Crises in the Atlantic Alliance. Affect and Relations among NATO Members

EZNACK GUZIEJKO, Lucile Annie

Abstract

Through a theoretical and empirical examination of the 1956 Suez Crisis, the 1966 NATO crisis, and the 2003 Iraq crisis, Eznack explores the connections between affect and emotion, the occurrence of crises, and the repair of those crises in close allies' relationships. This book constructs a new history and theory of the workings of alliances and provides a new perspective on alliances and friendly relations among states.
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In 2003, the governments of France and the United States clashed bitterly over the issue of Iraq. This transatlantic crisis, which involved strong language and harsh accusations, particularly on the American side, was accompanied by equally fervent proclamations of each country’s long and continued closeness to the other. This combination of two apparently opposite attitudes was maintained for months, from the run-up to the Iraq War to the G-8 meeting some months later. Moreover, this was not the only episode of crisis between two members of the Atlantic alliance during which such paradoxical reactions were simultaneously displayed. The same pattern had also occurred on numerous occasions in the past, and not only between France and the United States. Yet, such episodes are not playacting, and allies often engage in actions that are deliberately and expressly harmful to each other during such crises. Nonetheless, the negative attitudes triggered by such crises are invariably associated with positive ones, emphasizing the importance of, and the value attached to, the two countries’ relationship, as well as the need to achieve relational repair, that is, the need to overcome the damage to these ties that resulted from the crisis.

This phenomenon is characteristic of the more general puzzle represented by the Atlantic alliance. Indeed, the Atlantic alliance is peculiar not only because of its length and the fact that it survived both the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the common enemy, but also because of the tumultuous nature of its history. Since its creation, the Atlantic alliance has been marked by a series of disagreements and crises among its members. As Kaplan notes, “No year in the Cold War had passed without revelations of strains between the United States and its European allies; some were minor, others serious.”

Moreover, while the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) did not lead to the alliance’s disintegration, neither did it put an end to the tumultuous nature of the alliance. Members of the Atlantic alliance continued to confront recurrent disagreements, as well as serious clashes. Yet, it celebrated its sixtieth
anniversary in 2009, and none of its members ever withdrew. In fact, even the sharpest clashes among the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members were overcome. What can explain this phenomenon? What is so special about this alliance that not only has it survived the disappearance of the conditions that led to its creation, but also its members regularly engage in and find a way to resolve severe disputes?

The purpose of this book is to offer a series of tools to help solve this puzzle. To do so, this book presents a new perspective on crises in the Atlantic alliance by underlining and explaining the connections that exist between affect, crises, and relational repair in friendly interstate relations. Moreover, through its specific focus on both the existence and the role of affect within the Atlantic alliance, this book also contributes to the development of a theory of affect in international politics.

More specifically, the theoretical contribution of this book is based on three central arguments. First, affect exists within the Atlantic alliance, in the form of a relatively high degree of attachment of NATO members to the alliance as a whole, as well as, for some members, to their bilateral relationships within the alliance. This affective charge of the alliance constrains these countries’ behavior and shapes their expectations of each other’s behavior. Second, affect triggers crises among alliance members when these behavioral expectations are violated, that is, when the conduct of one or more NATO members puts into question the overall value of the alliance and/or of these countries’ bilateral ties with their allies. In other words, NATO members’ attachments to the alliance, and/or their bilateral relationships within it, lead to strong negative emotional reactions when the object of their attachment is negatively affected by the behavior of one or several members. These negative emotions generally involve a degradation of the alliance as a whole and/or the ties binding the countries concerned. Yet, affect also triggers the need to overcome such degradation, that is, the need to achieve relational repair—and this is the third claim of the book. This need enhances the countries’ willingness to make efforts at resolving the crisis with the minimum possible damage to their relationships, and to the alliance as a whole. As I show in chapters 3, 4, and 5, although NATO members may not always manage to fully repair their relationships, their efforts toward this goal do generally have a positive effect on the evolution of the ties that bind them.

Hence, the aim of this book is not to present another account of transatlantic crises or of the evolution of the Atlantic alliance over time. Instead, by providing clues as to how to solve the Atlantic alliance puzzle, and more particularly by studying the connections that exist between affect, crises, and repair within the Atlantic alliance, this book provides an original and significant complement to, and even at times a revision
of, existing knowledge on the Atlantic alliance and transatlantic crises, as well as friendly interstate relations more generally. The Atlantic alliance and transatlantic relations not only offer the perfect framework to develop a theory of affect in friendly interstate relations, but also are more generally the topic of an extensive literature which has yet to explain all aspects regarding the peculiarity of the alliance. Also, the context of crises among NATO members is particularly appropriate for observation and analysis of both the existence and impact of affect in these types of relationships. As Crawford notes, “Even though emotions are ubiquitous, they are most likely to be articulated and noticed in a crisis.”

Both the theoretical and empirical contributions of this book are also part of a growing recognition that affect, or emotions, is an important topic in international relations. Yet, the role of affect in international politics is still undertheorized and empirically underdeveloped. By focusing on the concept of affect and how it impacts on allies’ perceptions and behavior, and by providing the reader with rich empirical illustrations, thus showing how the theoretical claims defended here transform into practices in the real world of international relations, this book contributes to filling an important gap in the study of international politics.

The originality and added value of this book also come from the interdisciplinary spirit of its theoretical foundations. While the main focus of this work is interstate behavior at the international level, some of the theoretical claims presented and then empirically illustrated here were largely inspired by research in sociology and social psychology on the role of emotion in social relations more generally. In particular, the literature on close relationships such as friendship but also kinship and romantic affinity offers a well-established set of propositions regarding the connections between affect, crises, and relational repair that political scientists and international relations’ scholars tend to overlook. This is because they don’t see them as applicable or pertinent to the study of interstate relations. Yet, as I argue in Chapter 1, despite the ontological differences that exist between states and individual human beings, the adaptation of results from research in sociology and social psychology on the role of affect in interpersonal relations to the study of relationships at the international level sheds valuable light on the behavior of countries in the context of friendly interstate relations.

**The Atlantic Alliance Puzzle**

As already mentioned, the Atlantic alliance is characterized by its survival, despite the disappearance of the conditions that led to its creation (i.e., the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union), and
by the numerous disagreements and sometimes serious clashes that some of its members have confronted throughout its history.

The issues of burden sharing and the overwhelming role of the United States within the alliance are among the most-cited examples of recurrent disagreements among NATO members. The considerable influence of the United States, both in terms of its responsibility to protect its allies and in terms of its weight within the alliance’s institutions, caused significant displeasure not only among other NATO members, but also in Washington. The United States was also regularly blamed for not consulting enough its allies on matters directly affecting their security, such as during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and also during the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army in 1968. NATO members also questioned Washington’s commitment to protect them, particularly at times when the balance between NATO and Soviet forces seemed or threatened to be disrupted in favor of the latter.

The Cold War was also the theater of major crises among members of the Atlantic alliance, which seriously endangered the ties binding the countries concerned. The Suez crisis of 1956, for instance, was a particularly bitter clash between France and Britain, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other. Other episodes of crisis followed, such as that provoked by the withdrawal of France from the Atlantic alliance’s integrated military structures in 1966 and the 1973-74 crisis over the Middle East that opposed the United States and its European allies.

However, none of these disputes has led to the end of the alliance or the withdrawal of any of its members. Moreover, contrary to many pessimistic predictions, the Atlantic alliance did not disappear when the common enemy, that is, the Soviet Union, disintegrated in the early 1990s. Indeed, according to balance of power and balance of threat theories, alliances are unlikely to survive the disappearance of the conditions leading to their creation. In fact, the Atlantic alliance proved capable of evolution and adaptation to the changes that took place on the international scene after 1949, and especially after the end of the Cold War. As Lord Robertson writes, “The challenges have changed. So has NATO.”

Hence, the Atlantic alliance not only survived, but also expanded, both in size and in the scope of its missions. Its members’ sense of unity and solidarity did not evaporate in the post–Cold War security environment, as exemplified by the decision to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the very first time in 2001 in response to the terrorist attacks on US territory. However, new disputes and issues of disagreement have arisen since the end of the Cold War. The United States was criticized by its European allies for its unilateralism, already in existence under President Clinton, as well as later on under President George W. Bush, on issues such as the Kyoto Protocol, the International
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Criminal Court, or trade with Iran for instance. The Yugoslav crisis, which started with the debate over recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991-1992 and then extended to disagreements about intervention in the Bosnian crisis, showed the inability of the allies to agree on a common position and course of action in a crisis situation. It was soon followed by sharp disagreements during the Kosovo campaign in 1999 over information sharing and distribution of forces and command. The issue of burden sharing and the capabilities gap between the United States and its European allies resurfaced during the Kosovo crisis, leading to the development of a Defense Capabilities Initiative, aimed at tackling this issue.

The invocation of Article 5 and the solidarity evinced after September 11, 2001, were quickly followed by European disappointment at the US decision to intervene in Afghanistan outside of NATO’s framework. Yet, the real crisis started a year later, around the issue of war in Iraq. France’s and Germany’s opposition to the United Nations Security Council’s authorization of the Iraq War and their initial refusal, along with Belgium, to provide security assistance to Turkey under the NATO framework in case of a war in Iraq was a severe blow to the alliance.

Yet, each time, even the sharpest clashes were overcome. Despite all these aforementioned events, and the continued strains within the alliance caused by the war in Afghanistan, it celebrated its sixtieth anniversary in 2009. The co-occurrence of both harsh accusations and fervent proclamations of closeness during crises among NATO members, mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, shows how traditional explanations for both the endurance of the alliance and the resolution of disputes within it, based on the primacy of strategic and material interests, might be misleading, or at best incomplete, in that they cannot fully account for the paradoxical nature of these countries’ reactions.

A central aim of this book is thus to uncover the peculiarity of the Atlantic alliance, and of its members’ relationships, that lies behind this phenomenon. Hence, although each specific crisis involves unique circumstances, the goal here is to move away from individual, case-specific explanations, so as to offer a broader picture of the dynamics that lie behind the puzzle represented by the Atlantic alliance. I propose to do so by introducing the concept of affect and analyzing its impact on states’ actions and perceptions in the context of friendly interstate relations.

ADDING AFFECT TO THE PICTURE

By adding affect to the picture, this book points toward the need to look at the Atlantic alliance puzzle from a different angle, and thus to adopt a
different perspective on the dynamics of friendly interstate relations more generally.

Authors from different theoretical perspectives have attempted to explain the endurance of the Atlantic alliance, referring to its high degree of institutionalization, the strategic interests of the United States and/or its European members, or their high level of shared values and norms and the willingness to spread these throughout Central and Eastern European countries. However, the notions of affect and attachment to the alliance or to specific bilateral relationships within it are generally not developed as such, as if nonexistent or at best irrelevant for understanding the persistence of the alliance. My argument is that affect does matter, and that not taking it into account leaves part of the picture unexplained. Simply put, the strength of NATO members’ attachments to the alliance, as well as to some of their bilateral relationships within it, is a key factor explaining its duration. These relatively strong attachments come from a combination of instrumental and more affectively charged factors in these countries’ evaluation of the alliance as a whole and/or their bilateral ties within it. Hence, because the significance and value they attribute to the alliance goes beyond material and/or strategic considerations, their attachments to it are relatively independent of potential fluctuations in terms of material and/or strategic interests due to changing international circumstances.

Yet, this particular impact of affect explains only part of the Atlantic alliance puzzle: if NATO members are strongly attached to the alliance as well as to some of their bilateral ties within it, how to explain the regular disputes taking place? Most importantly, why do alliance members sometimes let their disagreements transform into crises, with strong reproaches and counterreproaches exchanged? In other words, why take the risk of endangering the alliance and/or the ties that they so greatly value?

Here again, affect helps to answer these questions. Indeed, scholars tend to misunderstand allies’ actions and reactions in times of crisis among them, and this despite the existence of an extensive literature on alliances in general and on transatlantic relations and transatlantic crises in particular. Scholars generally see the Atlantic alliance or some of its members’ relationships as falling apart each time there is a crisis among them. Such crises are viewed as symptoms of either preexisting problems among these countries or a lack of shared values. More generally, the existing literature lacks theoretical explanations for both the persistence of the Atlantic alliance over time and the occurrence of serious crises among its members.

As I argue here, adding affect to the picture helps to uncover the mechanisms behind this phenomenon. Indeed, by underlining the existence of
affect within the Atlantic alliance and its impact on NATO members’ conduct vis-à-vis each other, I show how crises among these countries are signals of the strength, and not of the weakness, of their relationships.\(^{31}\) In what may appear as paradoxical or counterintuitive at first, it is in fact these countries’ attachments to their ties and to the alliance as a whole, rather than the erosion of these ties, that sometimes triggers episodes of crisis among them. Indeed, while these attachments tend to constrain NATO members’ behavior and shape their expectations of each other’s behavior, they can also act as an exacerbating factor in certain circumstances, transforming what could have been simple disagreements or disputes into severe clashes.\(^{32}\) Hence, the presence of positive affect in interstate relations is not necessarily synonymous with gentle or smooth exchanges, characterized by uneventful interactions or the quick and easy resolution of any issue of disagreement among the countries concerned. In fact, affect, even when it is positive, may trigger passionate reactions when one or several countries perceive that the object of their attachment—here, the Atlantic alliance as a whole or the quality of a specific bilateral relationship within it—is endangered.\(^{33}\) Affect thus helps to explain the occurrence of crises among members of the Atlantic alliance.

Moreover, focusing on the presence and impact of affect within the Atlantic alliance also helps to uncover another understudied concept at the level of international relations, and which is key to fully solving the Atlantic alliance puzzle: the concept of relational repair. Indeed, to explain the persistence of the Atlantic alliance not only despite the disappearance of the conditions that led to its creation, but also despite the several crises occurring among its members, it is necessary to account for the resolution of such crises, as they have the potential to seriously endanger the ties binding the countries concerned and the alliance as a whole. Hence, the very fact that the Atlantic alliance is still alive and well implies that its members have managed to overcome different crises and the deterioration of ties resulting from them. In other words, they have achieved relational repair.

Here again, affect plays a central role. While affect triggers the passionate reactions leading to crises in the first place, it also enhances the need to get past these crises as quickly as possible, and with the least relational damage possible. Because these countries attach great value to their relationships, as well as to the alliance as a whole, they do not want to risk seeing them permanently damaged. Of course, other factors, including sometimes crucial material and/or strategic interests, are at play in explaining the need to achieve relational repair after a crisis. Yet, affect plays a key role in explaining not only the reasons why NATO members are generally eager to achieve relational repair, but also how they behave
during crises and what such a goal entails in terms of costs and sometimes even sacrifices from them.

Indeed, as scholars overlook the presence and impact of affect in interstate relations, they tend to assume that, because of prevailing strategic or material interests, the relational damage caused by such crises among NATO members will eventually be repaired. Officials from the countries concerned will soon realize that they cannot be angry at each other forever, and with the passing of time and maybe some leadership turnover, their relationship will come back to what it was before the crisis. But a closer look at the interactions taking place between members of the Atlantic alliance during such crises shows that, in fact, these countries do not wait to seek relational repair between them. As the aforementioned display of opposite sentiments by France and the United States during the Iraq crisis shows, close allies never act as if their relationship was less important or less valued because of the crisis, or as if they could accept any long-term damage to it. In fact, relational repair processes start at the same time as the disputes themselves.

However, the fact that these countries are willing to achieve relational repair does not mean that it will happen automatically or even smoothly. Relational repair processes generally require efforts and even sacrifices from the countries concerned. Yet, even if these countries do not manage to achieve full relational repair, that is, even if their relationships never fully recover from crises and the accompanying deterioration of ties, their willingness to reach this goal and the efforts they make toward it generally do have some positive effect on the evolution of their relationships, and on the alliance as a whole.

Adding affect to the picture helps to explain the persistence of the Atlantic alliance (despite the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the common enemy) and the occurrence of crises among its members as two distinct phenomena. However, and more importantly, affect also helps to explain the persistence of the Atlantic alliance despite these crises. Hence by underlining and explaining the connections that exist between affect, crises, and relational repair in friendly interstate relations, this book offers a clue to solving the puzzle represented by the peculiar history of this alliance.

However, as I have argued elsewhere, the arguments presented here do not aim to minimize the significance of material and/or strategic interests in international relations. The introduction of and focus on affect does not imply a rejection of any other explanations for the persistence of the Atlantic alliance over time or the occurrence and resolution of crises among its members. I rather treat these existing explanations as incomplete, and I show how adding affect to the picture helps to enhance our
understanding of the phenomena under study. I develop the view that the traditional motives of satisfaction vis-à-vis friendly interstate relations such as geopolitical interests, security benefits, or intense interactions and cooperation that NATO members derive from the alliance and/or from their bilateral relationships within it can all be considered as factors explaining the development of affect within the Atlantic alliance. Yet, other more affectively charged factors, such as the memories of wars fought together or a sense of belonging and common identity, should also be taken into account, as they play an important role in these countries’ evaluation of the alliance and of the quality of the ties that bind them. It is the combination of these two types of factors that explains the strength of a particular country’s attachment to the alliance or a specific bilateral relationship within it.

My arguments also do not imply that NATO members have sentiments such as love toward each other. Affect as understood here deals with the extent to which, and the reasons why, a country values a particular institution or group of countries, and/or the particular quality of the ties that bind it to another member of this group. Britain and the United States are strongly attached to their relationship; but this does not necessarily mean that they love each other. It means that the value they attribute to the characteristics of this relationship, and what it represents for them and on the international scene more generally, is both very high and derived not solely from instrumental factors, but also from more affective ones. They view the ties that bind them as unique and superior to the ones they enjoy with other countries, including other allies with whom they enjoy relatively less affectively charged relationships.

In this sense, the affect I am focusing on here is oriented toward the relationship itself, rather than the particular country at the other end of this relationship. I do not mean that Britain and the United States cannot be said to be attached to each other, in addition to their attachment to their relationship. It is simply not the type of affect I am interested in here. However, these two types of attachment may be related—for example, country A’s attachment to its ties with country B may come in part from country A’s attachment to country B. Alternatively, the strength of country A’s attachment to its relationship with country B may have a positive effect on how country A perceives country B, and thus on the strength of country A’s attachment to country B. However, a connection between these two types of attachment does not always exist. One can imagine a situation in which country A is strongly attached to country B, but dislikes the characteristics of its relationship with country B, because of its conflictual nature or because country A perceives a certain imbalance between its own efforts toward this relationship and those of
country B. The reverse is also true in the sense that a country may be strongly attached to its relationship with another country, without being as strongly attached to this particular country taken individually.

**Structure of the Book**

In the first part of the book (chapters 1 and 2), I develop the theoretical claims presented here, which are aimed at solving the Atlantic alliance puzzle. In the second part (chapters 3, 4, and 5), I illustrate these claims through the analysis of three episodes of crisis among members of the Atlantic alliance: the Suez crisis of 1956, the crisis triggered by the withdrawal of France from the alliance’s integrated military structure in 1966, and the 2003 Iraq crisis.

Chapter 1 starts with a discussion of affect itself and its centrality to social relations at the level of individuals. I then argue that the same is true for interstate relations, thus justifying the need to take affect into consideration for the study of states’ actions and interactions on the international scene. I also present recent attempts at doing so in the international relations literature. In the second part of this chapter, I develop the argument that affect exists within the Atlantic alliance, through the strength of its members’ attachments to the alliance as a whole as well as, for some of them, to the special quality of their bilateral ties within it.

Chapter 2 makes a direct link between the affective dimension of the Atlantic alliance and some of its members’ relationships and the occurrence of crises among them. I start by discussing the ways in which affect constrains allies’ behaviors and shapes their expectations of each others’ conduct. I develop in particular the notion of norms of appropriate behavior for alliance partners in their dealings toward each other. Applying some of the findings of research in sociology and social psychology on crises among individuals within close relationships, such as couples or close friends, I then argue that crises among members of the Atlantic alliance are triggered by the violation of one or several of these norms of appropriate behavior, and the offended country’s perception that such a violation puts into question the overall quality of both the alliance as a whole and the ties that bind it to the offending country.

In other words, I show how attachments to a particular object (e.g., an alliance or a bilateral relationship) can trigger emotional reactions to stimulus events that affect this object. I also introduce the concept of relational repair; I establish how affect impacts on the resolution of crises among NATO members by enhancing the need to get past them, that is, to achieve relational repair. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, I discuss the choice of cases of crisis among NATO members that I develop in
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