NATO’s pursuit of legitimacy in the 21st century: 
Normative dilemmas in view of global challenges

Abstract
This paper is a draft version of a pilot study that examines normative dilemmas in NATO’s discourse during the strategic concept process of 2009-2010. It is the first step in a larger project that aims to examine the struggle over norms among key global actors in the sphere of security. A central argument is that global security politics can be explained by reference to a struggle over ‘security norms’. Since the end of the Cold War, global players in the sphere of security have been forced to engage in a struggle that aims to control the normative discourse on security. The preliminary analysis provided weak proof of this thesis. The findings suggest that the concept process was very much about using ‘others’ to legitimise NATO’s existence, but it was little about norms and it was a lot about finances. A few possible reasons for the weak prevalence of normative justifications in the concept process are suggested and the author asks whether NATO in the long run can avoid an open debate on the normative underpinnings of security policy.

Draft version, do not quote

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Introduction

This is a draft version of a pilot study that asks to what extent and in what ways NATO has used normative justifications to muster legitimacy. The thesis that guides the research project is that global security politics can be explained by reference to a struggle over ‘security norms’.

During the Cold War, it was not as urgent for politicians to seek legitimacy in the sphere of security because most Soviets, Americans and Europeans agreed with their leaderships on the major threat. In the post-Cold War era, there is no automatic agreement on key threats. Leaderships have to pay increased attention to developments in public sentiments and adjust their argumentation in order to safeguard support for their security policy. The Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Admiral Giampaolo di Paola (2009) demonstrated an awareness of the centrality of legitimacy when he argued that NATO had to explain the threats and ensure that national publics and parliamentarians had a ‘…good understanding of the types of future missions that will probably need to be conducted on their behalves. Without this basis of knowledge, it will be increasingly hard to maintain the necessary public and parliamentary support needed to pay for military capabilities and sustain future campaigns’ (di Paola 25 Sep. 2009).

The lack of consensus on how to present the new security environment in such a way so as to acquire popular legitimacy has forced political leaderships to engage in a process of ‘trial and error’ since the end of the Cold War. What arguments can serve to rally popular support? As will be demonstrated below, the use of threat constructions persists as a classic strategy for mustering support. Yet, this author argues that global players in the sphere of security have also been forced to

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1 The paper makes part of a joint research project that addresses how leaderships differ in their legitimization of security policies in the globalised world. The larger research project takes as its point of departure that in the current era, the need for legitimization is more pressing, both due to the problems at hand and to the complexities and mutual dependency of the actors involved in the solutions. The larger project will explain what policies are considered legitimate by what actors; how the process of legitimization take place; why certain policies are considered legitimate and what this means for multilateralism.
engage in a struggle that aims to control the normative discourse on security. Ethical rhetoric is increasingly applied as a way of boosting the weakened legitimacy and coherence of national governments and international organizations (Chandler, 2003:299–303). As a first step in providing empirical proof of the thesis, the pilot study explores NATO’s use of normative arguments during the Strategic Concept process, from September 2009 to May 2010.

The need for legitimacy

A sense of crisis has pervaded large parts of the world ever since international terrorism caused alarm in 2001. Perceptions of terrorism as a major threat are often strengthened because terrorism is presented as intertwined with a range of other serious transnational challenges, such as spread of WMDs, piracy, drug trade, failed states and regional instability. Climate threat and other environmental problems have also evolved as severe existential threats in the minds of many. On top of this, the global economic crisis has bred distress over the globe. Moreover, modern threats are often diffuse and difficult to remedy. Ulrich Beck and other scholars use the concept of ‘risk’ that signals that modern politics is very much about handling insecurity (Beck 1999). In this context, political leaders may find it difficult to determine ‘what buttons to push’ in order to obtain popular legitimacy.

This author complies with Robert Keohane’s (2006:2) definition of legitimacy. In Keohane’s scheme, an institution may be legitimate in a normative sense ‘…when it is accepted as appropriate, and worthy of being obeyed, by relevant audience’. It may also be legitimate in a sociological sense ‘…when its practices meet a set of standards that have been stated and defended.’ Often, Keohane argues, ‘…legitimacy is contested, either because people hold different normative theories of it or because they evaluate the facts differently.’ This article focuses on the former aspect of legitimacy and more specifically, on how leaders attempt to present an organisation in such a way that it appears appropriate and worthy of being obeyed by relevant audiences.
Arguably, NATO needs support from several categories of actors. NATO spokesmen demonstrated awareness of significance of capitals and parliaments during the concept process, but they also paid tribute to the UN. Support from the UN Security Council (SC) is important because it is the only instance that ‘transcends’ NATO in the sense that the SC can provide the alliance with a mandate to infringe on a state’s sovereignty.

Furthermore, observers within NATO argue that troop contributing non-member states are becoming increasingly important to the alliance because of the need to share burdens for out-of-area missions. The alliance paid substantial attention to this group of actors. NATO representatives travelled to a range of non-member states during the concept process and they underlined the value of the contributions made by for example Finland, Sweden, Georgia and Australia (for example Rasmussen 23 Oct., 26 Nov. 2009).

The alliance has also to consider ‘recipients’ of NATO’s missions, above all the citizens of Afghanistan, in its public communication. In NATO’s struggle for ‘hearts and minds’, public messaging is essential in order to increase its credibility. Of key importance here is to get NATO spokespersons to speak with one voice, preferably also in compliance with representatives of other actors such as the EU, the UN and various NGOs. This aspect was however probably more important to NATO’s messaging on the ground in Afghanistan than to the concept discourse.

NATO’s public discourse is also a tool for communication with actors that do not necessarily comply with its existence and policies, such as the leadership of Russia and China. NATO spokespersons need to consider these actors as well when crafting their messages. The Expert Group summarised this under the headline ‘Telling NATO’s Story’, arguing: ‘As Allies prepare a new Strategic Concept, they should bear in mind how such a document will be read not only within the Euro-Atlantic community but in every region. NATO populations should be reminded that the alliance serves their interests through the security it
provides; people outside NATO should know that the organisation and its partners are working each day to build a safer world’ (NATO 2020 Assured security:12).

Notwithstanding the importance of the actors discussed above, this paper focuses on yet another actor category, national publics, because NATO cannot do without public support. One of NATO’s key current challenges lies in mustering legitimacy for a military alliance that is not obviously relevant to everyday life of ordinary people. European, Canadian and US citizens are no longer threatened by nuclear war between two superpowers. When resources are particularly scarce, as during the recent global economic crisis, it becomes especially important for NATO to prove its relevancy and utility.

The strategic concept process of 2009-2010 was crafted as a tool for public diplomacy that would serve the purpose of convincing Western public opinion of the need to finance NATO for the sake of security (Delaney 2009). Twelve independent ‘experts’ were appointed with the mission to prepare suggestions to the Secretary General after consultations and debates during a series of conferences in different capitals. The catchword was ‘openness’. NATO invited people to engage via public seminars and chat on the home page. The Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared his ambitious goal to craft a consultation process that was more open than any other process.

I intend to make this the most open, the most inclusive consultation process in NATO's history, and I dare say, in the history of any international organization. The experts will hold many consultations in many countries. I will do the same. And our web model is giving the world a window into the process and a way to provide input as well.

Rasmussen, Albright and van der Veer, 4 Sep. 2009.

The Secretary General placed emphasis on transparency and on the public aspect of the process. The concept process was to …’create a new, solid consensus among Allies on our key tasks, but also to connect our populations with the new
NATO. After all, people will only support what they understand and appreciate.’ He argued that the alliance must invest more time and effort in connecting with its publics, because ‘these people are our customers’ (Rasmussen, 17 Nov. 2009).

**NATO using finances, norms and ‘the other’ to muster legitimacy**

Political leaders can use a range of different strategies to muster legitimacy. A first reading of NATO’s discourse during the concept process indicated that in addition to references to norms, NATO leaders mainly referred to threats and finances in order to rationalise the alliance’s future orientation as a security organisation. The author decided to focus the analysis on these three sources of justification.

First, the use of threat constructions is a classic way to muster legitimacy. A classical method for strengthening national identity is to utilise ‘negative identification’, for example by going to war to create an ‘other’, which may unite the population around a leader (Bloom 1990:80).

In order to be able to use this mechanism, politicians have to define who is the other. After the end of the Cold War it has become increasingly difficult for NATO to use Moscow as ‘the other’. NATO is divided internally. Some still perceives of Russia as a key threat, whereas others aim to let go of the old paradigm. The severity and complexity of globalised threats and the financial crisis appear to pressure the alliance to find new allies and to come up with ways to counter new threats in a more cost-effective way. This time, it is not enough to appease Russia. NATO officials have argued that the alliance has to intensify collaboration with Russia and other non-members in order to share burdens and designate new solutions. In other words, NATO has to realise ‘real cooperation’ with Moscow (Rasmussen 4 Dec. 2009).
Yet, such moves risk altering NATO’s identity and may force it to modify its customary ways of attaining legitimacy. How does a community handle fears that arise when it is pressured to ally with former ‘others’? Can the community stick to traditional views of ‘self’, collaborating with old ‘others’ without fully assimilating, pretending that co-operation will not affect its self-image? Or can it reconstruct former ‘others’ into ‘selves’? Can new ‘others’ replace old ones and glue the community together? In the light of these dilemmas, the use of threat constructions was tricky during the concept process. Taking on the task of formulating a new strategic concept, NATO seemed caught between two competing paradigms with two different ‘others’; the looming ‘Cold War paradigm’, according to which Russia and a range of other untrustworthy states remains irremediable ‘others’, and a ‘New Threats paradigm’ which require alignment with former ‘others’ in view of terrorism and other severe challenges.

Second, security politics can be justified with reference to norms. Participation in international military missions out-of-area can partly be explained by the needs of Western governments to nurture their self-image. In contemporary politics, a strong power can be strong without being considered good/appropriate, but to remain strong over a durable period of time, a leader has to be considered to be not only a strong, capable problem-solver, but also a guardian of righteous norms. Political leaders can acquire legitimacy by providing security for its own citizens, but they may also gain legitimacy by reference to ‘ethical’ missions that goes beyond crushing terrorism and piracy, missions that aim to regenerate the world as not only more secure, but also more just.

Moreover, even if leaderships refrain from being explicitly normative, referring to interests rather than ethics, they still have to position themselves with regards to a range of normative dilemmas in the sphere of security. These dilemmas may involve the tension between liberty and security and under what conditions it is legitimate to intervene in a sovereign state. Another dilemma involves whether the actor should place priority on short-term problem-solving that often relies on the engagement of strong global powers and the use of military means, or on long-term structural efforts that often rely on institutional involvement (EU, UN,
NATO) and the application of a variety of measures, such as economic reconstruction programmes aiming to stabilize failed states.

Norms are defined along with Peter Katzenstein (1996:5), as ‘collective expectations for the proper behaviour of actors with a given identity’. If a spokesperson refers to a favoured norm, ideology or to morally appropriate behaviour, this is defined as a normative message. Norms are seen as the building blocks of ideologies, religions, political systems and other collective ideational constructs. The analysis maps out statements that include references to ‘democratic norms’, ‘liberal norms’, and norms underpinning a system aimed at ‘justice’, ‘equal treatment’, and so on. If an actor refers to shared norms, ideologies or morally appropriate behaviour, this is defined as a normative message.

Third, the global financial crisis urges political leaders to increasingly take budgetary limits into consideration when outlining future security policy goals and methods. From the outset of the concept process, NATO leaders referred extensively to finances as a key factor that ought to guide the alliance’s future orientation. In the case of NATO, the financial factor goes to the very heart of the organisation’s identity, because financial constraints are tightly intertwined with NATO’s need for extended partnership and burden sharing. Increased pressure to work with other actors and organisations become a sign of NATO’s transformation from a dominant security organisation into an organisation that has to settle for a more limited role in the sphere of security, while letting others carry out quite a substantial part of the job in the global sphere of security. The struggle between ‘regionalisers’ and ‘globalisers’ within NATO (Ringsmose and Rynning 2009) witnesses of an unease within the organisation emerging from a realisation that NATO can no longer be ‘everything to everyone’.
NATO’s pursuit of legitimacy

How and to what extent did NATO apply these strategies during the concept process? The analysis targets the texts that NATO chose to present on its home page under the heading “speeches and transcripts” during the concept process from its official start on September 2 2009 until the issuing of the report of the Group of Experts on May 17 2010. Consisting of public statements in speeches, press-conferences, seminars and interviews, it is the official public narrative of NATO. 124 documents were analysed by ways of qualitative content analysis. The analysis aims to catch the official image that the alliance chose to present to its member states and the wider world. It does not unravel NATO’s ‘true motives’, but focuses on official justifications of security policy that function as political signals that have tangible consequences for relations with partners and for an actor’s international image and identity.

The main spokespersons are the Secretary General and the press spokesperson, yet other actors such as members of the Group of Experts, state representatives and academics also contributed. The focus is thus on NATO as a united actor, or institution, that promotes a particular version of the alliance’s reason for existence, goals and activities. Needless to say, member states vary considerably in their opinions on NATO’s development, yet their narrative on NATO is not covered in this paper, but certainly merits attention of future research.

First, NATO’s spokespersons elaborated extensively on the financial dimension. The financial crisis was a catalyst for NATO's reform process. The Secretary General acknowledged that the member states faced a severe financial crisis and argued that NATO had to ensure that member states ‘…get “more bang for the buck”, or “Euro” – and to ensure that tax-payers’ money is spent most effectively.’ (Rasmussen, 26 Nov. 2009). The spokespersons argued that it was necessary to avoid overlap between the EU and NATO and discussed reforms within the organisation that would minimise bureaucracy and devote more resources to NATO’s missions (for example Rasmussen, 9 Sep., 22 Oct. 2009, 5 Feb., 13 Mar. 2010, de Wijk 19 Sep. 2009). Rasmussen (9 Sep. 2009) wanted
‘value for money’. What was needed was a smaller, less bureaucratic and more operational organisation (Rasmussen 23 Feb. 2010). Rasmussen argued that NATO’s transformation was actually about carrying through its work as cost-effectively as possible:

To my mind, NATO transformation is, first and foremost, about making sure we have the kinds of forces that we can deploy, with the equipment and training they need, and at a price we can afford. It’s as simple as that.

The concept process was also very much devoted to outlining threats and challenges. NATO spokespersons acknowledged that some member states remain concerned about Russia (Rasmussen, 17, 19 Nov. 2009) and that NATO had to remain relevant in the light of a ‘residual conventional threat’ (di Paola 25 Sep. 2009). Yet, in general, the spokespersons did all they could in order to ameliorate relations to Russia and did not subscribe to the definition of Moscow as a threat (for example Rasmussen 18 Sep., 4 Dec. 2009).

According to the Group of Experts, the most probable threats to Allies are unconventional (NATO 2020 Assured security: 17). International terrorism was presented as the most serious threat (Rasmussen, 7 Mar. (a) 2010). Terrorism had turned global (Rasmussen, 9 Oct. 2009) and could not be allowed to proliferate (Rasmussen, 2 Sep., 7 Oct., 17 Nov. 2009). Afghanistan could not be allowed to become a safe haven for terrorism (Rasmussen, 2 Sep., 9 Oct., 23 Oct. 2009, 25 Jan., 7 Feb., 7 Mar. (a) 2010), because terrorism and instability could spread from Afghanistan to Europe (Rasmussen, 7 Oct., 9 Oct., 22 Oct., 17 Nov., 19 Nov., 26 Nov. 2009, 7 Feb. 2010). The terrorist threat was constructed as intertwined with a range of other transnational challenges, such as spread of WMDs, piracy, drugs trade, failed states and regional instability. Rasmussen (26 Nov. 2009) argued that the greatest threat to NATO emerges from the link between failed states and international terrorism.


Normative argumentation was thus mainly used in references to history and in the European context in connection with the ‘open door’ policy. Normative arguments were thus primarily used in order to rationalise NATO’s past and regional challenges of the present, whereas the greatest challenge to NATO was about defending interests in view of transnational challenges, with available means and at an affordable price.
Concluding discussion

This paper aimed to provide empirical proof of the thesis that global security politics can largely be explained by reference to the struggle over ‘security norms’. The preliminary analysis provided weak proof of this thesis. Preliminary findings suggest that the concept process was very much about using ‘others’ to legitimise NATO’s existence. It was little about norms. And it was a lot about finances. A few possible reasons for the relative absence of normative justifications in the concept process can be hypothesised.

First, NATO leaders may have toned down the normative component of their policies because they wished to forge a closer relationship with Moscow. Normative arguments can easily serve to distance Moscow, because Russian leaders are very sensitive to norm-spreading strategies (Wagnsson, 2008: 128-134). NATO leaders are most likely aware of this, and may have made a conscious effort during the concept process to formulate themselves in terms of interests rather than in normative terms. Rasmussen (17 May 2010) argued for ‘…working for a real partnership with Russia – based on shared interests and reciprocity.’ He held that NATO and Russia should not let disagreements in some areas, such as on the ‘open door’ policy overshadow cooperation in other areas (Rasmussen, 2 Sep., 4 Dec., 17 Dec. 2009). The spokespersons underlined the value of existing co-operation and called attention to the need for a common ground for NATO and Russia on common challenges such as terror, non-proliferation, pirates, Afghanistan and organized crime (Albright, 14 Jan. 2010, Rasmussen, 23 Apr. 2010). The Expert Group concluded that the relationship with Russia should be ‘…based on shared interests, mutual confidence, transparency and predictability.’ (NATO 2020 Assured security: 27).

Is this a viable strategy for NATO-Russia relations? Can NATO accommodate Moscow by seeking a common, interest-based ground while keeping quiet on normative issues such as human rights? Analysing NATO-Russia relations, Karl-Heinz Kamp (2009:7) rhetorically asks ‘Can NATO as a community of values be engaged in a special partnership, if a common value base is missing’? And
indeed, Madeleine Albright (13 Nov. 2009) paid tribute to the ‘basic idea of European pacification; the entire continent ought to be turned into one single family with compatible ideals and values.’ She (17 May 2010) underlined ‘NATO is the kind of organization that countries want and choose to join – not only because of what it does, but because of what it stands for and because of what its members believe.’

Second, the relatively weak presence of norms in the discourse may signify that norms quite simply are and will remain less central to NATO’s rationalisation of future core activities and goals. In this view, NATO will remain rather conventional and focus on the regional dimension on security, placing key priority on defence of borders of its member states. It will be less concerned with normative dilemmas out-of-area, for example whether to intervene to halt genocide. In this interpretation, a clear difference will remain between NATO, which focuses mostly on interests and the EU, which has been called a ‘normative actor’ (Manners 2002). This interpretation is strengthened by a national representative within NATO who laconically stated that as opposite to the EU, ‘NATO is no purer than its member states’.

A third, and alternative interpretation, is that norms are not irrelevant, but rather too central to NATO. If the concept process was about mustering public support, NATO leaders may have deliberately refrained from starting a debate on basic norms because they were afraid that such discussions would expose severe differences of opinion among member states. This interpretation is supported by Michael Williams (2009:6-7) who argues ‘…the norms of the risk society have yet to be established. The lack of such new norms, norms that in the modern era had been established via NATO, was very much at the heart of the transatlantic Iraq crisis. The problems that continue to plague NATO in Afghanistan and transatlantic relations more generally are fundamentally about a lack of agreed upon norms’.
Further, in Williams view (2006:4), ‘common values do not translate automatically into common norms’. This observation seems relevant in the case of NATO. NATO member states agree on common basic values; democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law and free institutions. According to the North Treaty of April 4 1949, member states ‘...are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area. They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security. Member states are unlikely to clash directly over these values. The spokespersons did refer to the basic values of freedom and democracy during the concept process (Rasmussen, 9 Oct., 17 Nov. 2009, 12 Apr. 2010, di Paola, 25 Sep. 2009, Asselborn, 16 Oct. 2009). Yet political leaderships may use and interpret these values differently in order to promote their own particular versions of normatively correct strategies and behaviour in the sphere of security. If one leadership promotes interference in a sovereign state to oust an ‘evil’ regime with reference to spread of democracy, another may contest such an intervention referring to the value of individual liberty (every people’s right to choose their own leadership) or to well-being in the North Atlantic area (financial constraints).

Thus, the sparing use of normative arguments in the rationalisation of NATO’s future missions may be indicative of that member states differ on the normative underpinnings of NATO’s work. Whereas some states, such as Germany, Canada and France place more emphasis on humanitarian aspects and long-term structural projects, Great Britain and the US focus more on defence of interests and rapid problem-solving. Some fear that NATO will develop into a ‘two-tier alliance’, where each member state contributes only with what it regards as central to its own interests. If this is the case, it will be difficult to use normative arguments making a strong case for what tasks should be prioritised.

In conclusion, NATO spokespersons did not make extensive use of normative arguments during the concept process. Is it possible for NATO, in the long run, to
largely abstain from normative justification of security policy? Can it base its security policy argumentation on interests, in order to forge partnerships with former ‘others’ more easily and in order to avoid controversies among member states? Albeit NATO representatives largely abstained from openly debating norms, the discourse was permeated by issues that have normative implications and sooner or later the alliance will have to deal with them. Is NATO to focus on ‘our’ security, defending borders of member states only, or is it to include ‘their’ security, securing strangers out-of-area? Is it to engage in climate change or keep to combating terrorism? Should it be a tool for short-term problem-solving or should it engage in long-term structural processes for the sake of security in failed states? Such questions merit attention of future research because they are inherently normative, above all in the sense that they evolve around the question of whose security should be given priority.

Finally, a central issue that has not been addressed here is how national publics apprehend NATO’s messaging. Public opinion plays a key role in global politics. An argumentative logic that yields legitimacy domestically within a state or an organization tends to be replicated by other leaderships, but if a leadership experiences diminishing support, other leaderships are less likely to replicate its lines of reasoning. Future research within this project will refer to developments in public opinion in NATO member states in order to increase the understanding of public opinion as a driving force for the normative underpinning of security politics. Are national publics convinced by NATO’s strategies for mustering legitimacy? How do national publics differ on normative issues? Could NATO have gained increased public support if they had been more prone to use normative arguments?
**Bibliographical note**

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