnic Albanians. Furthermore, NATO's intervention was a gradual, phased and reiterative campaign aimed at forcing Serbia to change its course from war to peace. Thus, the campaign targeted military and defence systems while the diplomatic efforts with Milošević were ongoing, and the campaign expanded to include dual-use civilian–military infrastructure only when he did not respond to calls for conflict termination. By the time NATO was ready to deploy ground troops, Milošević accepted defeat in early June 1999 and agreed to allow the deployment of NATO peacekeepers as part of a UN-authorized deployment.

NATO's Operation Allied Force achieved its objectives: it forced Serbia to cease its military actions against civilian ethnic Albanians and withdraw from the territory, and created a safe and secure environment for the return of refugees and the deployment of a UN civilian presence. However, in the course of NATO's military campaign it is estimated that 4,400 Kosovo Albanians were killed by the Serbian forces, 863,000 civilians were forced to take refuge in neighbouring Albania and Macedonia, and another 590,000 were internally displaced.[47] Yet in the words of Solana, the 78-day operation was a 'victory for NATO' which averted a humanitarian disaster.[48] It also arguably catapulted the alliance into the role of normative leadership—albeit in a contested, polarizing subject area.[49] Solana was

[45] Marc Weller, 'The Rambouillet Conference on Kosovo', *International Affairs* 75: 2, 1999, pp. 211–51 at p. 238, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00069.

[46] Javier Solana, 'A defining moment for NATO: the Washington Summit decisions and the Kosovo crisis', *NATO Review* 47: 2, 1999, https://www.nato.int/docu/rev-pdf/eng/9902-en.pdf, pp. 3–8.

[47] Mark Webber, 'The Kosovo War: a recapitulation', *International Affairs* 85: 3, 2009, pp. 447–59 at p. 451, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00807.x.

[48] Javier Solana, 'NATO's success in Kosovo', *Foreign Affairs* 78: 6, 1999, pp. 114–20 at p. 118, https://doi.org/10.2307/20049537; see also Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning ugly*.

[49] Tal Dingott Alkopher, 'From Kosovo to Syria: the transformation of NATO Secretaries General's discourse on military humanitarian intervention', *European Security* 25: 1, 2016, pp. 49–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2015.1082128.

justified in describing this as 'a defining moment for NATO', since it encouraged the alliance to develop a long-term vision for south-east Europe, an enhanced military capacity, more outreach arrangements—such as the Partnership for Peace and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council—and a renewed Atlantic community.[50] However, the intervention was, and continues to be, controversial. NATO is criticized for intervening in a country that was not a direct threat to its member states, and also for undertaking military action that was not authorized by the UNSC, which became a major stain in NATO's post-Cold War evolution.[51] The human and environmental collateral damage and side effects were also controversial: around 500 civilians died and another 900 were injured as a result of NATO's alleged failure to take precautionary measures to protect civilians.[52] However, in 1999 a special committee established by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia to review the NATO bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia concluded that there were not sufficient grounds to investigate NATO's operations during the campaign.[53]

The NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR)

NATO's military intervention in Kosovo played a decisive role in ending the violent conflict there and paved the way for a fragile and hybrid peace to emerge. The placement of Kosovo under an interim UN administration and the postponement of defining Kosovo's political status was the optimal arrangement that the international community could agree within the UNSC. Although UNSC Resolution 1244 (1999) became the main framework guiding the transition from war to peace in Kosovo, it was not a mutually agreed peace settlement between Serbia and Kosovo. On June 1999, a NATO-led force of 50,000 troops was deployed in Kosovo following the conclusion of the Kumanovo Agreement and UNSC approval through Resolution 1244 (1999).[54] This marked a crucial turning-point not only for the legality and legitimacy of NATO's intervention, but also for its peacekeeping capacity. KFOR and its operation under the UN framework meant that the legality of the military campaign against Serbia was no longer contested, and the organization enjoyed both legality and legitimacy in the conduct of its peace operation in Kosovo.[55] Under UN authorization NATO peacekeepers had a broad mandate, including deterring the renewal of hostilities; ensuring the

[50] Javier Solana, 'A defining moment for NATO'; see also Mark Webber, 'The Kosovo war: a recapitulation'.

[51] Alister Miskimmon, 'Falling into line? Kosovo and the course of German foreign policy', *International Affairs* 85: 3, 2009, pp. 561–73, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00814.x.

[52] Amnesty International, 'No justice for the victims of NATO bombings', 23 April 2009, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2009/04/no-justicia-victimas-bombardeos-otan-20090423.

[53] UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, *Final report to the prosecutor by the committee established to review the NATO bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*, 13 June 2000, https://www.icty.org/en/press/final-report-prosecutor-committee-established-review-nato-bombing-campaign-against-federal.

[54] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1244 (1999) adopted by the Security Council at its 4011th meeting, on 10 June 1999*, 1999, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/274488?ln=en.

[55] Michael F. Harsch, *The power of dependence: NATO–UN cooperation in crisis management* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 66–7.

withdrawal of Serb military, political and paramilitary forces; taking responsibility for the demilitarization of the Kosovo Liberation Army; establishing a safe environment for the return of civilians; and ensuring public safety and freedom of movement until the UN civilian presence was consolidated.[56] Critical to NATO's successful security practices in Kosovo was its broad mandate to maintain a safe and secure environment, which enabled KFOR to transfigure its mandate and approach in Kosovo and thus evolve into a multidimensional operation able to prevent, mitigate and manage disputes through diplomatic, political and military means.[57]

A critical review of major events and security incidents in Kosovo between 1999 and 2023 demonstrates NATO's will to succeed through its constant transformation of peacekeeping tactics and approaches, including its cooperation with the EU and UN, its approach to the Kosovo authorities and the country's political status, as well as the approach to Serbian authorities and the local minority community in the country. It is widely accepted that NATO's engagement has produced stability and security in Kosovo, which is measured against the absence of ethnic confrontation and overall institutional stability. The demilitarization of the Kosovo Liberation Army and their transformation into a civilian defence structure is considered one of the early successes of KFOR.[58] However, the most notable problem of the security provision by KFOR and the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) was the failure to prevent ethnic revenge and extend security and the rule of law in the northern part of Kosovo.[59] NATO peacekeepers were incapable of preventing ethnic crimes, as they, alongside UNMIK, effectively delayed for nearly a year the operationalization of their missions in the north of Kosovo.[60]

As the post-conflict ethnic crimes in Kosovo increased hostilities between ethnic groups, Serb enclaves became safe zones in the context of the anarchic transition in Kosovo. This suited Russia's and Serbia's attempts to make the case for ethnic partition of Kosovo and to delegitimize NATO's intervention.[61] One of the most significant events that shaped ethnic politics and peace prospects in Kosovo was the decision in 1999 to divide the city of Mitrovica into two parts, the south with an ethnic Albanian majority and the north with an ethnic Serb majority. Despite their large presence, UNMIK police and KFOR had no contingency plan on how to respond to widespread civil disorder and inter-ethnic violence, nor the political will to enforce the peace.[62] This led to friction between the UN, NATO peacekeepers and the EU which resulted in political and operational mistakes,

[56] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1244 (1999)*.
[57] Jef Huysmans, 'Shape-shifting NATO'.
[58] Sultan Barakat and Alpaslan Özerdem, 'Impact of the reintegration of former KLA combatants on the post-war recovery of Kosovo', *International Journal of Peace Studies* 10: 1, 2005, pp. 27–45.
[59] Tim Judah, *Kosovo: war and revenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
[60] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Parallel structures in Kosovo*, 2006–2007, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/f/24618.pdf. See also: Gëzim Visoka, *Peace figuration after international intervention: intentions, events and consequences of liberal peacebuilding* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016).
[61] John Norris, *Collision course*.
[62] Michael Dziedzic, 'Kosovo', in William J. Durch, ed., *Twenty-first-century peace operations* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 2006).

leading to internal ethnic partition and displacement, and the formation of illegal parallel structures in Serb-populated regions.[63] The initial mistakes of KFOR and UNMIK combined with local resistance and counter-peace measures not only shaped the political landscape of post-conflict Kosovo but also determined the security environment to which KFOR had to adjust and the type of threats to which it had to respond.[64] For example, a confidential UNMIK report sent to the UN assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping operations in October 2007 admitted that 'the spread of parallel structures contravenes UNMIK's authority to implement its mandate, thereby violating SCR 1244 and establishing preconditions for a de facto partition of Kosovo'.[65]

Despite this initial friction, cooperation between NATO and the UN improved, but it was mostly driven by their co-dependence and limitations on resources and tools to implement their mandates and avoid failure.[66] Both organizations were keen to ensure that their involvement in Kosovo produced positive results. For example, in 2002 KFOR signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation with UNMIK Police and the Kosovo Police Service which laid out the practicalities of security provision in the country.[67] NATO's presence declined from a 50,000-strong force in 1999 to just under 20,000 in 2000 and under 5,000 from 2010 onwards. It has retained battlegroups, and has developed other kinetic and non-kinetic specialized units to respond to crises in the country, from violent protests to terrorist actions and cyber attacks. Most notably, in March 2004, a series of incidents of ethnic violence erupted in Kosovo resulting in the death of 19 civilians, the destruction of dozens of Serb churches and ethnic clashes in mixed communities.[68] Yet, the nature of conflict in Kosovo moved from violent to political conflict, which was manifested with ethnically motivated crimes and inflammatory discourse among political leaders and the media, as well as grassroots counter-peace movements.[69] Since the 2004 violence the role of KFOR focused mostly upon providing security to Serb enclaves and religious sites. This peacekeeping activity employed civilian and military cooperation (CIMIC) doctrine, which entailed working with local communities, civil society and donors in addressing and responding to local needs.[70] Effectively, KFOR, through its CIMIC

[63] Bernard Kouchner, *The warriors of peace* (Paris: Grasset, 2004); Kosovalb.com, 'Clark: Problemet në veri, pasojë e mospajtimeve në Bruksel' [Clark: problems in the north, a consequence of disagreements in Brussels], 19 Oct. 2012, https://kosovalb.com/2012/10/19/clark-problemet-ne-veri-pasoje-e-mospajtimeve-ne-bruksel.

[64] Denisa Kostovicova, Mary Martin and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 'The missing link in human security research: dialogue and insecurity in Kosovo', *Security Dialogue* 43: 6, 2012, pp. 569–85, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010612463489.

[65] See: Visoka, *Peace figuration after international intervention*, p. 118.

[66] Harsch, *The power of dependence*.

[67] NATO, *Monthly report to the United Nations on KFOR operations*, UN Doc. S/2002/611, 3 June 2002, https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2002%2F611.

[68] United Nations Security Council, *Provisional verbatim of the 4942nd meeting*, UN Doc. S/PV.4942, 13 April 2004, https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2FPV.4942, p. 2.

[69] Gëzim Visoka, 'Everyday peace capture: nationalism and the dynamics of peace after conflict', *Nations and Nationalism* 26: 2, 2020, pp. 431–46, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12591; Gëzim Visoka and Oliver P. Richmond, 'After liberal peace? From failed statebuilding to an emancipatory peace in Kosovo', *International Studies Perspectives* 18: 1, 2017, pp. 110–29, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekw006.

[70] See Gerard Lucius and Sebastiaan Rietjens, eds, *Effective civil–military interaction in peace operations: theory and practice* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016).

teams, transformed from an armed peacekeeping force into a uniformed peacebuilding organization. It established multiple liaison monitoring teams, which served as 'the eyes and ears of KFOR throughout Kosovo, measuring its pulse'.[71] Thus, KFOR's mission also adjusted, to primarily focus on creating a safe and secure environment in Kosovo to enable other international peacemaking, statebuilding and peacebuilding actors to pursue their political agendas. In addition, KFOR developed a comprehensive approach for engagement with both national leaders and local communities. It has used military diplomacy as well as civilian–military approaches to try to build trust in KFOR and enable it to perform its mandate. For KFOR, as noted by its officials, 'the best and most efficient tool of stabilization has been—and still is—political dialogue and practical cooperation through partnership'.[72] NATO became the last-resort mechanism to enforce peace and push both local Serbs and Kosovo governments whenever they risked derailing the international conflict resolution agenda.

Between 2006 and 2008, when the UN-led talks on the definition of Kosovo's future political status, there was relative peace in Kosovo and KFOR, mostly focused on protecting and promoting security for the Serb community in their enclaves. However, after the refusal of Serbia to accept the UN special envoy's proposal for supervised independence for Kosovo with enhanced minority rights, and the subsequent declaration of independence by Kosovo Albanian representatives, the role of NATO peacekeepers in Kosovo entered a new and delicate phase. Four out of 31 NATO member states continue to not recognize Kosovo, which complicates NATO's engagement in the country.[73] While NATO's intervention in 1999 was used as one of the arguments for justifying the independence and subsequently the recognition of Kosovo, the presence of NATO peacekeepers under the UN framework is used by Serbia as a counterargument against recognition of Kosovo. Serbia's and Russia's constant criticisms of KFOR, including the status-neutral stance of four NATO member states, have significantly affected the role of NATO in the region.

After Kosovo's independence, KFOR was forced to engage in conflict mediation and de-escalation campaigns in the north of Kosovo in light of the resistance of local Serbs (including shadow structures which were implicated in illicit activities)[74] and the refusal of Serbia to accept Kosovo's jurisdiction over Serb-populated areas.[75] KFOR neutrality towards Kosovo's independence not only legitimized Serbia's and Russia's campaign for non-recognition of Kosovo but

[71] KFOR, *Forward together: KFOR XVII* (Pristina: NATO, 2013), https://jfcnaples.nato.int/systems/file_download.ashx?pg=3587&ver=1, p. 7.

[72] Silvia Maretti, 'Twenty years of NATO and the Western Balkans', in NATO Defense College Foundation, *Special issue: Western Balkans: the way ahead towards a full Euro–Atlantic integration* (Rome: NATO Defense College Foundation, 2021), https://www.natofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NDCF-DOSSIER-Special-Issue-WB-231121.pdf, p. 38.

[73] As of January 2024, four NATO member states, namely Cyprus, Greece, Romania and Slovakia, continued to withhold recognition of Kosovo for their internal reasons.

[74] United Nations Security Council, 'Letter dated 12 June 2008 from the Secretary-General to His Excellency Mr. Boris Tadić', UN Doc. S/2008/354, 12 June 2008, pp. 6–7; Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *The fog of peace: a memoir of international peacekeeping in the 21st century* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

[75] Visoka, *Peace figuration after international intervention*.

it also encouraged local Serbs to contest Kosovar authorities and refuse integration, cooperation and coexistence within an independent Kosovo. For instance, in an attempt to spread its authority throughout the territory, on 25 July 2011 the Government of Kosovo authorized an unexpected police operation to regain control of two border crossings in the north of Kosovo. This intervention triggered a violent reaction against Kosovo police, KFOR, EULEX police and customs officers throughout the north of Kosovo.[76] The resistance gained new momentum and spread throughout northern Kosovo, resulting in road blockages, civil disobedience to EULEX and KFOR orders and the opening of more illegal and informal border crossings with Serbia.

Tensions in Kosovo declined after 2011 when the EU launched a technical and political dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia for the normalization of relations.[77] The role of NATO peacekeepers on the ground since then has been mostly to maintain a safe and secure environment that would enable political dialogue and conflict resolution. NATO has provided strong support for two major agreements, reached in 2013 and 2023, which aim to gradually normalize relations. Notably, KFOR evolved into a military wing of the international political and diplomatic missions which were leading efforts for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.[78] However, the dispute over Kosovo's independence and the quest to expand territorial and functional autonomy for the Serb minority remain the main sources of tension. They have derailed the EU-led dialogue on several occasions and forced KFOR to intervene to restore peace and security, including during renewed clashes in 2022 and 2023 between Serb organized groups and law-enforcement authorities. It is the everyday insecurities as well as political developments in Kosovo and the region which will shape NATO's security practice on the ground and determine its exit strategy. As noted by senior officials, 'NATO's presence through KFOR will remain as long as it will be necessary. NATO's deployment is conditions-based, and not calendar driven.'[79] Moreover, at a time when the UNSC is unable to authorize new peacekeeping missions (under chapter VII of the UN Charter), the NATO-led KFOR operation in Kosovo remains vital for EU and western states to have a military presence on the ground that can be deployed not only in Kosovo but also in other parts of the region. As noted by a senior NATO official, NATO's presence in the western Balkans is crucial to NATO's own security: 'When NATO neighbours are more stable, the Alliance itself is more stable.' [80]

[76] United Nations Security Council, *Provisional verbatim of the 6604th meeting, Tuesday, 30 August 2011, New York*, UN Doc. S/PV.6604, 2011, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/710077?ln=en. EULEX Kosovo is the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo.

[77] United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 10 February 2017 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2017/120, 2017, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/858854?ln=en, p. 3.

[78] See Catherine Ashton, *And then what: inside stories of 21st century diplomacy* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2023), p. 136.

[79] Silvia Maretti, 'Twenty years of NATO and the Western Balkans', p. 38.

[80] Silvia Maretti, 'Twenty years of NATO and the Western Balkans', p. 39.

The impact of Kosovo on NATO's security practices and great power rivalries

While NATO's intervention in Kosovo and the subsequent deployment of peacekeepers under the UN framework were determined by ethnic conflict in Kosovo and the wider region, broader international and systemic considerations have also shaped the alliance's security practices. Central to NATO's post-Cold War relevance was an expansion of threats, where fragile states and conflicts outside the alliance emerged as key challenges. Thus crisis management outside the deterrence and defence core mandate became a crucial task for NATO. In this context, NATO's military intervention in Kosovo during 1999 played a major role in shaping NATO's engagement in 'non-article 5' operations, namely peace support and crisis management operations which are launched outside the territories of NATO member states and conflicts that do not directly respond to armed attacks against one of its members.[81] While NATO's 1991 Strategic Concept[82] does not make reference to humanitarian intervention, the conflicts in the Balkans, especially the intervention in Kosovo, pushed NATO to include crisis management operations in its 1999 Strategic Concept.[83] The rationale was clear: beyond NATO's borders, crises and conflicts may directly jeopardize the safety of alliance territory and its subjects. However, NATO's Operation Allied Force and the subsequent deployment of ground troops under UN auspices played a crucial role in shaping and expansion of NATO's doctrinal and strategic outlook. The intervention opened the door for NATO to deploy its troops in, and provide security guarantees to, non-member states. It created a multilayered sphere of security and protection, with NATO member states at the core, followed by neighbouring states within the Euro-Atlantic geographical zone (the western Balkans) and other surrounding states outside Europe (the Middle East and North Africa).[84] After Kosovo, NATO intensified its strategic efforts to expand its membership by designing two important mechanisms, the Membership Action Plan and the Partnership for Peace, as key preparatory steps for enlargement.[85] Moreover, Kosovo helped NATO to advance its civilian and military cooperation doctrine, which in effect enabled NATO to perform a wide range of peacebuilding and confidence-building measures, which are traditionally performed by civilian organizations and civil society groups.[86]

NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999—its first 'war'—is a key reference in debates about 'humanitarian intervention' in the unfolding post-Cold War era:

[81] See Martin Reichard, *The EU–NATO relationship: a legal and political perspective* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 17.

[82] NATO, 'The Alliance's new Strategic Concept (1991) agreed by the heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council', 1991, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23847.htm.

[83] NATO, 'The Alliance's Strategic Concept (1999) approved by the heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C.', press release, 1999, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm.

[84] See Martin A. Smith, 'Taking stock after twenty years', pp. 485–6.

[85] James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, eds, *Evaluating NATO enlargement: from Cold War victory to the Russia–Ukraine war* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

[86] See Sarah da Mota, *NATO, civilisation and individuals: the unconscious dimension of international security* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

the use of military force across state borders aimed at ending egregious suffering without the consent of the target state.[87] Kosovo exposed a 'fundamental tension' in the relationship between international order, legality and human protection.[88] Along with NATO's eastward enlargement, the 1999 intervention in Kosovo played a defining role in the unfolding normative and geopolitical contestation of the shifting international order.[89] The intervention reflected the heyday of liberal internationalism under US leadership, but it was also a symptom of the fragmented international peace and security architecture that was ill prepared to address new wars in the post-Cold War era. Rwanda was controversial because genocide occurred without meaningful international response; Kosovo was controversial because the international response under NATO was in tension with the norms of non-intervention and territorial integrity. NATO's intervention in Kosovo was highly controversial because it occurred outside UN auspices, and for this reason it generated a furious response from Russia, China and India, among many other non-western states,[90] and a great deal of legal disagreement.[91]

Kosovo has played a central role in this debate since 1999 and continues to be a key reference point as conflicting claims appear to be getting further apart in the context of normative fragmentation in international relations.[92] The R2P principle was formulated to respond to this predicament, aiming to generate political agreement on how and when the international community can prevent or stop serious human rights abuses such as war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. However, the operationalization of R2P has proved to be highly sensitive and divisive, and this is illustrated in the case of Libya, where UN-authorized military force facilitated regime change.[93] R2P remains broadly characterized by disagreement on the scope and application of its principles—particularly military intervention—and the questions of when it should be invoked and by whom, and

[87] See, for example, Simon Chesterman, 'Legality versus legitimacy: humanitarian intervention, the Security Council, and the rule of law', *Security Dialogue* 33: 3, 2002, pp. 293–307, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010602033003005; Hideaki Shinoda, 'The politics of legitimacy in International Relations: a critical examination of NATO's intervention in Kosovo', *Alternatives* 25: 4, 2000, pp. 515–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540002500405; Aidan Hehir, 'Kosovo 1999: the false dawn of humanitarian intervention', *Comparative Strategy* 38: 5, 2019, pp. 454–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2019.1653041.

[88] Edward Newman and Gëzim Visoka, 'The geopolitics of state recognition in a transitional international order', *Geopolitics* 28: 1, 2023, pp. 364–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1912018.

[89] Andrew Cottey, 'The Kosovo war in perspective', *International Affairs* 85: 3, 2009, pp. 593–608, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00816.x.

[90] Oksana Antonenko, 'Russia, NATO and European security after Kosovo', *Survival* 41: 4, 1999, pp. 124–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/713660137; Adam Roberts, 'NATO's "humanitarian war" over Kosovo', *Survival* 41: 3, 1999, pp. 102–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339912331342943.

[91] Richard A. Falk, 'Kosovo, world order, and the future of international law', *American Journal of International Law* 93: 4, 1999, pp. 847–57, https://doi.org/10.2307/2555350; Mary Ellen O'Connell, 'The UN, NATO, and international law after Kosovo', *Human Rights Quarterly* 22: 1, 2000, pp. 57–89, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2000.0012; Christopher Greenwood, 'International law and the NATO intervention in Kosovo', *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 49: 4, 2000, pp. 926–34; Marjorie Cohn, 'NATO bombing of Kosovo: humanitarian intervention or crime against humanity?', *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law,* vol. 15, 2002, pp. 79–106, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015043810758; B. Simma, 'NATO, the UN and the use of force: legal aspects', *European Journal of International Law* 10: 1, 1999, pp. 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/10.1.1.

[92] Aidan Hehir, *The responsibility to protect: rhetoric, reality and the future of humanitarian intervention* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[93] Alan J. Kuperman, 'Obama's Libya debacle: how a well-meaning intervention ended in failure', *Foreign Affairs* 94: 2, 2015, pp. 66–77, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2019-02-18/obamas-libya-debacle.

who has responsibility after intervention. NATO's intervention in Kosovo and the role this played in the establishment of R2P has thus been a point of friction in the context of the shifting international order, in particular in the contestation of norms and institutions. It is indeed telling that opposition to R2P has been consistently expressed by rising or resurgent states such as China, India, Russia, South Africa and Brazil,[94] countries which are active in challenging liberal 'hegemony'. Although Kosovo was a referent example for regulating international interventions after 1999, NATO's post-war experience in Kosovo has given the alliance an opportunity to put into practice the responsibility of the international community not only to prevent conflicts but also to protect civilians from state-sponsored atrocities, and to rebuild their societies and political institutions. In other words, since Operation Allied Force undermined NATO's international reputation, it required a strong investment by the alliance to demonstrate its good intentions and the humanitarian character of the intervention.

The experience of Kosovo since NATO's intervention in 1999 is also a key focus for the changing international order in other ways, beyond the normative contestation. The intervention came at a time—and in many ways it was an expression—of the pinnacle of post-Cold War liberal internationalism under western, and especially US, sponsorship. NATO's engagement in and commitment to Kosovo has therefore put the alliance at the heart of the geopolitical contestation of the changing international order and therefore inevitably makes its policies and activities—including its global partnerships—sensitive and politically charged. Despite maintaining a good relationship at the operational level, NATO's cooperation with the UN, especially among the permanent members of the UNSC, has deteriorated since the intervention in Libya, the subsequent impasse in Syria and most recently the war in Ukraine. Despite greater efforts to regulate international interventions, there is a drift away from multilateral consensus to situational crisis management.[95] While there may have been a case for international intervention in Syria on the grounds of R2P, normative and geopolitical friction between the western powers and their rivals has incapacitated any hope of a collective, consensual or unified international response.[96] While Russia and China have blocked a UN-led and western-designed peacekeeping presence in Syria, in turn the US, UK and France have opposed Russia's intervention and support for Bashar al-Assad's regime. As a part of this normative friction within the UN, Russia has sought to legitimize its intervention in Syria using the UN's authorization of NATO operations in Kosovo as a basis upon which they are entitled to make a similar deployment in Syria.[97] Yet, despite renewed normative

[94] Edward Newman, 'R2P: implications for world order', *Global Responsibility to Protect* 5: 3, 2013, pp. 235–59, https://doi.org/10.1163/1875984X-00503002.

[95] See Richard Gowan, *The future of multilateralism*, GCSP Policy Brief No. 6 (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2023), https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/pb-6-gowan.

[96] Aidan Hehir, 'Assessing the influence of the Responsibility to Protect on the UN Security Council during the Arab Spring', *Cooperation and Conflict* 51: 2, 2015, pp. 166–83, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836715612849.

[97] UN Peacekeeping, *The future of UN peacekeeping and parallel operations*, undated, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/the_future_of_peacekeeping_and_parallel_operations.pdf; Derek Averre and Lance Davise, 'Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria', *International*

and geopolitical contestation between the West and other global powers—where Kosovo is one of the cases of dissent—at the operational level the NATO-led and UN-authorized peacekeeping mission in Kosovo has been largely shielded from such friction due to its complex calibration of competing interests on the ground. Since Russia participated initially in the NATO-led KFOR mission in Kosovo (with over 3,000 troops), it was also framed as a crucial example of partnership for collective security. As noted by a NATO statement,

> Russian peacekeepers serving in the Balkans have had the opportunity to get to know how NATO works and acts. In this way, they have seen for themselves that NATO is a transparent alliance, dealing with a wide range of complex issues and happy to work with and consult partner countries to build durable solutions.[98]

In this regard, the KFOR mission has helped NATO promote the image of a sustainable peace operation. NATO has projected itself as a sustainable organization capable of implementing the mandate and contributing to national and regional peace and security. NATO involvement in Kosovo has shown that for international interventions to work they require a costly, long-term and multilayered international presence.[99] At the forefront is international diplomacy supported by on-the-ground programmes focusing on statebuilding, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and backed by an international peacekeeping presence used as a last resort for crisis management and coercive diplomacy to deter counter-peace forces. Thus, KFOR has played a role in retaining institutional cooperation between NATO and the UN, both on the ground and centrally. As per the provisions of UNSC Resolution 1244,[100] the NATO-led international security presence was obliged to report periodically to the UNSC on the implementation of its mandate. While NATO initially submitted monthly reports to the UNSC on the performance of its peacekeepers in Kosovo, the frequency of reporting has declined over time to a brief annual public report. NATO has repeatedly tried to justify its added value and contribution in Kosovo by highlighting the ability 'to fulfil its mission within its means and capabilities'[101] and the effectiveness of its work in 'maintaining a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement in [Kosovo]'.[102]

KFOR has been a highly adaptive mission, serving initially as a deterrent against regional and cross-border incidents and as a first responder and enforcer of

Affairs 91: 4, 2015, pp. 813–34, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12343.

[98] NATO, Office of Information and Press, *NATO and Russia: partners in peacekeeping*, 19 Feb. 2001, https://www.nato.int/docu/presskit/010219/brocheng.pdf.

[99] See also Vera Mironova and Sam Whitt, 'International peacekeeping and positive peace: evidence from Kosovo', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61: 10, 2017, pp. 2074–2104, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715604886.

[100] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1244 (1999)*, para. 20.

[101] United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 19 May 2016 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2016/459, 2016, https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2016%2F459, p. 3.

[102] See, for example, United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 26 November 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2018/1051, 2018, https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2018%2F1051; United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 5 March 2021 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2021/228, 2021, https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2021%2F228, p. 3.

law and public order; then, for providing security for UN civilian staff and other humanitarian organizations, and as a back-up force for local police and security forces. It has also had a role in the statebuilding process by providing security to electoral processes, sitting on transitional civilian bodies and overseeing the development of security structures and institutions in Kosovo. KFOR has also engaged with high-level military diplomacy as well as everyday diplomacy with all ethnic communities to gain the trust of local, national and regional stakeholders. It has demonstrated its ability to cooperate closely with other international missions and has invested in making sure that peace and security in Kosovo is a joint success for all concerned parties. Through the Joint Implementation Council and the NATO military liaison office in Belgrade, KFOR has maintained a professional and cooperative relationship with the Serbian armed forces and the political leadership, against whom NATO launched a military campaign to protect Kosovo Albanians.[103] In other words, KFOR's performative effort to protect the Serb community in Kosovo has contributed to the restoration and development of a NATO–Serbia partnership despite Serbia's proclaimed military neutrality and close ties with Russia and China.

Despite criticism of western selective interventionism and allegations of double standards, the NATO presence in Kosovo demonstrates greater normative and operational consistency than military interventions and missions of non-western states.[104] For example, Russian peace operations are widely seen as mechanisms to 'freeze conflicts and protect strategic interests'.[105] In particular, the KFOR mission in Kosovo has remained loyal to people-centred security regardless of ethnic background or political affiliation, and remains neutral as to Kosovo's status. Because KFOR operates under a UNSC mandate, which has not called for collective recognition or for collective non-recognition of Kosovo, its stance on Kosovo is aligned with that of the UN, which currently also maintains a status-neutral stance. In official correspondence with the Kosovo leadership NATO has avoided using an official designation or symbols that would imply recognition of Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state. Kosovo's prospects for joining NATO are also partially tied in with the fate of the UN's presence in Kosovo and partially shaped by the lack of recognition of Kosovo by four NATO member states (Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain). Consequently, the government of Kosovo has been forced to accept KFOR's conditions and limit its sovereign authority in the north of the country.[106] Unlike Russia and China, which defend their allies from the scrutiny or judgment of the UN or other international organizations,

[103] European Parliament, 'NATO's relations with Serbia', undated, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/sede/dv/sede130411natoserbia_/sede130411natoserbia_en.pdf.

[104] See Alex J. Bellamy and Paul D. Williams, *Providing peacekeepers: the politics, challenges and future of United Nations peacekeeping contributions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Cedric de Coning, Chiyuki Aoi and John Karlsrud, eds, *UN peacekeeping doctrine in a new era* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).

[105] Nikolas Eklund, Malin Eklund Wimelius and Jögen Elfving, 'Russian ideas of peace and peacekeeping', in Anna Jarstad, Johanna Söderström and Malin Åkebo, eds, *Relational peace practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), p. 27.

[106] Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, *Letter to the NATO Secretary General Rasmussen*, Ref. 138/13, 19 April 2013, https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Marreveshjet.pdf.

NATO has arguably shown greater impartiality towards the conflicting parties—for example in supporting the prosecution of key Kosovo Albanian political and military leaders for alleged corruption, war crimes and breaches of law.

NATO's membership and organizational culture are arguably embedded in democratic and liberal values. Its experience in Kosovo, through the security practices and discourses of KFOR, have demonstrated strong commitment to human security and the protection of civilians regardless of their ethnic and religious background. Undoubtedly, NATO's normative agenda and its programmes in Kosovo have given the alliance the upper hand in contrast to Russia's peacekeeping model as a part of the Commonwealth of Independent States, its military presence in the de facto states of the former Soviet space and its diplomatic narratives within the UNSC.[107] In particular, KFOR's performance is arguably more effective and better aligned with UN standards than the Russian deployments in Syria or Nagorno-Karabakh.[108] Nevertheless, NATO's record still sits alongside a more divisive and controversial legacy, because its engagement in Kosovo puts the alliance at the centre of the normative and geopolitical friction of the shifting international order. In this context, the promotion of a liberal international agenda by an exclusive group of states, however inadvertently, is contributing to political conflict and the amelioration of this—while maintaining NATO's core values—must be the next stage of the alliance's evolution.

Despite KFOR's role in demonstrating and strengthening NATO's will for success and cooperative security with other regional actors in south-east Europe, the Kosovo case is used by rival powers as a justification to challenge the western and liberal international order. Many countries in the global South—including India, China, South Africa, Pakistan and Brazil—have been unsupportive or ambivalent towards the western approach to Ukraine, including the narrative which frames the conflict as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism. From this perspective, Kosovo is a key case—alongside Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria—where western intervention tested UN norms on non-intervention. Thus, while western elites condemn Russia's violation of settled international norms, others—notably China—challenge the idea of a rules-based international order when it is not consistently upheld by the (mostly western) countries which steadfastly champion it.[109] It is this context which at least partly explains the voting for UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/ES-11/4 in October 2022 condemning Russia's aggression, in which 35 countries abstained, representing over half of the world's population. In broader context, therefore, the tensions and suspicions caused by NATO's intervention in Kosovo and its ongoing engagement continue

[107] Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, ed., *Peacekeeping: the Russian way,* ISPI Dossier (Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2021), https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/peacekeeping_russian_way_november_2021_final_0.pdf.

[108] David Lewis, 'Contesting liberal peace: Russia's emerging model of conflict management', *International Affairs* 98: 2, 2022, pp. 653–73, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab221.

[109] Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 'Remarks by Ambassador Zhang Jun at the UN Security Council open debate on the promotion and strengthening of the rule of law in the maintenance of international peace and security', 12 Jan. 2023, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202301/t20230113_11006774.htm.

today and hinder international efforts to collectively manage security challenges. Responses to the Ukraine war expose a degree of antipathy in some areas of the global South towards the West, based upon perceptions of double standards at play with reference to earlier US-led interventions, and indeed the West's colonial legacy generally.

Conclusion

This article, in contrast to much of the analysis of NATO's engagement with Kosovo, demonstrates a complex, nuanced and not always coherent picture. As a consequence, the implications are not straightforward. While NATO's intervention in Kosovo is often associated with a fragmented international order, the post-1999 experience and transformation into a UN-authorized mission remains largely overshadowed. For the most part, the UNSC was split between a number of political agendas—in particular, NATO's intervention and Kosovo's quest for statehood led by the US, against countries generally wary of NATO's ambitions and proponents of Serbia's political agenda in Kosovo.[110] The latter, led by the Russian Federation, China and other influential countries in the global South, used the UN strategically to defend the rights of Serbs and sustain Serbia's fictional sovereignty over Kosovo. In these circumstances it was necessary for KFOR to strike a balance between the contentious nature of the 1999 intervention, the ambiguous meaning of UNMIK's mandate with regard to sovereign control in Kosovo, and the local struggle for state formation, in order to appear as though both Serbia's and Russia's demands were being met. However, the rejection of Kosovo's independence—as much as it aimed to encourage the resolution of the statehood dispute between Serbia and Kosovo through dialogue and peaceful means—also serves as a compensation and implicit apology for the bombardment of Serbia in 1999. Moreover, NATO's status-neutral policy was also a push against Kosovo Albanians' quest for the creation of a state without the consent of Serbia and outside the UN framework. In other words, it aimed to show the power of international partnerships in enforcing peace versus the push of national self-determination forces to create their own ethno-nationalist polities.

As a result, NATO's strategic evolution through its engagement in Kosovo over the past 25 years has been largely responsive but also shaped by the objective of gaining international legitimacy and local acceptance for the organization. The UN-authorized KFOR mission in Kosovo served NATO both as a correction of the mistakes it made in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, and in promoting NATO's liberal peacekeeping and conflict-management models. It ultimately balanced multiple conflicting agendas among various international and national actors. It aimed to demonstrate higher normative standards in transforming relations with former adversaries in Serbia and Russia, and to promote and protect the rights and interests of civilians regardless of their ethnic background in Kosovo. In order to gain the confidence of other international actors, NATO had

[110] Mulchinock, *NATO and the Western Balkans*.

to make concessions and follow the UN and EU agendas before and after Kosovo's independence. On the ground, in order to reduce the resistance of local Serbs, as well as to debunk Serbia's and Russia's anti-NATO discourse, it had to tolerate and appease Serb illegal parallel structures in Kosovo, as well as push against the consolidation of the Kosovo government's authority in the north of the country. The shift in NATO's referent subjects of protection from Kosovo Albanians to Kosovo Serbs demonstrated NATO's commitment to human security[111] and also debunked the Russian narrative that NATO launched aggression against Serbia and the civilian Serbs. It involved putting into practice the responsibility of the international community not only to prevent, but also to protect civilians from state-sponsored atrocities, and to help rebuild their societies and political institutions.

In this article, we have identified the quest for successful security practices as the overarching explanation for NATO's presence in Kosovo. We argue that Kosovo presented unique and context-specific circumstances, which permitted NATO to perform successful security practices. Seen through the lens of practice theory, NATO's intervention and peacekeeping mission in Kosovo served multiple purposes: from experimenting with crisis-management operations to preventing regionalization of conflict in south-east Europe and building a collaborative security architecture with other organizations, such as the EU, the UN and the OSCE. This is a good demonstration of the intersection between 'strategic concepts' and practice.[112] Since the violence in Kosovo ended relatively quickly in 1999, the country has been an attractive deployment zone for both NATO members and their partners to practise modern military doctrines, rehearse and keep their forces fit for combat operations, and socialize and learn from multinational deployments. However, with the renewed rivalries between the West, Russia and China, it is unlikely to see further KFOR-like collaborative and multinational deployments elsewhere. We are currently witnessing a resurgence of alliance politics and a reshuffling of regional powers with little prospect for renewing a common multilateral security architecture. NATO's 75th anniversary and the UN's Summit of the Future—both happening in 2024—find a fragmented world with around 90 countries experiencing some form of violent conflict, where alliance politics replace multilateralism, collective security is replaced by regional domination, peacemaking is replaced by victor's hegemony and universal humanitarianism is replaced by racialized and ideological solidarity. Reconstructing the international peace architecture, in accordance with the aspirations of the UN Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace, will be very difficult under these conditions of renewed militarization and fragmentation in world politics.

[111] For example, the outgoing KFOR commander noted in 2017 that the 'KFOR mission always focused on putting the people of Kosovo first, working with the people to improve their conditions towards a safe and secure environment'. Alice Barisan, *KFOR Yearbook 2017* (Pristina: KFOR, 2017), https://jfcnaples.nato.int/systems/file_download.ashx?pg=5760&ver=1, p. 6.

[112] Lukas Milevski, 'What makes a good strategic concept?', *Comparative Strategy* 42: 5, 2023, pp. 718–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2023.2236493.