De Europa
Vol. 9, No. 1 (2026), 47-67
ISSN 2611-853X
www.deeuropa.unito.it

Strengthening the Western Security Community. Wendt's Master Variables and EU-NATO Relations

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Changing geopolitical dynamics between traditional transatlantic allies have raised profound questions not only about the future of the North Atlantic Alliance, but also about that of the European Union (EU). Without NATO, the EU would likely remain a 'civilian' or 'normative' power in a world increasingly characterized by the use of military force and apathy towards fundamental international norms. This view is consistent with the literature on EU–NATO relations, which has highlighted European dependency from NATO, alongside the Union's more limited impact within the Alliance.

In this paper, we challenge this perspective by arguing that the EU has been, and continues to be, at least as indispensable to NATO as the latter has been — and still is — to the former. More specifically, building on Alexander Wendt's four master variables and drawing on relevant publications, speeches, and official declarations from both organizations, we aim to demonstrate that the EU has strengthened the norms and values of NATO, served as its extension in areas it is incapable of acting, and formed a shared sense of common fate with the Alliance. In doing so, it complements NATO's strategies and contributes to the internal cohesion of the Western bloc, thereby strengthening the Western security community.

Introduction

Recent disagreements and diverging positions on Iran, Greenland, and military spending are merely the latest developments in a long-standing debate on the state — and therefore the future — of NATO. As early as 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron had described the Alliance as being in a state of 'brain death'. This raises profound questions not only about the future of the North Atlantic Alliance, but also about that of the European Union (EU), which continues to debate the merits of pursuing its own strategic autonomy. Undoubtedly, the Alliance has historically been indispensable for the EU (Howorth 2018) and continues to be so, particularly in light of Europe's persistent military shortcomings. The Union, for its part, has often been described as a 'civilian' (Orbie 2006) or 'normative' power (Manners 2002), in stark contrast to the current international context.

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the views or policies of NATO, the EU, US government, US Department of Defense, or US Department of the Navy.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.13135/2611-853X/14006

The literature on relations between NATO and the European Union has highlighted, on the one hand, the significant impact exerted by the former on the latter (Koops 2012) and, on the other, the limited influence of the Union within the Alliance (Varwick & Koops 2009). From this perspective, it has been argued that "Europe appears to be more dependent on NATO and the US than at any point since the 1980s" (Howorth 2017, 457). In this paper, we show that — after the end of the Cold War — the EU has been at least as indispensable to NATO as the latter was (and still is) indispensable to the former. Drawing from the literature on security communities (Adler & Barnett 1998) and reading EU-NATO relations through Wendt's master variables, we aim at contributing to the debate on EU-NATO relations by theoretically revealing why the EU can be conceived as a security community-builder not only in the face of non-member states (Bremberg 2015), but also *vis-à-vis* the same North Atlantic Alliance. More specifically, by reviewing publications, speeches, declarations, and initiatives from both institutions, we argue that the EU contributes to strengthening NATO in several ways: first, by reaffirming the values upon which both organisations are grounded, the EU has a crucial role in building trust between the two organisations, strengthening self-restraint mechanisms; second, by complementing NATO's hard power, the EU may use instruments that the Alliance is incapable of implementing, thus increasing interdependence between the two organisations; third, by discursively emphasizing the existence of common threats and adopting the same strategy of enlargement, the EU reinforces the shared fate of the Euro-Atlantic area; finally, by monitoring member states' commitment to democracy and the rule of law, the EU contributes to strengthening the internal homogeneity of the Western security community.

The paper proceeds as follows: in the next section, we briefly review the literature on EU-NATO relations; then, we outline our analytical framework, making reference to the four "Master Variables" that, according to Wendt, are responsible for the establishment of a common identity; in the final section, we draw some conclusions and propose some paths for future research.

1. EU-NATO relations: the state of the art

The academic literature on EU-NATO relations has flourished over the past few years, systematically increasing after some key events experienced by the two organisations (Smith & Gebhard 2017), such as the establishment of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the early 1990s, the Berlin Plus agreements (early 2000s) and, in the last 15 years, the institutional complexities and the political realities (Howorth 2009) that shape the relationship between the two entities. Most of the analysis has been policy-oriented and thus focused on the operational aspects of the EU-NATO relations, while theoretical and more conceptual contributions have often remained on the margins of research (Græger & Haugevik 2013: 266; Koops 2017; Ojanen 2018). Within this limited branch of scholarship, works range from realist and geopolitical perspectives (Simon 2013) to rationalist accounts (Biermann 2008; Brosig 2011), from

principal-agent approaches (Schleich 2014) to the growing body of works on inter-organisational relations (Ojanen 2018) and its several subfields (Koops 2017), like multi-level analysis (Koops 2011), inter-organisational overlap (Hofmann 2011; Schuette 2023) and isomorphism (Juncos 2007), resource dependence theory (Biermann 2014) and practice-based approaches (Græger 2017). Many contributions have stressed the dynamics of (possible) collaboration (Himmrich & Raynova 2017), rivalry and competition (Ojanen 2006; Duke 2008) between the two entities, which admittedly are involved in an interorganisational relation that is hard to theorize, because both NATO and the EU are unique in their own way.

Understandably, the main scholarly concern has been assessing the performance of EU-NATO strategic partnership, with some authors underlining the crisis of Western multilateralism (Smith 2018) or the fluctuating nature of their relationship, strengthening and weakening overtime as a consequence of both internal and external events (Howorth 2018; Newsome & Riddervold 2022). However, there is a sort of consensus among scholars that a grand political bargain between the EU and NATO (Cornish 2006) — i.e. a high-level, coherent and consistent inter-institutional agreement for a more effective collaboration — is hard to achieve, because of the so-called participation (or Turkey-Cyprus) problem (Smith 2011; Smith & Gebhard 2017; Cladi & Locatelli 2020), i.e. the limited application of the Berlin Plus agreement to EU member states which are also NATO members.

In this regard, some authors have identified decoupling tendencies in the EU-NATO relations (Koops 2012), with cooperation between the two organisations taking place only at the informal level (Smith 2011). Adler (2008), for example, underlines the crucial role of like-minded groups of practitioners as vanguards or 'carriers' of social structures in the two organisations, while Græger and Haugevik (2011) argue that, to get around the Cyprus issue, EU and NATO personnel have developed an informal, parallel collaborative practice, which takes place in everyday relations (Græger 2017), especially in joint operations (Gebhard & Smith 2015). Within the range of approaches for understanding the relations between the EU and NATO, the multi-level analysis (Varwick & Koops 2009; Koops 2012; Cladi & Locatelli 2020) therefore looks like the most fruitful methodological approach, along with the distinction between structural and more agency-related aspects of decision making (Smith *et al*. 2017).

Besides the role of practice and practitioners in the complex realm of transatlantic relations, many authors have stressed the role of ideas (Croft 2000), norms and values shared by both organisations, starting from the implicit assumption that the EU-NATO partnership is a *sui generis* relationship between two entities that are, themselves, *sui generis*: the EU is much more than an international organisation, while NATO is much more than an alliance. Indeed, both have been defined as pluralistic security communities (Adler & Barnett 1998; Wæver 1998), with their members sharing *dependable expectations of peaceful change* (Adler & Barnett 1998). While remaining two separate entities — with Europe looking as an *apartment building* and NATO more as a *neighborhood watch* (Biscop 2020) — both organisations may have diverging interests, but they are able to act together when it comes to defending the lib-

eral order (Raube & Rubio 2022). Their apparent isomorphism (Juncos 2007) makes it even more necessary to understand who influences and/or shapes who (Ojanen 2004; Varwick & Koops 2009). On the one hand, NATO is a military alliance between some of the most powerful states in the world and has always been crucial for the protection of Europe as a whole (i.e. including non-NATO members); it is therefore plausible that it served as a role model for the establishment of the CFSP; on the other hand, one might wonder what the North Atlantic Alliance would be today without the EU and its integrative power (Koops 2011), *i.e.* "*the ability to build organizations, to create families and groups, to inspire loyalty, to bind people together, to develop legitimacy*" (Boulding 1990: 25). To provide for their own security, both communities have no choice but to enlarge their area of peace by including additional members, and while growing they both face a sort of integration dilemma (Charap & Troitskyi 2013; Duke & Gebhard 2017), as the Russian aggression of Ukraine has made clear.

There is a broad agreement among scholars that, despite the recent European quest for strategic autonomy, the EU-NATO relations remains asymmetric (Lachmann 2010). To be sure, the relationship between the two entities on defense has been unbalanced from the very beginning, with NATO exerting influence on the EU first as a *model* (or mentor), later as an *enabler*, and finally as a *competitor* — or negative other — (Koops 2012). The EU's performance within NATO looks still limited by political divergences between the two organisations (Græger & Haugevik 2011), by the dual consensus rule (Biermann 2015) as well as by the different positions and roles of member states (Smith 2011; Ewers-Peters 2023). Someone went even further, arguing that the EU is "strategically and politically ill prepared to make a difference at the regional or global level" (Dempsey 2015). We do not agree with this view and, in the next section, we will show that the EU was and is at least as indispensable to NATO as the latter was (and is) indispensable to the former.

2. Strengthening the Western Security Community: four causal mechanisms

In IR literature, constructivism has been broadly used to understand EU-NATO relations (Waever 1998; Adler 2008; Risse 2012; 2016). In a recent essay, for example, Thomas Risse (2016) tried to evaluate the state of transatlantic ties from a security community perspective, arguing that they had weakened under the Obama administration as a result of conflicting interests, loosening economic ties (*e.g.* the dispute over the TTIP), lack of institutional framework, and identity differences between the US and the EU. In this section, we aim at challenging this argument, while basically adopting a similar theoretical framework. As we will show, the EU and NATO's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revealed that these institutions are more united than ever and stand on solid ground. In our opinion, this has been mainly the result of EU's contribution to the Western security community.

Security communities can be conceived as the ultimate stage of positive peace (Goerzt *et al*. 2016), a situation in which states respect the basic rules of friendship relations (i.e. non-violence and mutual aid) and share the same identity. According

to Wendt (1999: 298-308), this situation emerges when four causal mechanisms — or master variables (self-restraint, interdependence, common fate, and homogeneity) — push states towards collective identity. One of them (self-restraint) is a necessary condition, while the others are efficient insofar as their increase fosters actors' prosocial behaviours. We argue that such causal mechanisms may emerge also between international organisations.

The decision to use the theoretical paradigm proposed by Wendt stems from the fact that, as demonstrated in the previous section, much of the literature on relations between the EU and NATO adopts a constructivist approach. Some have pointed out that the use of Wendt's paradigm, and in particular of master variables, can be problematic because it is fraught with paradoxes (Behnke 2012, 47–50). However, we believe that Wendt's master variables are particularly useful for assessing the effects of those practices which, according to many authors, have produced collective meanings and a shared background knowledge between the two organisations (Adler 2008). In this sense, Wendt's contribution provides a 'big picture' view of dynamics that theorists of communities of practice tend instead to analyse at a more micro level.

The following sections analyse the central role of the EU in shaping — particularly since the end of the Cold War — this process of collective identity formation, thereby contributing to the construction of a Western security community.

2.1 Self-Restraint: shared norms and mutual trust

The fact that the vast majority of EU member states are also in NATO renders violent conflict between the two organisations implausible. To be sure, democracies are more likely to adopt self-restraint practices towards each other and regime affinity may explain their attitude towards compromise and peaceful resolution of disputes. However, Wendt (1999) argued that self-restraint does not only occur if an actor is able to suppress any fears of being taken over by the other, but also when states are able to establish trust to ensure their distinctive qualities are not completely subsumed by the others. Since their respective beginnings, the EU and NATO have exhibited mutual respect towards each other's needs and demonstrated self-restraint. Consequently, this has resulted in increased trust between the two organisations and facilitated collective identity formation.

Sceptics about the future of transatlantic relations have highlighted the risks of competition between the EU and NATO (Duke 2008) and described their relationship as an "unstrategic partnership" (Koops 2010). In contrast to this view, we argue that trust between NATO and the EU does not simply imply that their members will refrain from acting against one another; rather, it entails the expectation that each will remain committed to shared rules and, most importantly, that neither will perceive the strengthening of the other as a threat.

Since the advent of the EU's CFSP, the EU has reassured NATO that, in developing its own security and defense, it has no intention of duplicating or replacing NATO's mission. In 1998, speaking at the Informal European Summit in Pörtschach (Austria),

Tony Blair laid the foundation for the EU's CFSP, asserting that "European security and defense identity is very much within NATO" (quoted in Rutten 2001: 3)[1]. The subsequent declaration that emerged from the St. Malo Summit, which is considered "the start of the European defense project," emphasized that EU security and defense endeavors would reinforce NATO and that the EU would not assume a "go-it-alone" approach (Fiott 2021). The St. Malo Summit served as a precursor and a model for follow-on initiatives, such as the adoption of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) by the European Council in Cologne in 1999 and the Berlin Plus arrangements in 2002. Most notably, the Berlin Plus agreement institutionalized "an essential interlinking of NATO and the EU institutions" (Keukeleire & MacNaughtan 2008: 176) and reaffirmed for many member states that NATO remained the major forum for security policy. In more recent publications, such as the 2016, 2018, and 2023 EU-NATO joint declarations, EU leaders have been concordant on their stance regarding NATO and stressed the same themes that Blair asserted decades prior — that a more capable EU in the areas of security and defense "is complementary to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defense for its members" (EEAS 2022: 10).

EU leaders, recognizing the shared values between the EU and NATO, have praised NATO and called for even further coordination between the two organisations amidst Russia's aggression. The EU's High Representative Josep Borrell (2022) stated at the Brussels Foreign Affairs Council that it is paramount that the EU "work[s] closely with NATO and partners worldwide to defend the international rule-based order, and to reject the notions of spheres of influence that was used in the past century." European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen also expressed strong support for NATO's defense of the rules-based international order and praised their self-restraint as it guarded the eastern flank of Europe. Additionally, she added that "Denmark's' abolishment of the opt-out clause related to EU defense" shows that NATO and the EU together would "stand up against" those who violate the norms set by the liberal-democratic order (Von der Leyen 2023). The EU and NATO have openly and resolutely reaffirmed the values they were founded on and continue to represent, which consequently has resulted in closer coordination and cooperation between them.

The EU and NATO have formed, in many respects, their own "security community" as their partnership "has become a central component of the *broad security governance architecture* for a series of reasons" (Tardy & Lindstrom 2019). This sentiment was emphasized by both the EU and NATO through the publication of the Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation in 2023, where both organisations asserted that "the NATO-EU strategic partnership is founded on *our shared values*, our determination to tackle common challenges and our unequivocal commitment to promote and safeguard peace, freedom and prosperity in the Euro-Atlantic area" (European Council 2023).

However, the existence of fully developed trust relations between NATO and EU members cannot be inferred from compliance alone. Indeed, the relationship

[1] Blair asserted at the same Summit that "nothing must happen which in any way impinges on the effectiveness of NATO, anything that suggests it should be complementary to that, because NATO for us is the absolute correct forum".

between NATO and the EU is also characterised by mutual respect and reciprocal support, particularly at the level of communities of practice. In fact, both NATO and the EU have even encouraged the strengthening of the other, both in terms of membership and with regard to military capabilities. Soon after the Russian aggression, President Ursula Von der Leyen (2023) commended Sweden and Finland for seeking membership in NATO, saying "we very much look forward to [them] becoming NATO members soon," which Finland did in April 2023. After helping draft parts of the "Strategic Compass" (e.g. at the 2021 Bled Strategic Forum) and then releasing their own "Strategic Concept," NATO officials publicly demonstrated support for EU security initiatives and consistently noted that a more capable EU strengthens NATO further. At the same time, NATO (2021) established a firm boundary with the EU, repeatedly asserting that the EU will not replicate or replace NATO. This demand by NATO, in turn, has been respected by EU leaders as substantiated by repeated assertions in public addresses and EU official documents. Such recent examples of mutual respect showcase a well-established trust between the two organisations and accentuate the self-restraint imposed towards each other. In sum, by imposing limitations on themselves, the EU and NATO have developed a profound trust towards each other. The EU's perception of NATO's "repeated" and "habitual compliance" to established norms, which is substantiated by NATO's actions and encouragement, is enabled further by the fact that both institutions share core values (Wendt 1999: 361).

2.2 Interdependence: complementarity and division of labour

Wendt (1999: 344) outlines that "actors are interdependent when the outcome of an interaction for each depends on the choices of the others." Articulated another way, "once a collective identity exists actors will experience each other's gains and losses as their own". On this point, Wendt goes beyond the simple definition of interest-based interdependence as proposed by Axelrod (1984), including *complex learning* (reciprocating prosocial behaviors) and *verbal communication* (representing each other discursively in cooperative terms), which should drive states towards a more subjective understanding of interdependence. This has been most visible for the EU and NATO in the last three decades.

In 1998, for example, the then President of the European Commission Jacques Santer (1998) implicitly supported this view in a speech at the Johns Hopkins University Bologna Center, stating that "diplomacy can succeed only if there is a united political front backed up by military means" and that "reason suggests and experience proves that there can be no lasting commercial greatness which is not married, where necessary, to military might." While the EU underwent a series of transformations in the late-1990s in response to the Balkan Wars, to include the development of the CFSP, the EU demonstrated that it was "married" to NATO and its military might (Santer 1998). Shortly thereafter, his successor Romano Prodi asserted that "in the light of the post-Yugoslavia experience," both "hard" and "soft" forms of power are required in "an intelligent multilateral approach," noting European leaders "built our Union for peace,"

and that "NATO continue[d] to bear the main responsibility for our [the EU's] security" (Prodi 2004). More recently, former High Representative Federica Mogherini highlighted NATO's preeminent role in fighting terror on behalf of the EU in the 2016 "EU Global Strategy," asserting that "when it comes to collective defense," to include fighting terrorism at home and abroad, "NATO remains the primary framework" as it "remains the strongest and most effective military alliance in the world" (EEAS 2016: 20, 36-37). Conversely, the EU complemented NATO in the fight against terrorism, by adopting policies that sought to combat radicalization *i.e.* something that NATO could not do on its own. Moreover, EU and NATO have proven to be a compact entity during major crises — such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Gheciu 2022) and they are actually getting stronger despite President Trump's unpredictable foreign policy. This is mainly because NATO and the EU tend to complement each other and should be viewed as extensions of one another, filling in the voids for each organisation. Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO stationed 40,000 troops and placed military assets along NATO's eastern flank, showcasing to Russia and the rest of the world their fast-response and formidable hard power capabilities (NATO 2023c). At the same time, the EU launched its own instruments. In addition to upholding international treaties and emphasising core values, the EU adopted unprecedented economic sanctions against Russia and its oligarchs, notably through instruments that would likely be more difficult to implement within NATO's consensus-based decision-making framework. The EU's and NATO's responses have occurred in tandem and have deliberately complemented each other, filling in voids as if they are one multilateral institution.

The EU and NATO have also reinforced each other and demonstrated their interdependence through joint public forums. The day after Russia's military crossed the Ukrainian border and began committing atrocities on European soil, President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen, President of the European Council Charles Michel, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg gathered together to collectively condemn the attacks, assuage fears, and reaffirm common defense and unity amidst Russian aggression (NATO 2022*)*. One year later, Stoltenberg, the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba, and EU High Representative Joseph Borrell held a joint press conference to express their solidarity and continued support for Ukraine (NATO 2023c).

To be sure, these joint declarations may remain mere rhetoric if not followed by concrete action; however, we argue that they nonetheless signal a genuine commitment on the part of both organisations to stand together, particularly when considering that officials often blur the lines between the two. For example, when Finland and Sweden applied to join the NATO alliance, EU leaders viewed NATO's enlargement as a gain of their own, illustrated by Charles Michel's assertion that Finland's official accession to NATO and Europe's continued support to Ukraine was "a historic

[2] During a meeting with Prime Minister Sanna Marin of Finland, European Council President Charles Michel asserted that Finland's application to join NATO "is extremely important for the future of Finland and for the future of Europe" and that "it will make Finland and Europe safer and stronger." He continued to highlight that

moment for the European Union" (European Council 2022a)[2]. In the face of Russian aggression, the relationship between the EU and NATO has acted as a unifying force, fostering even closer interdependence, as the gains and losses experienced by one affect the other. Needless to say, the cost of ending such a relationship would be high for both organisations.

2.3 Common Fate: facing the same threats and adopting common strategies

Alexander Wendt (1999: 349) wrote that "actors face a common fate when their individual survival, fitness, or welfare depends on what happens to the group as a whole." He continued to note that "common fate is not the same thing as interdependence," as "interdependence stems from the interaction of two parties" whereas "common fate is constituted by a third party which defines the first two as a group" (ibidem). While making a theoretical point about behavioral and discursive mechanisms, Wendt alluded to the fact that NATO had effectively formed a collective identity during the Cold War and that it remained intact even after it defeated this third-party enemy. He wrote that through continual collaboration, "habits of thought which motivate actors to cooperate" can formulate and develop even if the common enemy is no longer present (Wendt 1999: 352). This applies also to the EU. Indeed, Western Europe and NATO faced the same threat during the Cold War, and after the third-party threat disappeared, the two Western bodies developed synchronized "habits of thought" and coalesced in an "altruistic" (team-oriented) fashion (Wendt 1999: 351).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, neither an external nor internal threat of the West seriously threatened the European way of life for the first time in centuries, opening the door to new possibilities in the 1990s. EU and NATO enlargements were just a few manifestations of such possibilities. The same leaders that envisioned a more-inclusive NATO, such as former French President François Mitterrand, simultaneously led efforts to create a more inclusive European political and economic community. Working in tandem, EU and NATO leaders created roadmaps for Eastern European nations freed from Russian internal interference to join their respective alliances. Most notably, in 2004 the EU added Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Cyprus, and Malta, and, in the same year, NATO incorporated Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania after having already added the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland five years earlier. In other words, EU and NATO enlargement occurred hand-in-hand, therefore demonstrating that, for security communities, collective identity is mainly achieved through norm diffusion, *i.e.* through the widening of the area of security (Koschut 2016).

Finland's request to join NATO, which came to fruition in April 2023 when Finland officially joined the defense alliance, "is a historic moment for the European Union".

[3] US President Bill Clinton captured this sentiment during a visit to Europe in 1994, stating that "freedom's boundaries now should be defined by new behavior, not by old history. I say to all […] who would draw a new line in Europe: we should not foreclose the possibility of the best future for Europe – democracy everywhere, market economies everywhere, countries cooperating for mutual security everywhere. We must guard against a lesser outcome." See Huntington (1996: 161) for further analysis.

After 9/11 and other large-scale terrorist attacks across Europe, the relative peace of the 1990s came to a halt as Europe faced a third-party threat once again. While Islamic fundamentalists did not terrorize Europe with apocalyptic annihilation as the Soviet Union did and was comparatively "less acute," they still brought violence and paranoia to the continent in a new way (Wendt 1999: 352). As Wendt (1999: 353) wrote, "in situations that do not have sufficient salience the emergence of perceptions of common fate may depend on 'entrepreneurs' and/or 'epistemic communities' who take the lead in reframing how actors understand themselves," as the EU did. After a series of violent incidents in 2015, the EU launched a transformed counter-terrorism approach, identifying itself as the "the main forum for cooperation" (European Council 2022b). At this juncture, the EU reframed the fight as one that required a collective approach as it believed all of the EU faced a common threat (terrorism), though not every member state experienced a significant terrorist attack. By reframing the threat and assuming a position of collaborator, the EU enabled NATO to serve as the primary means to combat terrorism after unilateral action failed to prevent deadly attacks throughout Europe such as the 2004 Al-Qaeda train bombings in Madrid, the 2015 ISIS attacks in Paris, and the 2017 ISIS attacks in Barcelona.

With regards to Russia, when Putin annexed Crimea in 2014 and then launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Europe encountered a far more acute external threat. As Europe's main multilateral organisations, the EU and NATO faced and continue to face a common fate as they confront Russia. If Russia's imperial aims and aggressions spill over into NATO territory or escalate to a point where NATO engages directly against Russian troops, Europe may find itself in another world war. Yet, the common fate experienced by the EU and NATO has resulted in unprecedented coordination. In the "Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, 10 January 2023," the leaders of both organisations in response to Russia's invasion collectively asserted that they are unwavering in their shared commitment to "tackle common challenges" and they "will further mobilize the combined set of instruments at our disposal, be they political, economic, or military, to pursue our common objectives to the benefit of our one billion citizens." In sum, for several decades, the Soviet Union challenged the EU's and NATO's collective existence during the Cold War while the fight against terrorism introduced new collaborative approaches between the EU and NATO. Consequently, the "altruistic" efforts by past EU and NATO leaders laid the groundwork for the unprecedented cooperation the EU and NATO are now exhibiting against Russia. If Europe finds itself engaged in combat as a result of further Russian aggression, it is prepared to fight because of prior collaboration and planning for a third-party threat. Ultimately, the EU and NATO share the same fate, and when a common enemy like Russia endangers Europe, the two organisations have demonstrated they will jointly utilize the tools at their disposal to confront a common enemy, showing the EU's indispensability in confronting existential threats to Europe.

2.4 Homogeneity: checking members' commitment to liberal democracy

According to Wendt (1999: 353-357), alikeness is the fourth master variable (and third efficient condition) for collective identification between two entities. To evaluate how much two actors are homogeneous, we should consider both their corporate identity (i.e. how much they share the same form, function, and causal powers) and type identity (how much they are alike in their political institutions). While the EU and NATO are multifaceted and layered bodies with several differences in their organisation structures (type identities), they share a similar corporate identity as defenders of the liberal-democratic order.

Both NATO and the EU have a peculiar form, with the former being more than an alliance and the latter more than an international organisation; however, despite those institutional differences, they both share a commitment to the principles of liberalism (freedom of expression, freedom of dissent) and democracy (accountability and leadership turnover). They both share overlapping functional elements, which are clearly outlined in each institution's declarations of purpose and published mission statements: on the one side, Article II of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) provides one of the most well-known, codified expressions of the EU's common purpose, pointing to its founding principles, stating that "the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities" (European Union 2010). On the other, NATO's (2023b) mission statement asserts a similar corporate identity, stressing its goal of safeguarding "the freedom and security of all its members" and securing "a *lasting peace* in Europe, *based on common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.*"

Causal power has to do with their agency, or actorness, i.e. the ability to produce intended consequences at the international level, while reproducing and reinforcing the ideological structure of rule-based international order. Both organisations consist of members who have voluntarily bound themselves to the obligations and responsibilities outlined in their respective treaties; they tend to define other members' interests as part of their self-interest. Moreover, while the EU is founded on an adherence to the rule-of-law and NATO on collective defense, the shared "disposition" of "values and institutions" as demonstrated through the shared treaty-based approach where both organisations have effectively established legal authority to operate has facilitated some degree of homogeneity between them (Wendt 1999: 340, 357). Ultimately, these attributes are expressions of both institutions' corporate identity. More specific shared corporate identity examples include how every single member state is represented in multiple bodies and committees, voting is conducted through democratic processes such as unanimity, leadership positions rotate, and many heads of internal bodies within each institute serve as overarching organisational leaders.

However, having a shared corporate identity does not mean being alike, since — as Wendt put it — the second source of homogeneity is type identity, which can be understood as a set of characteristics producing a social content, *i.e.* they are recognised as meaningful by other actors. Under this view, both the EU and NATO mem-

bers recognise each other as liberal-democracies, although regime type is more important for accessing the former than the latter. It is precisely in this area that the role of the EU is indispensable for NATO.

Indeed, despite being two separate entities, their membership is overlapping (23 member countries in common) and single EU countries know very well that they can rely on NATO's protection, while non-EU NATO countries entertain privileged political and economic relations with the Union. Under this view, the boundaries of the Western security community are more normative than juridical. Moreover, having a democratic regime is a pre-condition for becoming (and being) part of the EU, which has the power to sanction or punish states that divert from the rule of law (as in the case of Hungary and Poland); on its side, and despite recalling the principles of "*democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law*" in its treaty's preamble, NATO (1949) does not have either such requirement (for accessing the alliance) or that capacity (to force its members' commitment to the rule of law). It is sufficient in this regard to recall the case of Turkey, which is a member of the alliance but, precisely because of its recent authoritarian drift, has no immediate expectations of joining the EU. As NATO lacks such abilities, the EU's high accession standards (regime-type, Convergence Criteria, etc.) for potential candidates and its legal processes that address democratic backsliding reinforce NATO as they strengthen internal homogeneity of the Western security community.

In response to Russian aggression, EU and NATO leaders have consistently reaffirmed their respective treaty-based, democratic processes and shared commitment to the rule of law. As they have emphasized their own organisation's mission to uphold, maintain, and protect democratic principles, they have also highlighted each other's role in preventing Russia and China from seeking to change the international order towards authoritarianism. In a speech marking the one-year anniversary of Russia's war, Von der Leyen stressed NATO's importance as the West confronts Russia and China[4]. Equally, Stoltenberg has highlighted the EU's efforts in supporting Ukraine and underscored common values and interests in his speeches and statements[5].

The mutual recognition of shared mission sets has established a foundation for structural reform and procedural revisions of intersecting EU-NATO processes to occur. Leaders from both organisations have informally discussed how to more closely align their security and defense planning approaches, to include reforming the EU's existing framework by harmonizing it with NATO's top-down and established process (the NATO Defense Planning Process - NDPP). Additionally, widespread support for a stronger "European pillar within NATO" (Michel 2023) among European leaders

[4] EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen noted how Russia and China were "increasingly attempting to reshape the international order to its benefits" and that it was vital for NATO to meet and confront these real threats. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-joint-press-conference-nato-secretary-general-stoltenberg-and-2023-01-10_en#:~:text=We%20will%20deepen%20our%20excellent,to%20broaden%20and%20deepen%20it.

[5] Examples include the recent meetings of NATO SG with members of EU Parliament (13 July 2022: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_197904.htm) and the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (7 September 2023: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_218172.htm).

coupled with Russia's invasion has resulted in closer EU and NATO cooperation, opening new possibilities for future EU-NATO integration and internal structural alignment (type identity). With this momentum, we propose that future research focus on the practical steps in which the EU and NATO can harmonize their defense planning processes and examine the legal paths that streamline joint operations and enable coordinated responses.

Conclusion

In a well-known article, Mearsheimer (1990) predicted that NATO — along with the Warsaw Pact — would have soon dissolved after the end of the Cold War. As we know, despite its nature of military alliance established against a threat, NATO still exists. There may be several reasons for this persistence, and we agree that both organisational and international institutional theory (McCalla 1996, Wallander 2000) or its democratic membership (Thies 2008) may provide plausible explanations. Yet, in this paper we argue that, besides these arguments, there is one that seems more plausible than the others: it is the concomitant establishment of the EU in the early 90s that played a crucial role in strengthening NATO after the Cold War, incorporating the alliance into its ascent as a security community. Through an analysis of Alexander Wendt's master variables of collective identity formation, it is evident that the EU and NATO have formed a shared identity and mutually beneficial partnership that resembles the arrangement of a *tightly coupled security community* (Adler & Barnett 1998). By reinforcing each other and filling in crucial voids, the two organisations have demonstrated that they can operate as one interconnected, multilateral entity. Despite past areas of divergence in the transatlantic partnership, the EU has regularly adopted policies that support NATO. EU leaders have also consistently affirmed that NATO should maintain its standing as Europe's defense institution. Not only does NATO provide the EU with tangible defense without tapping into EU resources, but it also provides a wide array of US-led capabilities that EU member states do not possess, specifically in the areas of intelligence, surveillance, and nuclear power projection. Conversely, the EU fills gaps for NATO through measures (e.g., economic sanctions) that would be difficult for the Alliance to adopt. While NATO provides the missing link (military integration) for the EU to become *a tightly coupled security community* (Adler & Barnett 1998), the EU reinforces NATO through load-sharing initiatives, contributing to the formation of an integrated security community. Furthermore, the democratic standards required to join and remain in the EU ensure homogeneity in the security community, thereupon reinforcing NATO.

Providing a theoretical lens, constructivism helps explain how and why the EU and NATO have strengthened each other as shared ideas, norms and values are pervasive throughout publications, speeches, declarations, and initiatives from both institutions when they address each other. In these sources, EU and NATO officials evoke a central tenet of constructivism — collective identity. Most notably, they point to one another as crucial defenders of the rule-based international order and as multi-

lateral partners that share common values and fundamental principles as codified in Article II of the TEU and the preamble of NATO's Washington Treaty. While the EU is both a supranational and intergovernmental institution and NATO is strictly an intergovernmental body, 23 of 27 EU member-states are also in NATO. The same member states that contribute militarily and politically to NATO have demonstrated that they have no desire for their assets, whether financial or with personnel and soldiers, to be duplicated by another entity in Europe. Rather, they have enacted measures that more closely link the EU and NATO together, which have increased since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia's unprovoked actions have effectively reversed the notion that European territory remained safe from an outside threat and accelerated an "outcome" for the transatlantic community (Risse 2016)[6].

As early as the late 1990s, prominent figures such as Tony Blair and Madeleine Albright had strongly advocated the need for a Europe capable of taking military action ("a Europe that can act"), provided that this was done in a manner that complemented, rather than was separate from, the North Atlantic Alliance. In its recent Strategic Concept (2022), NATO reaffirmed that the Alliance "remains the unique, essential and indispensable transatlantic forum to consult, coordinate and act on all matters related to Allies' security." This can obviously clash with legitimate European aspirations related to achieving strategic autonomy; however, the question is not whether the EU and NATO can compete or cooperate, decouple or avoid duplications, but fulfil their respective roles within the Western world. On the one hand, NATO is and remains a military alliance, whose decision-making process is based on a consensus that is often difficult to reach and whose instruments are predominantly military in nature. It is therefore unlikely that it will be able to resort to non-military means in the future, which could lead to a deadlock in its actions; on the other hand, absent any political leadership, it will be impossible for the EU to put in place NATO-style operations, even for fiscal constraints (Becker & Bell 2019).

The notable presence of NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, as well as representatives from many NATO countries that are not members of the European Union (the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia) at the 8th European Political Community Summit, which recently took place in Yerevan (4–5 May 2026), vividly illustrates that NATO and the EU form a single Western security community and are aware that the future of both institutions lies together. In this perspective, the EU's role is not to be a competitor, a rival or a mere duplicate of the Atlantic alliance: EU's integrative power (Koops 2012) has been and still is crucial insofar as it strengthens norms and values on which NATO is grounded. Indeed, as Koschut (2016) has argued, security communities rest on shared norms, interests and values, whose fragmentation may put at risk the very existence of the community. Against the backdrop of norm contestation and the threat to the liberal order (Borg 2021) this seems today more important than ever for the persistence of both organisations.

[6] "The collective identity of the transatlantic community rests on shakier grounds than Sunday speeches celebrating Western values pretend" (Risse 2016). "The collective identities and values beneath the transatlantic community are shakier than is often assumed" (Risse 2012).

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