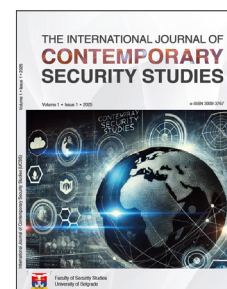


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Review article

Non-Traditional Roles of Military Actors: NATO's Engagement in Natural Disaster Response

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the primary purpose of military alliances has been to secure state sovereignty and provide collective defence against external armed threats. The events of the Cold War shaped the trajectory of NATO as a leading military alliance, with the principal task of developing and maintaining the capacity to defend against attacks from the opposing bloc. This task determined the course of the alliance's development during the Cold War, aimed at strengthening military capabilities and ensuring readiness to mount a collective response to any aggression against its members. However, the dissolution of the rival bloc and the changing nature of security threats in the post-Cold War period compelled NATO to shift from a military alliance to a broader political and military forum, maintaining its relevance and justifying its continuity. While NATO has increasingly assumed the role of a political coalition, its military capability still represents its core strength. Nevertheless, its use is now linked to a broader spectrum of practices than during the Cold War, including humanitarian responses to natural disasters and other emergencies. This paper aims to examine one of NATO's post-Cold War roles, specifically its engagement in crisis response operations triggered by natural disasters, and to demonstrate that this practice has become an integral part of NATO's contemporary identity. Methodologically, the paper combines content analysis of NATO documents with two case studies. The findings indicate that both the internal and external NATO identity, grounded in its operational roles, have evolved. Member states, partner countries, and international organisations no longer perceive NATO solely as a defensive alliance but also as an actor to which they turn to address complex crises, including those triggered by natural disasters.

KEYWORDS

Crisis management, humanitarian assistance, natural disasters, identity, NATO.

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the viability and continued relevance of military alliances have emerged as key issues on the international agenda. What contemporary tasks a military alliance should perform, what its purpose is in the absence of an opposing bloc, and what direct military threats to its member states are among the pressing questions surrounding NATO. Given that traditional theoretical frameworks fail to explain the persistence of alliances without a direct military threat, scholars have increasingly turned to modern, alternative theoretical approaches to account for NATO's resilience and longevity. Interpretivist perspectives have taken a leading role, attributing NATO's endurance to its adaptability and transformative capacity—particularly

its ability to convert military capital into political capital. By assuming new roles and responsibilities and transforming its traditional identity, NATO has secured a pathway for its continuity.

Following the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet threat, NATO indeed turned to a range of new tasks and activities aimed at convincing the broader public and its strategic environment of the necessity of its continued existence. Additionally, its material and organisational capacities have often proven essential in responding to a wide range of crises. By modifying its traditional role—broadening the framework beyond the concept of collective defence—while simultaneously leveraging the capabilities and experience of a military alliance, NATO has evolved into a powerful politico-military organisation capable of addressing various types of crises. Such an organisation has developed a contemporary identity rooted not only in military defence but also in a range of roles and tasks undertaken to respond to the challenges of a turbulent environment and modern security threats.

2. Redefining the Role of Military Alliance: NATO and the expansion of the defence paradigm

Military alliances have traditionally represented a form of interstate cooperation in the field of defence, serving as a conventional means of addressing issues of international and national security. While providing a precise and universally accepted definition of the term ‘alliance’ may be complex, scholars tend to identify key elements or defining features of the concept instead of offering a single definition. Edwin H. Fedder defined alliance as “a limited set of states acting in concert at X time regarding the mutual enhancement of the military security of the member” (Fedder, 1968, p. 68). Stephen M. Walt defines it as “a formal or informal commitment for security cooperation between two or more states”, with a defining feature which consists of “commitment for mutual military support against some external actor(s) in some specified set of circumstances” (Walt, 1997, p. 157). According to Walt, this definition underscores that alliances are essentially formed as a means of collective alignment against an external actor or actors. In contrast, Stefan Bergsmann, summarising previous definitions, argues that the most adequate way to define an alliance is as an “explicit agreement in which partners promise mutual assistance in the form of a substantial contribution of resources and cooperation” (Bergsmann, 2001, p. 36). The specific operational role within the military sphere constitutes the fundamental commonality among all military alliances.

Within the framework of the Westphalian system, the traditional role of a military alliance has been determined by its commitment to collective defence, namely the preparedness to protect a member state in the event of aggression by another state or coalition. A defining feature of the Cold War alliance is encapsulated in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which affirms that “the Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area” (The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949, art. 5).

Up until the end of the Cold War, the role of military alliances in the literature was viewed almost exclusively through the lens of defence and deterrence, based on the prevailing stance that “alliances are against and only derivatively for, someone or something, so the cooperation in alliances is in large part the consequence of conflicts with adversaries and may submerge only temporarily the conflicts among allies” (Liska, 1962, according to Fedder, 1968, p. 79). At the heart of the debate was the question of the alliance’s continued relevance, which was firmly rooted in the assumption that the role of a military coalition is precise and narrowly defined. During the Cold War, NATO’s longevity could be attributed to its anti-communist purpose and its ability to maintain a credible deterrent against the Soviet Union (Dinerstein, 1965, p. 598). However, the collapse of the Soviet Union reignited debates and introduced new perspectives on the factors that have ensured NATO’s survival as the foremost military alliance of the contemporary era.

As one of the leading theorists in international relations, Stephen Walt listed several key factors that explain the continued existence of military alliances, even after the conditions that gave rise to them have changed: the exercise of hegemonic power by a strong alliance leader that discourage dissolution bearing a disproportionate

share of the costs; preserving credibility with partners; domestic conditions within member state as elite manipulation pushed by self-interested groups that need the alliance to support their individual self-interest, even though the coalition may not be in the interest of the larger societies of which they are a part; a high level of institutionalisation within alliances, manifested through the presence of formal organs responsible for specific tasks and the existence of both formal and informal mechanisms for collective decision-making; and finally, Walt pointed to the presence of a strong sense of collective identity and a mature security community as particularly important, albeit uncommon, factors contributing to the resilience of military alliances (Walt, 1997, p. 164–170).

NATO, by meeting these Walt's criteria, has fulfilled the key conditions for continued existence. Scholarly literature increasingly refers to the fact that NATO transitioned from a military alliance to a security community (Williams & Neumann, 2000; Ciuta, 2002). To remain a relevant international actor within the contemporary security environment, NATO had to expand its scope of engagement from military to non-military threats following the end of the Cold War in order to protect the values that underpin the North Atlantic community. Value alignment and a high level of institutionalisation were further strengthened through the development of a specific form of security community. This, in turn, prompted a transformation of NATO's identity, enabling the Alliance to become both stronger and more adaptable. The disappearance of the Soviet threat did not eliminate the need for NATO to continue acting as a cohesive force uniting North American and Western European democracies nor as a forum for consultation on all forms of threats to the vital interests of Western civilisation. The post-Cold War period brought about strategic changes for NATO, prompting a shift toward a "values-based security order to which the Allies ultimately aspire" (Moore, 2007, p. 55). Although these strategic shifts brought significant changes to NATO's roles, Trine Flockhart argues that from its very inception, it has been either explicitly or implicitly clear that NATO possesses multiple roles that go beyond its initial mandate to "keep the Russians out". She views NATO's adaptation to the new security environment, the redefinition of its tasks, and the expansion of its partnership network as a reflection of the Alliance's maturity and evolution (Flockhart, 2011, p. 111).

As a community of Euro-Atlantic nations bound by shared values, norms, mutual interaction and trust, NATO has set itself the objective of developing this community both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal development is pursued through the process of enlargement, while the vertical dimension of development is achieved through the adoption of new goals, tasks, and activities. The development of NATO as a pluralistic security community is also taking place through the internationalisation of the norms and values upon which the Alliance is founded, notably by expanding its network of partnerships.

As NATO evolved into a security community, it was compelled to reshape its dominant narrative to reflect its expanding roles and responsibilities. A defining feature of NATO's post-Cold War narrative, in line with its broader transformational trajectory, is the emphasis on the Alliance's inherently positive nature—not grounded in the existence of an adversary, but rather in the intrinsic value of the Alliance itself as a bearer of democratic values and a bastion of Western democracy. NATO, as a community of shared values whose identity and cohesion are underpinned by deep-rooted cultural and civilisational affinities, has succeeded in ensuring its continuity through a deliberate and strategic reconstruction of its collective identity. Whereas during the Cold War, this logic rested principally on defence against military threat, it is now predicated on NATO's envisioned role as the consolidator of Western civilisation, thereby reaffirming the Alliance's distinctive form of symbolic power (Williams & Neumann, 2000, p. 361). In contrast to the Cold War narrative, which was grounded in the rationalisation of the nuclear arms race (Lawrence, 1996), the NATO narrative later has been founded upon an evolved understanding of security and security practices, and that evolution has fundamentally reshaped perceptions of the Alliance and its roles (Ciuta, 2002, p. 54). The post-Cold War NATO narrative "simultaneously 'floats' the practice of NATO and 'fixes' its definition as 'security'" (Ciuta, 2002, p. 51). Феликс Ёура also emphasised that "in the practice of security narratives of identity, interests, and of security itself, are created, established and changed" (Ciuta, 2002, p. 55).

In the context of NATO's post-Cold War security practices, the process of vertical expansion was inaugurated by the 1991 Strategic Concept and subsequently advanced through the successive iterations adopted in 1999, 2010, and 2022. The three core tasks outlined in NATO's most recent Strategic Concept, dated 2022, are deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security (NATO, 2022 Strategic Concept). These three core tasks also reflect NATO's ongoing tendency to expand the scope of its operations to encompass a broader range of crises, including numerous situations that fall outside the remit of Article 5

of the Washington Treaty. In the official discourse of NATO representatives, the justification for the Alliance's involvement in an increasingly wide range of operations (such as conflict prevention activities, peacekeeping operations, peacemaking, peacebuilding, peace enforcement operations, humanitarian operations) is frequently framed in terms of safeguarding Western values—most notably democracy—and addressing, with appropriate resolve, any crisis arising globally that may pose a threat to the security and stability of the Alliance (Crisis Management, NATO, 2025). This expanded interpretation of defence reveals a significant evolution in NATO's strategic posture—from a traditionally reactive framework centred on the protection against a defined adversary, such as the Soviet threat, towards a more proactive paradigm rooted in the defence of core democratic values. Such a reconceptualisation is particularly evident in the rhetoric employed by NATO's senior leadership. In one of his addresses, the NATO Secretary General underscored the point by stating:

"The core purpose of NATO is to defend all allies, but NATO is also defending some values, and in our founding treaty, it is clearly stated that our core values are freedom, individual liberties, and the rule of law... people have to be safe to be free, and we need freedom to have real democracy. NATO contributes to democracy, in part, by defending our own countries. Still, we are also helping not by force but through cooperation, through partnership, also to build democratic institutions in other countries." (Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the 38th Meeting for Friendship amongst Peoples in Rimini, Italy, August 24th 2017).

This expanded understanding of defence, which underpins NATO's second core task—crisis management—provides a framework of legitimacy for the Alliance's assumption of an increasingly diverse set of roles. The dissonance between NATO's post-Cold War practices and its longstanding identity—shaped by decades of Cold War confrontation and rooted in its original defensive mandate—is being reconciled through the adoption of new tasks, upon the successful fulfilment of which the Alliance's future relevance and identity increasingly depend. Given that crisis management now constitutes a core area of NATO's operational focus and that the values underpinning the Alliance are safeguarded through such engagements, these activities have become an integral component of NATO's contemporary identity. By adopting a comprehensive approach to crisis management, NATO has strengthened its partnerships with civilian actors — including non-governmental organisations and local stakeholders — and has concentrated its efforts on several key areas of engagement: cooperation with external actors, planning and conduct of operations, lessons learned, training, education and exercises and public messaging (Crisis Management, NATO, 2025).

Alongside a range of peace support operations, NATO's crisis management efforts also encompass the provision of assistance to civilian populations affected by disasters resulting from human, natural, or technological causes. This aspect of NATO's activity, which has been increasingly prominent over the past few decades, lends credence to the Alliance's assertion that it has, in essence, always functioned as a security community, framing its contemporary transformation as a "return to the roots" (Ciuta, 2002, p. 42). As early as the 1950s, NATO began developing measures aimed at protecting civilians in the event of a nuclear attack; however, member states soon recognised that these measures could also be effectively employed in responding to humanitarian crises, as well as natural and technological disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and industrial accidents. Detailed procedures for coordination among NATO member states in the event of a disaster were subsequently developed as early as 1958. Since 1995, these procedures have also been extended to include NATO's partner countries (Crisis Management, NATO, 2025).

3. NATO and the Provision of Assistance in Cases of Natural Disasters

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been actively engaged in a wide array of crisis management operations, encompassing both military and civilian crises. Nevertheless, given its decades-long focus on military affairs and the comparatively higher level of development of its military component, this aspect continues to represent a unique value added by NATO, even within the context of civilian operations. In addition to its military capabilities, NATO's contribution lies significantly in its coordinating function, which is widely regarded as an asset. This advantage stems not only from the Alliance's extensive experience and organisational capacity but also from the fact that it brings together virtually all Western nations, which collectively command substantial military, economic and political power (Roper, 1999, p. 57). Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that only a limited number of member states possess the capacity to independently and consistently deliver substantial assistance rapidly to remote and affected areas. Hence, NATO improves the speed and efficiency of assistance

to victims of humanitarian crises (Jacuch, 2019, p. 78). In such instances, NATO assumes a pivotal role in harnessing and coordinating the collective capabilities of its member states—resources which, in isolation, would not be readily deployable in a coherent or sustained manner during complex and prolonged crises. NATO's coordinating role is deemed beneficial not only for the recipient country but also for the United Nations, as it enables engagement with a single, coherent actor rather than multiple, potentially fragmented interlocutors (Jochems, 2006).

In the context of disaster relief operations, which fall within the domain of civilian crisis management, NATO stands out as a key actor whose military capabilities, coupled with its robust organisational and coordination capacity, constitute a significant contribution to the broader network of stakeholders engaged in responding to complex humanitarian emergencies such as natural disasters. In this regard, as early as 1998, NATO established the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Unit as mechanisms for coordinating assistance and support to member and partner countries affected by disasters. The EADRCC is also mandated to assist the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA). Since its inception, the EADRCC has regularly conducted exercises aimed at fostering interoperability between military and civilian first responders, enabling them to operate jointly in the aftermath of disasters, notwithstanding differences in protocols and operational cultures. The Centre has been instrumental in coordinating relief efforts across a broad spectrum of natural emergencies, including severe snowfalls, floods, wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, and public health crises such as the Ebola and H1N1 outbreaks (NATO, EADRCC Operations, 2015).

NATO also plays a pivotal role in enhancing the preparedness of the civilian components of its member states, thereby strengthening the overall societal and state resilience required to function effectively in the face of both civil emergencies and crises stemming from military threats. Given that the transport of troops and military equipment relies heavily on civilian infrastructure, NATO seeks to ensure that, in times of crisis, member states maintain the continuity of government and essential public services, the uninterrupted supply of energy, food and water, as well as the effective functioning of telecommunications, internet networks and transport systems. Furthermore, it emphasises the necessity of national capacities to manage uncontrolled population movements and mass casualties (NATO Civil Preparedness, 2024). NATO has incorporated these elements of societal and state resilience into its emergency management exercises to train the responses of Allies and partners to a broad range of crisis scenarios.

The North Atlantic Council makes decisions regarding NATO's involvement in crisis response on a case-by-case basis through consensus. Such decisions are grounded in Article 4 of the Washington Treaty, which entitles any member state to initiate consultations and discussions on matters of concern. Participation is determined following a formal request by an international organisation or a state facing a crisis, and requests for assistance are also being submitted by countries "out of area".

3.1. NATO's Assistance during the 2014 Flood Emergency in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The heavy rainfall that struck Bosnia and Herzegovina in May 2014 led to major river overflows, resulting in large-scale flooding across the northeastern and central regions of the country. The areas affected included Tuzla Canton, Sarajevo, Zenica-Doboj, the Brčko District, and the Republika Srpska. This natural disaster affected approximately one-quarter of the country's territory and around one million residents, accounting for 27% of the national population (European Commission, IPA II, 2014).

The prolonged rainfall that led to the flooding created a severe crisis, threatening to culminate in a full-scale humanitarian disaster. Numerous roads were rendered impassable and bridges destroyed, leaving certain areas completely cut off and making the delivery of aid to those regions extremely difficult, if not impossible. In addition, the floods triggered approximately 5,000 landslides, leaving parts of the country without electricity, clean water, or mobile phone coverage. Public services, the local economy, and agricultural activities were brought to a standstill, and instances of infectious diseases began to emerge. According to official statistics, 25 persons died as a result of the disaster. At its peak, 49,822 persons took refuge in either official or alternative private accommodations (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, 2014, p. 16).

A crisis of such magnitude necessitated the involvement of the international community. On 15 May, two days after the onset of the floods, the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted a formal re-

quest for assistance to the EU's Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC), the principal operational body of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, operating under the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) of the European Commission (European Commission, Echo Joint Assessment Report, June 6, 2014, p. 7). Requests for assistance were also addressed to other key actors in the humanitarian field, including UN agencies, which later implemented the EU Floods Recovery Programme funded by the European Union and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (IOM, 2025)

In addition to the traditionally recognised humanitarian actors, Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted a formal request for assistance to NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) on 15 May 2014. The request emphasised that all available national assets had been fully engaged in addressing the consequences of the natural disaster and that supplementary resources were urgently required to facilitate the evacuation of the affected population. The request specifically called for the deployment of five helicopters, complete with crews and the necessary evacuation equipment, with the capability to operate during night-time hours, as well as the provision of as many motorboats as possible (EADRCC Urgent Disaster Assistance Request Bosnia and Herzegovina – Floods, OPS(EADRCC) (2014)0019). NATO approved the request, which included the deployment of a Rapid Reaction Team comprising four civilian experts from the Civil Emergency Planning (CEP) groups, along with one member of the International Staff (EADRCC Situation Report No. 10, July 22, 2014).

Over more than two months, during which NATO's assistance operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was active, the Alliance coordinated humanitarian relief provided by twenty-one NATO and partner countries. This effort involved numerous governmental and non-governmental organisations, which, through the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), provided financial aid, humanitarian supplies, drinking water, food, medical assistance, shelter, personnel, and other resources. As part of this comprehensive response, NATO deployed a team of civilian experts from Germany, Finland and the United States to support damage assessment, logistics and recovery coordination. In addition, the United States, via the European Command (EUCOM), provided field vehicles, pumps and other equipment valued at \$700,000 to the Civil Protection Authority of Republika Srpska (Sarajevo Times, May 20, 2014).

About this operation and NATO's broader partnership with Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Alliance emphasised that its ultimate objective is "improving the everyday lives of the people of this country, peace and stability" (NATO, February 2, 2017) and that "it is not all about defence per se, it is about areas where the NATO alliance can help with problems that you have to maintain your society, to maintain your economy and to maintain the survival of your people, in this case against a natural catastrophe" (NATO, May 29, 2017). Following the experience of assisting during the 2014 floods, NATO set out to work jointly with Bosnia and Herzegovina to strengthen its capacity to respond to natural disasters. With this aim in mind, a joint field exercise (the seventeenth of its kind) was held on 25 September 2017 in Tuzla. Organised by the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), the event brought together disaster response actors and reflected the "real value of NATO's network of partnerships" (NATO, September 25, 2017). The exercise activities were based on a scenario that included floods, an earthquake, landslides and chemical incidents affecting the population and critical infrastructure in Tuzla canton. A wide range of relief operations included water rescue, urban search and rescue, medical/paramedical teams, and Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear (CBRN) protection, as well as decontamination teams (NATO (September 24–28, 2017).

3.2. NATO Assistance during the 2017 Wildfires in Montenegro

The wildfires that broke out on the Luštica Peninsula on July 16, 2017, posed a serious threat to the safety of hundreds of residents living in the area. The rapid spread of the fires necessitated their evacuation. Although local and national resources were mobilised, they proved insufficient to contain the disaster, which was exacerbated by strong winds. The uncontrolled blaze affected the municipalities of Herceg Novi, Tivat, and Kotor and was also active in Podgorica, Cetinje, Danilovgrad, Nikšić, and Bar. Due to extremely high temperatures, strong winds, and the challenging terrain, national capacities came under considerable strain, creating the need for international assistance.

The Directorate for Emergency Situations of the Ministry of the Interior of Montenegro promptly submitted a request for international assistance through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Additionally, a request

was sent once again to NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) on July 17, 2017. Montenegro had the opportunity to utilise the Alliance's civil protection mechanisms during this natural disaster for the first time as a newly admitted NATO member (having attained full membership on 5 June 2017). The request was approved, and the relief operation continued until 25 July 2017, when the Ministry of the Interior of Montenegro officially notified the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) that the request for assistance had been formally closed. Before even becoming a member, Montenegro also requested international assistance from this body following floods in December 2010 and heavy snowfall in February 2012, and NATO members and partners responded positively to Montenegro's urgent needs and provided assistance.

During the operation, NATO coordinated the provision of assistance from several countries: Ukraine supplied a firefighting aeroplane; Switzerland contributed a multipurpose helicopter Super Puma; Bulgaria, through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, provided an MI-17 helicopter; Israel dispatched two agricultural aircraft and landed carrying 11 team members; and Croatia deployed two Canadair aircraft which assisted in the border area between Croatia and Montenegro on 20 and 21 July (EADRCC, July 25, 2017). In addition to coordinating international assistance, NATO also supported efforts in information management, needs assessment, and the exchange of best practices, which contributed to a more effective response on the ground. This made cooperation between NATO structures and Montenegrin institutions, such as the Directorate for Emergency Situations and the Ministry of the Interior, further strengthened during this crisis period. The Government of Montenegro expressed its gratitude to NATO and its partner countries for the swift reaction and assistance of its allies, stating that Montenegro would appreciate it (Vijesti, July 20, 2017). Also, NATO itself deemed that cooperation had yielded tangible and positive outcomes, as the improved expertise to assess and predict possible developments in the situation and improve communication with, first, neighbouring countries that are the closest and can deliver help the urgent possible and then, if necessary, with many countries involved in EADRCC mechanism with capacities to help immediately (Vijesti, October 1, 2017).

The NATO Secretary General emphasised that the rapid mobilisation of assistance within just a few hours demonstrated that NATO stands by its member states, stating, "This is what Euro-Atlantic solidarity is all about" (NATO, July 19, 2017). NATO's engagement in responding to crises induced by natural disasters, such as wildfires, which represent a recurrent and escalating threat in numerous regions globally, should not be viewed as anomalous. Instead, it reflects the Alliance's strategic intent to cultivate capabilities and operational frameworks that not only bolster its core security objectives but also contribute to the broader resilience and well-being of its member states and partners, as NATO Deputy Secretary General stressed at the Belgrade Security Forum Discussion in 2017 regarding Serbia (NATO, October 12, 2017).

NATO's response during the 2017 wildfires underscored the critical importance of civil protection mechanisms and multilateral solidarity in managing crises across the Western Balkans. Notably, a team from Montenegro participated in the NATO exercise "Bosnia and Herzegovina 2017", which was particularly relevant given the recent experiences of both Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as other countries in the region, with natural disasters. Beyond the provision of situational assistance, NATO's engagement in crisis management activities thus yields broader, long-term benefits, including enhanced inter-state cooperation and the strengthening of societal resilience among the citizens of the Western Balkans in times of crisis.

4. Conclusion

With the changing nature of security threats and the disappearance of the principal rationale for NATO's post-Cold War engagement, the Alliance has undergone a process of transformation. This transformation has involved both a "return to basics" and the development of a distinct form of Euro-Atlantic security community. In this context, since the end of the Cold War, NATO has pursued the horizontal development of this security community through enlargement, as well as its vertical deepening by adopting new objectives, roles, and activities.

Given the broad range of new tasks and roles NATO performs today, this paper aims to demonstrate that the Alliance's role identity has evolved beyond its core and traditionally exclusive role as a collective defence actor. Instead, it increasingly encompasses a variety of new roles that have shaped NATO's practice over recent decades. Among the most prominent post-Cold War activities are crisis management operations, which extend

not only to the military but also to civilian contexts, often stemming from diverse causes. Particular attention is devoted to natural disaster-related crises, as NATO has so far engaged in approximately sixty such operations. This paper presents two case studies of NATO's involvement in natural disaster response, both concerning the strategically significant Western Balkans region: the 2014 floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the 2017 wildfires in Montenegro.

NATO's involvement in disaster response operations, as demonstrated during the 2014 floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the 2017 wildfires in Montenegro, reflects a growing strategic emphasis on civil preparedness and resilience within the Alliance, as well as "out of area". While traditionally perceived as a collective defence organisation, NATO's active role as a coordinator of humanitarian assistance, facilitating multinational cooperation and supporting national capacities in times of natural disasters illustrates its evolving security agenda. These operations highlight the added value of NATO's institutional mechanisms, such as the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), which effectively mobilises both military and civilian assets in support of member and partner states. Despite concerns that the involvement of military actors in the humanitarian domain could undermine the perceived neutrality and credibility of humanitarian missions, NATO's engagement in disaster response has, in several instances, demonstrated the potential for constructive civil-military cooperation. Particularly in contexts where national capacities are overstretched, the swift mobilisation of NATO assets has not only filled critical operational gaps but also complemented the efforts of traditional humanitarian actors. The positive reception and official acknowledgements from national authorities underscore the relevance of NATO's crisis response capabilities in fostering regional stability, strengthening trust, and promoting Euro-Atlantic solidarity. As such, NATO's engagement in disaster response serves not only an operational function but also contributes to long-term strategic objectives, including resilience building, regional integration, and enhanced interoperability.

It may be concluded that NATO's engagement in disaster response operations related to natural hazards constitutes a domain in which member states, partner countries, as well as international and non-governmental organisations traditionally involved in civilian crisis management increasingly recognise the Alliance as a relevant actor. This perception is primarily attributed to NATO's ability to provide substantial logistical, material, and coordination support. While the Alliance does not position this role as its principal task, nor does it aspire to dominate the field of natural disaster response, such activities nonetheless form an integral component of NATO's evolving post-Cold War identity. In this context, disaster relief efforts contribute not only to enhancing operational cooperation but also to upholding and promoting the democratic values that underpin the Alliance's foundational purpose.

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