Environmental Security and the Prospects of International Institutions to Contend with the Emerging Threat

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Introduction

Climate change is one of the most widely recognized and universally accepted threats to global security. The scope of this threat puts it beyond the ability of a single state to tackle. Such threats are the reason international institutions were created. Following the global carnage of the First World War, United States President Woodrow Wilson proposed an organization that could prevent such a conflict from happening again; this became the League of Nations. The League represented some of the foundational principles that would define the concept of international institutionalism. The League failed to prevent the Second World War, but in that war’s aftermath, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt ushered the creation of the United Nations. The UN continues to exist as one of the foremost facilitators of global dialogue. The European Union is another institution created during the aftermath of World War II, and it eliminated many of the problems and tensions that allowed for the two world wars. The EU has adapted and changed a lot from its beginnings, and many see it as a natural leader in the fight against climate change following the Paris Agreement of 2016. The third potential institution that can provide leadership on the issue of climate change is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Many scholars will argue that NATO is not an institution but a military alliance. They are correct, but in addition to being a military alliance, NATO is also an international institution. Unlike many alliances throughout history, NATO has a higher decree of institutionalism. NATO has a permanent bureaucracy, and integrated command structure, and unified standards and doctrines (Johnston, 2017). NATO also has its executive who is capable of directing policy changes as I will discuss later in this paper. NATO also has an invested and explicit interest in developing environmentally sustainable policies and technologies.

NATO also has relatively limited aims which means that it may be more susceptible to adapting when those aims are threatened. If NATO cannot effectively conduct operations because of climate or energy-related issues, then it is in the best interest of the Alliance to find ways to mitigate those problems. Once some solution is found, then NATO should be able to diffuse these policies or technologies to other actors.

The United Nations and the European Union will undoubtedly be important international actors in any policies that seek to limit the impact of climate change, and I believe that much attention will be given to those institutions, but I want to understand NATO’s role. How effective will NATO be and adopting and implanting policies that limit its consumption of fossil fuels, and how well will it diffuse these technologies to all NATO members?

Why NATO?

Unlike the UN or the EU, NATO is a military alliance, so it is unlikely to take a direct role in developing policies to mitigate the damage caused by climate change, but NATO does have an invested interest in facilitating environmental sustainability. NATO sees climate change as a “non-traditional threat multiplier” and has acknowledged the challenges it poses for future NATO operations (Causevic, 2017). In 2014, the United States Department of Defense released a report on how the DoD plans to adapt to the problems posed by climate change; in this report then-Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is quoted as saying: “Climate change does not directly cause conflict, but it can significantly add to the challenges of global instability, hunger, poverty, and conflict. Food and water shortages, pandemic disease, disputes over refugees and resources, more severe natural disasters” (Department of Defense, 2014, p.1). All these factors contribute to growing conflicts that affect NATO members. The growing scarcity of water resources is a factor that leads to greater conflict. While the management and distribution of water resources is better left to the UN or EU, NATO is more likely to be involved in the conflicts that arise. In these scenarios is where NATO can work to improve its record on sustainability.

Fuel shortages severely hampered NATO operations in Afghanistan. Operations planners had underestimated the fuel requirements needed for such an undertaking, and insurgent fighters took advantage of the softer supply convoys and targeted them instead of the harder military installations (Larsen, 2015). Copious fossil fuel consumption is a problem for NATO because fossil fuels are a limited resource which is becoming scarcer. As the availability of fuel decreases, the price will increase which will drive defense spending up. If cutting costs is a goal for NATO members, then finding cheaper and more sustainable fuel sources is a necessity. To meet these challenges, NATO published its Green Defense Framework to meet the challenges of climate change. This document outlines broad policy goals which will be discussed, but it is important to note now that NATO members have poorly pursued these goals. Only a few of NATO’s 29 members have many any progress toward achieving the goals set out by the document, and the United States is the only member that has made real and significant progress. Why is this the case?

Hypothesis 1: The lack of a unified voice on climate change advocating for the diffusion of environmentally sustainable policies leads to a decrease of policy diffusion.

A key mechanism for institutional adaption is the presence of a strong leader who guides the institution through a critical juncture and remodels it. It is important that this person can drive other actors to behave in ways they normally would not because institutions and their bureaucracies are inherently resistant to change. This person must also have specific goals and plans to achieve these goals. This drive to change is likely to be most successful if it occurs during a critical juncture.

Hypothesis 2: Few overt climate-related incidents will result in lower urgency for NATO to adopt a more environmentally sustainable agenda.

As previously stated, NATO is a military alliance whose goal is to defend its members from hard threats such as state-based militaries and terrorist organizations. As a result, NATO is more likely to respond to these types of threats over environmental ones. If NATO is to adapt, then there must be examples where factors related to climate change such as fuel shortages, extreme weather events hindering military operations, changing participation patterns that impede on military planning, etc. These events must also occur at a frequency that drives NATO to an urgency that forces them to act.

Hypothesis 3: The resurgence of traditional threats to national security cause a decrease in spending allocated to developing more sustainable and renewable sources of energy for NATO members.

State-based militaries, nuclear proliferation, and new avenues for conflict between NATO and Russia have caused the alliance to focus its attention on its traditional role of hard deterrence and power balancing. The Russian Federation has fought three wars outside its borders since 2008 and has accomplished its goals in each. The Russian intervention in Syria in 2014 is the first time that the Russians have used their military outside of the former Soviet Union, and it demonstrated an ability to use offensive military equipment beyond what United States defense planners thought possible. As the United States would be a major player in any NATO adaption, the rise of China and the threat from North Korea also play a role in keeping the Alliance to its traditional roots.

Policy Streams and Critical Junctures

It will be important to understand how institutions adapt in general to understand why NATO implementation of its climate change goals has been slow. The concept of a critical juncture is key to why institutions adapt. The leading definition of this concept is a situation when the structural influences of an institution are relaxed which leads to a short window of time when political actors set new directions for the institution (Fioretos, Falleti, Sheingate, & Capoccia, 2016). The occurrence of a critical juncture is vital to the adaption of any institution because most bodies are inherently opposed to changes; this is often seen as a sign of a healthy institution, and adaption requires a political process in which the support of powerful actors is essential (Johnson, 2017). Adapting to changes in the security landscape is what NATO does best which is why it was able to survive the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Cold War, NATO made small institutional adaptions to stay in line with the security threats of its time, but the most dramatic change in its mission name during the Yugoslav Wars. Traditionally minded policymakers of that era including United States President Bill Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher chose to continue the Bush-era policy of conciliation rather than the promotion of NATO (Johnson, 2017). This policy would not allow NATO to get involved in a civil war in a non-NATO member. However, NATO Secretary-General Manfred Wörner pushed to get NATO more involved in Bosnia because he did not believe the United Nations was equipped to handle the situation, and he feared the ethnic conflict spreading into other parts of Europe. Wörner’s attempts to shift NATO’s mission beyond its original purpose succeeded because he took advantage of the uncertainty of the world order post-Cold War to change NATO’s broad strategy. He also used those same forces to change the Alliance’s institutional structures and bureaucracy to execute a mission far outside the conventional warfare the Alliance was expecting to conduct against Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces.

It must be granted that climate change is a much different threat than the potential spreading of a civil war, but it is one that NATO readily acknowledges as a threat to the stability of the West. NATO has already laid out policy options and sanctioned a study on why these changes have not been implemented. Essentially, it lacks both a critical juncture and a strong political actor to make the necessary changes. I believe it is imperative that both variables are necessary to implement change. Barack Obama was an important actor in shifting NATO’s attention to climate change. Obama’s Defense Department acknowledged that climate change was a threat to the Pentagon’s missions abroad, and during his presidency the United States Navy sanctioned the deployment of the Great Green Fleet, but this technology was not shared to other NATO members, and even though one of NATO’s principal goals on the topic of climate change was to facilitate the sharing of green technology, the organization was not successful in that regard. Even though the Alliance had a powerful political actor willing to make changes to the organization, President Obama lacked an opportunity window to make drastic changes to the Alliance’s bureaucracy. The absence of a long present enemy, widespread ethnic violence, and large-scale terrorist attacks are all powerful events that can provide a strong shock to a static system, but the melting of the artic, droughts in areas deemed critical to Western security, and rising costs and unsustainability of fuel sources do not provide for a dramatic enough shockwave to policymakers to implement any significant changes.

Public policy theorists have spent much ink writing about how policy takes shape. One such theorist is John Kingdon who outlined how policies take shape, and his theory specifies three streams of policy that must align for policy to be created. The first of these streams is policy. In this stream, there many different actors who try to get their ideas pushed to the front and compete with other actors who want to prioritize different policy (Kingdon, 2011). NATO lacks solid policy options on climate change. In 2014, NATO published a document called the Green Defense Framework which is the closest document the Alliance has thus far produced that gives any indication of policy options for climate change. The majority of the five-page document discusses how NATO intends for members to coordinate efforts on improving energy efficiency for future operations. The goal is to allow the member states to develop their own environmentally sustainable policies and diffuse those strategies and technologies throughout the alliance. This is an important point for institutions across the spectrum because all international institutions rely on the actions of their members to lead on policy. The document does note that NATO is not an appropriate vessel for advancing environmental policies (NATO, 2014). It acknowledges that NATO’s efforts in the field of environmental sustainability comes from its need to make itself as efficient as possible. In respect to facilitating the diffusion of policy, NATO authorized a smart energy team (SENT) to evaluate the implementation of the broad policies of the Green Defense Framework. Their report states that NATO members have not been successfully coordinating their energy efficiency efforts, and when SENT attempted to gather data as to why they only received a 50% response rate (2015). Of the limited feedback received, SENT notes that most of the nations responding said their nations do not have comprehensive energy strategies to implement. Because the NATO framework relies on the actions of its members, SENT went through alliance publications on defense and searched for references to strategies to deal with climate change or fuel/energy efficiency and found that fewer than half of them addressed energy.

The United States is one of the few Alliane members with the independent ability to act on the need for a more fuel efficient military. In 2009, the U.S. Secretary of the Navy announced that the Navy Department would reduce its fossil fuel consumption by 50% by 2015, and by 2020 all the Navy’s fuel consumption should be from alternative fuel sources (Larsen, 2015). The Navy created its so-called Great Green Fleet in 2015 to demonstrate its ability to succeed in this venture. This fleet was to use 50% alternative energy sources. In 2016, the U.S. Navy successfully launched the USS John C. Stennis Carrier Strike Group (John C. Stennis Strike Group Public Affairs, 2016). This group consisted of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier as well as four other vessels which are all operating on alternative biofuels. As of 2019, Italy is the only NATO member to adopt a similar policy. The Italian Navy worked in close cooperation with the U.S. Navy to research and develop more efficient alternative fuel options. The Italians have made clear that the cost of using this technology is a deterrent, and, as of the present, this biofuel technology has not proven to be as reliable as traditional petroleum-based energy (Larsen, 2015). This demonstrates that policies exist, but the Alliance has not been successful at diffusing them to its members.

The second steam in Kingdon’s model is the political stream. Even though policy experts develop policy options, it is the plans of the political actors that get implemented. Policy makers work to create policies around the ideas of politicians. When it comes to NATO, Jens Stoltenberg has been the Secretary-General since 2014, and he does not see NATO’s role as a leader on climate action. He sees NATO as a military alliance first and foremost and believes the Alliance should be responding to traditional hard threats to Western European security from the East and the South (Fetzek, 2016). The significance of his statement will be addressed in more detail later, but for the purposes of policy making, Secretary Stoltenberg does not appear to be fulfilling the role of a Manfred Wörner. His more conservative traditionalist mindset on the institution does provide a roadblock to efficient policy-making and institutional adaption. I want to draw attention back to the idea that NATO sees itself as a facilitator of policy diffusion rather than a creator of policy. In this respect, it is more appropriate to look at the NATO members for political leadership on this topic. The United States is the largest and most powerful actor in this alliance. Barack Obama saw the fight against climate change as an important problem to address. His successor, Donald Trump, does not see climate change as a threat in need of attention. President Trump has an erratic relationship with NATO, but one thing is clear, he wishes for NATO to play a more traditional role in world politics. This does not include action on climate change. Other potential NATO leaders on this would be the United Kingdom’s Prime Minister Theresa May who is currently bogged down in Brexit negotiations to the extent that leadership on any other issue seems impossible. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has widely been seen as the leader of the European Union for over a decade. No other European leader has driven policy in Europe more effectively than she had. Nevertheless, Merkel will step down as German Chancellor in 2021 which does not give her time to drive institutional adaption. The third option is French President Emmanuel Macron. President Macron has made climate change policy a large part of his overall presidency, and he has the potential to be the new leader of the European Union post-Merkel. It is his commitment to the European Union that complicates his relationship with NATO. President Macron wants to see new policies on climate change, but he believes these policies should come through the European Union (Keating, 2019). France has a more traditional view of NATO as a defensive organization.

The third stream in Kingdon’s model is the problem stream. In this regard, there is almost universal acceptance of the problem posed by climate change. Kingdon writes that a necessary component of the problem steam is what he terms a focusing event (2011). This incident channels the three streams into one and creates an opportunity window to tackle the problem. My example above of Secretary-General Wörner push to change NATO’s mission from deterrence to the containment of civil war followed Kingdon’s model quite well. The problem was the civil war and ethnic cleansing campaign in the former Yugoslavia, Wörner was the political leader who pushed for change, and the policy was to use NATO’s military power to end the ethnic cleansing. A significant factor in this adaption was the fact that the problem was explicitly a military one. Research has shown that European states are open to policy adaption on the issue of climate change, but it is the people’s proximity to the problem that drives the policy (Keskitalo, Westerhoff, & Juhola, 2012). Because NATO’s primary focus is defense, it is hard for it to adapt to a problem that does not directly threaten its mission. Climate change will make it more difficult for NATO to carry out its missions in the future, but it does not pose the same type of hard threat other state actors or terrorist organizations can. This is especially true since Russian foreign policy took a harder turn

Rising and Resurgent Great Powers

In 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a speech in Munich in which he criticized American foreign policy and claimed the United States was undermining global stability (Shanker & Landler, 2007). This speech preceded three Russian wars in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria in 2015. Russia’s Syrian expedition is the most alarming because it is the first time the Russian’s engaged in a war outside of the former Soviet Union since the days of the Soviet Union. When Donald Trump became United States president in 2017, he demanded that NATO members meet the standard of spending 2% of national GDP on defense spending. According to the Secretary-General’s Annual Report, between 2014 and 2017 only five of the Alliance’s 29 members met that threshold (NATO, 2017). NATO responded to Trump’s demand and has increased (Allen, 2019). Most of NATO’s focus in this respect takes on a more traditional hard defense.

President Trump has taken a hard line on hard defense. His administration's decision to withdraw the United States Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty has put U.S.-Russian relations to Cold War era stance. It is fair to say that the fact China and Iran were not bound by the terms of the treaty to be a reason for the withdrawal, but that reinforces the point that traditional threats will consume a great number of NATO’s resources. The direction of the United States heavily binds NATO, so threats to the United States from China and North Korea will influence NATO. The full scope of NATO’s response to the return of traditional threats is beyond the scope of this paper, but they are a factor nonetheless to shifting NATO’s focus away from is diffusion of environmentally sustainable policies. The 2017 Secretary-General’s report reflects this. The document makes no mention of fuel sustainability nor climate change. NATO’s only mention of climate change since 2016 was in the Brussels Summit Declaration where it stated the following: “We will also further improve the energy efficiency of our military forces, including through the use of sustainable energy sources, when appropriate” (para. 78). New world leaders and new world crises are shaping NATO’s role and causing it to fall back on its traditional roots. Climate change is likely to remain a back-bench issue for NATO in the foreseeable future.

Conclusions

International Institutions suffer from a “too many cooks in the kitchen” problem. Organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union have large bodies, and the players in these organizations often have conflicting interests. The UN’s internal conflicts and organizational shortfalls are too numerous to mention here, but these conflicts limit their ability to manage many situations. The European Union is suffering from a crisis of leadership with the United Kingdom’s pending withdrawal, Angela Merkel’s retirement, and France’s domestic troubles. It may have the best chance at driving effective climate policy, but it must weather its stormy waters.

NATO is a relatively small organization which has proven itself able to adapt. Its continuing existence is a testament to that fact. While the Alliance does acknowledge the negative effects of climate change on its ability to conduct operations, it has had trouble facilitating climate-friendly technologies between its members. Further research can be done to understand why the individual members are struggling to make the necessary changes, but I suspect it relates to the idea that climate change is not an easy problem to see. To problems it causes are easier to tackle than the root of those problems. NATO will respond to the problems it is accustomed to responding to, and climate change, while a significant threat to the Alliances security, does not pose an immediate or easily observable threat. Without those two conditions, it will be difficult for its members to unite to make practical changes.

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