RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ups and Downs of NATO-Russia Relations: a Cognitivist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article explains the recursive tendency to develop inimical relations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia by pointing at the incompatibility of their strategic cultures—here understood as broad cognitive frameworks subsuming an actor's self-perception, worldview, and preferred way to use force. NATO and Russia have defined their roles in world politics, decoded the other's intentions, and undertaken certain practices on the basis of divergent socio-cognitive assumptions. Incompatible strategic cultures bring about clashing grand strategies and generate conflictual relations. The two actors think differently and therefore read and react to a same situation in divergent ways. As a product of socially-embedded dynamics, NATO-Russia enmity cannot be easily overcome - if not in the long term and via sustained interaction. After presenting their theoretical framework, the authors reconstruct NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures, and then discuss the Ukraine crisis as a case study.

KEYWORDS: NATO; Russia; strategic culture; self-perception; worldviews.

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1. NATO-Russia Deteriorating Relations: Diverging Interests or Cognitive Dissonances?

The destinies of NATO and Russia have been intertwined since the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. As NATO's first Secretary General famously put it, the Alliance aimed "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down". The first of these tasks was the primary, constitutive *raison d'être* of NATO: it was because of the need to deter a Soviet attack on the Allies that the continued presence of the US in Europe was justifiable and the rearmament of (West) Germany legitimised. Collective territorial defence constituted the kernel of the Washington Treaty (article V) and had a clear anti-Soviet connotation,[1] just as the creation of the Warsaw Pact (1955) had clear anti-West aims.

The end of bipolarity and the dissolution of the Soviet Union represented a systemic change with huge implications. Russia lost its empire and NATO its main reason for being. This offered both actors a chance (or dictated the necessity) to transform their international roles and redraw amity-enmity lines. The process of NATO's renewal proceeded along three main strategic axes: helping stabilise the post-Soviet space; participating in conflict resolution at global level; and rethinking the deterrence posture. A similar – even more complex – process of self-redefinition occurred on Russia's side. Out of fear to be excluded from the new European security architecture, in the early 1990s shifts in Moscow's official rhetoric signalled clearly a Westward turn. Former Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev declared: "Values common to all mankind dominate the century. Personal freedom and prosperity, and the protection and development of the human being will be one of the cornerstones of international security" and of Russia's foreign policy (Kozyrev 1992, pp. 292-293). Words unthinkable until a couple of years before.

These changes promised to reshape East-West relations in a less hostile, more cooperative way - as the early 1990s seemed to confirm. Moscow joined the

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[1] The Washington Treaty does not specify an enemy explicitly (neither did NATO's first Strategic Concepts of 1949 and 1953). However, NATO's 1957 Strategic Concept detailed the Soviet threat at length. We are grateful to Prof Mark Webber for pointing us to this document.

North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) since their inception (1991, 1994), and NATO-Russia relationship was granted a special status.[2] In 1994 Moscow also participated in the contact group for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), sitting with the West in the attempt to grant peace in the Balkans. NATO and Russia capitalised these positive developments by establishing in 1997 the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), a shared platform for high level consultations and comprehensive bilateral cooperation in the military-strategic field.

However, the 'honeymoon' did not last long. NATO's formal invitation of Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to join its ranks in 1997 (later realised in 1999) and the allied bombing campaign against Serbia at the turn of the millennium triggered bitter Russian reactions. Reluctant to accept NATO expansion and decisively opposing the military intervention in the Balkans, Moscow symbolically withdrew from the PJC. The Joint Council reopened shortly after but the quality of NATO-Russia relations never recovered totally. From that moment and notwithstanding a few occasions of *détente*, East-West relations followed a slippery downward slope.[3]

9/11 and the perception of Islamic terrorism as a shared global threat brought NATO and Russia together again in Afghanistan and the Mediterranean (with *Operation Active Endeavour*). This cooperative experience led to the establishment in 2002 of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), aimed at promoting joint action in a series of critical areas - e.g., anti-terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, crisis management. But like a will-o'-the-wisp, the momentum of cooperation was ephemeral and vanished quickly. Relations deteriorated with the US invasion of Iraq (2003), NATO's second and broader Eastward enlargement (2004), tensions around the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE - from which Russia withdrew in 2007) and eventually Russia's intervention in Georgia in

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[2] Quite tellingly, the other two countries enjoying a 'Special Relationship' with NATO are Ukraine and Georgia.

[3] Some scholars note that the first real setback in NATO-Russia relations took place before 1997, since the Allies started voicing its first enlargement during the North Atlantic Council of December 1994. In addition, the PJC was born under a bad star and looked at with suspicion by many Russian and Western observers. See: Pouliot 2010; Webber et al. 2012.

2008 after G.W. Bush's call for Georgia's membership in NATO. The Lisbon edition of the NRC (2010) granted respite and led to new cooperation in Afghanistan and Syria, but as early as 2013 the unfolding of the Ukraine crisis created new divisions.

The 'reset' of NATO-Russia relations has fallen short of expectations and today many commentators even speak about a 'new Cold War' (Sakwa 2008; Legvold 2014). Whether or not one can legitimately draw such historical analogy, without any doubt we find ourselves at the lowest point in relations between NATO and Russia since 1991. Former Secretary General Rasmussen declared that "Russia's aggression to Ukraine was the gravest threat to European security in a generation" (Rasmussen 2014g), and Russian officials often reciprocate by accusing the West of being responsible of many - if not all - the crises of the last 30 years (Rosenberg 2016). Protracted sanctions regimes, the suspension of NATO-Russia cooperation below the Ambassadorial level, frequent Russian violations of the Allies' air-space and domestic processes, as well as NATO's deterrence measures along the Eastern flank (*Baltic Air Policing*, *Enhanced Forward Presence*, *Tailored Forward Presence*) contribute to the permanence of a tense international context.

How shall we read this? What are the causes of the continuous setbacks and recurrent tensions in NATO-Russia relations?

Existing literature in International Relations provides various but ultimately unsatisfactory accounts of NATO-Russia relations. Realist interpretations stress the role of objective constraints, competition for space and resources, and the 'natural desire' for power and prestige. Russia has been framed in these terms more frequently than the Alliance, if no other reason because the latter would be seen as an instrument of US hegemony, rather than an actor in itself (Friedman 2008; Mearsheimer 2014; Trenin 2014; Marshall 2015). However, the pretension to reduce international politics to a series of material dynamics ultimately linked to the goal of survival or great power status is far from satisfactory. NATO expansion cannot be linked to the realist concept of survival in any credible way, and even Russia's actions present only loose links with this ratio. Moscow aspires certainly to great pow-

er status but this cannot explain the full range of its strategic choices - included the seizure of Crimea. While the annexation granted Moscow a pivot in the Black Sea and higher contractual power vis-à-vis the West, it implied also serious backlashes in terms of economy and prestige at the expenses of the long-term generation of power. The inherent tendency of Realism to reduce international actors to "preprogrammed torpedoes" acting on the basis of a universally spread rational self-interest ignores the social, ideational, and institutional dynamics that take place within actors and define (or at least influence) their external behaviour (Katzenstein 1996a, p. 204).

If a pure material, power-oriented analysis is not satisfactory, nor it is a liberal perspective that does not qualify the way in which a liberal ontology (or the lack thereof) provides the cognitive filter through which actors perceive the world. Liberal-cosmopolitan views tend to produce ethnocentric accounts of Russia as an Evil force that triggers conflict with the only goal of undermining democracy and the liberal system of values (Snegovaya 2014; Diamond 2016). The argument is that Russia behaves the way it does because it is an autocratic regime: allegedly, no other information is needed to understand its choices. By the same token, NATO is seen as an incarnation of liberal values and thus a benign force by definition. By dividing the world in two artificial camps (the Good and the Evil) the space for critical analysis and political dialogue shrinks considerably.

In trying to dispense with both these theoretical simplifications, we side with the sociological and constructivist scholarships in International Relations (Wendt 2010; Onuf 2012). We do not deny that material forces may shape actors' behaviour, but believe that they play at best a permissive role. The material structure is not the only layer of reality. The way in which the former is interpreted and exploited depends indeed on the social structure (composed of beliefs and ideas) in which an agent is socialised. Social structure moulds an agent's mindset and ultimately underpins its behaviour. Each actor is equipped with its own peculiar perceptual lenses, which results from the interplay between previous historical experiences and bargains between relevant epistemic communities. There is no universal

rationality but a series of rather different rationalities.

Starting from these premises we explain the recursive tendency to develop inimical relations between NATO and Russia by pointing to the incompatibility of their strategic cultures. NATO and Russia have defined their roles in world politics, decoded the other's intentions, and undertaken certain practices on the basis of divergent socio-cognitive assumptions. Incompatible strategic cultures bring about clashing grand strategies and generate conflictual relations. The two actors think differently and therefore read and react to the same situation in divergent ways. Given opposite strategic cultures, the other's actions are by themselves unconceivable and are either rejected or mis-interpreted on the basis of one's own way of thinking. As a product of socially-embedded dynamics, NATO-Russia enmity cannot be easily overcome - if not in the long term and via sustained interaction.

Our attempt to unveil NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures is informed by an interpretative epistemology and accompanied by a deductive qualitative methodology (della Porta & Keating 2008). In our attempt to understand the actors' views and the meanings they attach to their own and the other's behaviour we look at both discourse and practice (Neumann & Heikka 2005). We examine a range of publicly available official documents (e.g., strategic concepts and doctrines) and speeches (in particular, those of NATO's Secretary Generals, Russian Presidents Medvedev and Putin, and Russia' Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov), as well as the overall strategic posturing. Addressed to both domestic and international audiences and by no means mere rhetorical exercises, documents and speeches give voice to NATO's and Russia's perceptions and reinforce their self-representations. Both types of sources are the products of bargain among Allies or within Russian security elite and as such they reflect the minimum shared views around which it is possible to organise action. Attentive and rich thematic analysis reveals these latent socio-cognitive elements (Braun & Clarke 2006) and sheds light on the strategic cultures of the two actors, helping clarify the reasons and mechanisms behind their enmity.

We firstly present the key tenets of a strategic culture (§2), then we look at the characteristics of NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures through the analysis of

discourses and practices (§3) and finally we show how the Ukraine crisis between NATO and Russia can be read as a result of cognitive dissonances (§4).

2. Strategic Culture: A Socio-cognitive Understanding of Strategic Behaviour

The role of cultural and perceptual factors in the conduction of grand strategy and war has always received some degree of attention, but far less than the more typical aspects of power, material resources, troop organisation, and sheer battle dynamics. Often disguised as 'moral forces', socio-cultural factors linger in the background of classical writings such as those of Thucydides, Clausewitz, and Sun Tzu but do not represent the core of their strategic analyses. During World War II, 'national character studies' posited a direct connection between the strategic behaviour of the Axis powers and their cultural characteristics (Desch 1998; Lantis 2006). However, these studies did not have any meaningful and durable impact on scholarship, rather providing a vaguely racist rhetorical backing of US' sense of moral superiority vis-à-vis the Axis. With the start of the Cold War, rationalist explanations of strategic behaviour almost monopolised security studies, marginalising alternative frameworks (Schelling 1960).

Attention to socio-cultural factors came back to security studies with Jack L. Snyder's "The Soviet Strategic Culture" (1977). The author reconstructed the psyche of the *homo sovieticus* in order to understand whether Moscow could have complied with the new American posture of limited nuclear deterrence. Snyder moved from the assumption that "Soviet leaders and strategists [were] not culture-free, preconception-free" (Snyder 1977, p. 4), but subjects whose decisions were guided by a peculiar way of thinking embedded in their minds as a result of socialisation. As a consequence, Washington should not have expected the Soviets to react to strategic stimuli according to the same logic of US' decision-makers. Snyder's research inspired many scholars to proceed along the same lines, giving rise to a proper scholarship on strategic culture. This scholarship comprises three so-called generations that span the 1980s and the 1990s (Johnston 1995b) and a more recent self-proclaimed fourth generation (Burns & Eltham 2014; Libel 2016, 2018).

Divergencies among the generations on the mechanisms linking culture and behaviour, the sub-components and operationalisation of strategic culture, as well as its causes (Johnston 1995a; Gray 1999; Lantis 2002, 2006; Howlett & Glenn 2005), limited the possibility to build a unified progressive theoretical model (Biehl et al. 2013).

This article does not have the ambition to tackle the inner debate among scholars employing the concept of strategic culture, nor to propose the definitive empirical application of the concept, but simply to show that a light use of the concept as a guide to identify the socio-cognitive roots of strategic behaviour proves to be useful to make sense of general and specific conflict dynamics.

To start with, how do we define the concept? In order to be analytically useful, a concept should display a good balance between its "extension" (the nature and broadness of the phenomenon), and its "intension" (the specific qualities that characterise the phenomenon) (Odgen & Richards 1985, pp. 1-23; Gerring 2001, pp. 39-41). Students of strategic culture have proposed a wide range of definitions, many of which are quite poor if assessed against the aforementioned criteria. In some cases, excessive parsimony resulted in conceptual under-determination, while in other cases the concept extended too much, at the expenses of internal and external coherence. Some (e.g. the famous Johnston's definition, 1995a, p. 36) gave priority to military issues, more than to self-perception, threat assessment, and grand strategy. Moving from these earlier works and building on literature in sociology and political science, we opt for a synthetic - yet encompassing - definition of strategic culture which points to the fact that the strategic culture of an actor is deeply intertwined with his/her self-representation and his/her worldviews and by no means is limited to a set of ideas on how to use force. More precisely, we define strategic culture as a *set of security-related beliefs subsuming an actor's self-perception, worldview, and preferred ways to use force.*[4]

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[4] There are many definitions available of the concept, but we opted for this original and simple one developed by Nicolò Fasola, which has the advantage of providing a light conceptual background clear and coherent enough to employ strategic culture empirically.

On the one hand, this definition is broad enough to be adopted by all generations. On the other hand, we believe it displays a good balance between extension and intension, without being neither excessively parsimonious nor over-deterministic. Moreover, our definition provides a clear indication of the components of strategic culture, thereby supporting validity and operationalisation. We neither confine the concept to the sole military domain, nor reduce it to a mere synonym of political culture or foreign policy. Conversely, we see strategic culture as a group of cognitively engrained orientations held by a collectivity with international agency and linking an actor's identity with its security interests and the forceful means and modalities to achieve them. These components are inter-dependent and equally necessary to depict a strategic culture. Before acting, an agent must *be* - i.e., it must possess an understanding of what it is, what is not, and how the world around it looks like. Cognitive (self-)positioning is pre-condition for action, even in the field of security (Goldstein & Keohane 1993; Katzenstein 1996a, 1996b). Clausewitz hinted at such connection by pointing to a war's *Zweck* (political aim) and *Ziel* (military objective) (Clausewitz 2000, *passim*). The *Zweck* is exogenous to military strategy as such but informs the *Ziel* a priori by providing the political interests which the military effort must serve. Since interests - coherently with our ontological approach - are defined (also by) socio-cultural beliefs, then it is safe to admit that ideational factors such as self-perception and worldviews impact also on the ways to use force (Weldes 1996).

Now let us clarify some of the terms employed above. *Self-perception* indicates the existential narrative of an actor, entailing the core attributes (implicitly or explicitly) attributed to the Self and the difference with respect to the relevant Other(s). Self-perception tells the story of a (collective) actor's self-identification in terms of 'who we are' ("mirror identity") and 'who we are not' ("wall identity") (Cerutti 2008, p. 6). When the alterity between the Self and the Other is extreme, the latter assumes the character of the Schmitt's *Feind* (enemy) and the possibility to undertake violent action against it becomes cognitively acceptable (or even desirable) (Schmitt 1972, pp. 108-113). Self-perception can be observed through the analysis of self-

representation and of the logical (in-)coherence between a given course of action and a specific mirror/wall identity. *Worldviews* describe instead an actor's cosmological, ontological, and mechanical views of international politics. They tell something about how the world works, what is possible, and what is desirable for a given actor (Johnston 1995a, p. 37; Kitchen 2010, p. 129). Projected in the domain of grand strategy, self-perception and worldviews help define the legitimate and preferred instruments of (violent) action of a collective actor pursuant a self-attached role in a subjectively defined world.

Strategic culture emerges out of processes of historical stratification, social construction, and continuous reassertion of 'who we are (not)' and how we interpret the international reality. Strategic culture is neither given once and for all, nor extremely fluid, but rather characterised by "flexible rigidity" (Katzenstein 1996a, pp. 3-4). This is to say that actors are not impermeable to what happens around them; contingencies may affect their cognitive outlooks. However, given the *cultural* nature of strategic culture, long-term continuity is the rule (DiMaggio 1997). Thus, a strategic culture may experience change only in the face of seismic environmental and/or social developments that, striking at the foundations of a collective cognition, impinge upon the latter's ability to make sense of the world (Eckstein 1988; Lantis 2002, 2006). As such, these events are rare and so is cultural change. Superficial adjustments in strategic culture are foreseeable, but only if coherent with its already existing pillars.

It is very important to note that our theoretical perspective does not preclude political actors from having material interests nor that the actions may occur in response to those interests. However, we do assume that the way actors formulate their interests, choose the means of pursuing them, and the way actors interpret the interests and preferences of others are all influenced by beliefs engrained in social cognition. At the same time, the way we represent ourselves (self-representation) embeds a communicative message for the others about who we are and what we stand for - to which the others react on the basis of their own (strategic cultural) beliefs. If the beliefs informing the words and deeds of given actors

have incompatible content - i.e., if these beliefs are not similar enough -, then interaction becomes more difficult and may slide into conflict. This is the basic way of functioning of socio-cultural systems (Gat 2006, esp. pp. 40-55, 149-156). They are 'designed' to facilitate understanding and interaction among those who hold the same beliefs, in support of the in-group's survival; but, by the same token, communication and coordination of action with out-group members are hindered considerably. The grater the divergence of basic beliefs between two social agents, the more difficult to understand and rationalise what the other says and does, and thus the higher the risk of null or negative interaction.

All this, we claim, is the case both for a traditional state actor like Russia and a collective actor like NATO, to which the concept has been rarely applied.[5] The composite nature of NATO may raise some suspicions in regard to the applicability of strategic culture. Yet to consider NATO as an actor bearing a distinctive strategic culture is no more artificial than to consider Russia (or any other state) in the same way. States do not exist as such: they are juridical and discursive expedients that convey the decisions of restricted groups of decision-makers (Krasner 1999). Therefore, what we call the 'strategic culture of Russia' is the sum total of the ideational points of convergence of the Russian security elite; and the same is true for NATO, whose self-perception, worldview, and approach to security can be conceptualised as the minimum common denominators among the ideational preferences of the Allied elite. In this sense, there is no a huge analytical difference between Russia and NATO.[6]

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[5] The concept of strategic culture has been traditionally applied to states, seldom to collective institutions (mainly the European Union - e.g., Rynning 2003) and even more rarely to NATO (mostly to study the different strategic cultures of the Allies - e.g., Biehl et al. 2013).

[6] As in the case of states one may ask to what extend specific elite sub-groups manage to influence state policy, so in the case of NATO one may ask what is the net contribution of a given state to the aggregate NATO policy. Or, to put it differently, does the strategic culture of the Alliance reflect the ideational preferences of one specific Member more than others'? This important question can be answered only after having determined the strategic cultures of the Allies *and* of NATO. While there are studies regarding the strategic cultures of individual NATO members, literature on NATO's strategic culture is scarce and thus we are lacking one of the terms of comparison necessary to answer the question above. This essay, by providing a first picture of NATO's strategic culture, will support further research in that direction.

3. Comparing NATO's and Russia's Strategic Cultures

In the following paragraphs we reconstruct and contrast NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures as they emerge from the analysis of selected documents, speeches, and actual behaviour. We do so by following the theoretical script laid down above. Hence our analysis will consist of three comparative blocs, focused respectively on self-perceptions, worldviews, and concepts of security and the use of force. This sub-division is clearly artificial, since these three levels intermingle and mutually support each other, constituting a coherent strategic culture. Still, our practice is functionally useful, since it allows a certain degree of order and clarity in the exploration of such a wide and complex subject as strategic culture. Table 1 summarises our findings.

The sources used in this section span the entire existence of both NATO and Russia. This is coherent with the empirical aim of this section - i.e., reconstructing NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures *as such* -, as well as our theoretical lens - which posits the long-term persistence of strategic culture. Hence for NATO we have considered the Washington Treaty (1949) – as it is the founding document, still adopted today and recursively recalled in NATO's documents today – and documents and statements issued since the end of the Cold War (1990-2019). For Russia the reference period is shorter: 2000-2019. Before 1991 the Russian Federation did not exist as such and the 1990s can be excluded given their transitioning character and heterogeneity with the political course chosen and consolidated under Putin (and Medvedev) (Mankoff 2012). During the 1990s, Russia risked disintegration, as the Soviet Union did before. Given the context of deep institutional, social, and economic distress, Russia had to focus its attention on domestic problems, away from grand strategy and military planning. The formulation and implementation of military policy went through considerable hurdles (Erickson 1993) and attempts at reforming the defence sector failed in both 1992-1993 and 1997 (Zysk 2018). This coupled with a drastic reduction of the Russia's international agency, direct consequence of the many internal problems - including the breakdown of identity. The fragile elite in power tried to find an anchor in liberalism but, while initially it played

well in the relations with the West, this recipe ended up being a blind alley for the country's rebirth. Overall, then, the 1990s represent for Russia a chaotic parenthesis of uncertainty and transformation. In that period we would find a fluid - rather than fixed and consolidated - strategic culture. And while this is highly interesting from a general academic perspective, it is not strictly relevant to the aim of this essay.[7] We could have imposed shorter timeframes for both NATO and Russia without risking necessarily to invalidate our findings. Yet in this way we are able to appreciate a wider range of sources, in support of the validity and rigour of our qualitative methodology.

3.1 Self-perceptions

NATO has conjugated different functions since its inception in 1949. As noted in the introduction to this article, the Alliance did not have only a defensive role. *Inter alia*, it concretised the transatlantic bond between the US and Western Europe, and was the first institutional setting for the reintegration of post-war Germany into the European political system. These and other facets of NATO's original essence come down to two self-representations: NATO as a *Defensive Alliance* institution and NATO as a *Community of values*.

The *Defensive Alliance* represents formally the security guarantee of all member States against a possible attack from an external enemy:

"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

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[7] Such topic would deserve individual attention, given its relevance not only in political and historical terms but also from a theoretical perspective. In fact, it may help test speculations about how strategic culture undergoes change. Relatedly, it would be interesting to assess if and to what extent Soviet and contemporary Russian strategic cultures are compatible. This may help test theoretical assumptions about both change and continuity of strategic cultural beliefs. However, as in the case of 1990s' Russia, the issue exceeds by far the constraints in time and space of this essay, as well as its primary aim.

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" (NATO 1949, §5; emphasis added).

Collective defence is in the first place an act of solidarity among the members of the Alliance, a promise of mutual (military) assistance (Colombo 2001). As such, it creates and extends into the future a bond of reciprocity that unites the Allies against a hostile external force - cementing the in-group vis-à-vis the out-group. The latter is not defined in restrictive terms and is tantamount to any potential source of politico-military threat. At the same time, it appears clear that for the Allies an "[a]ggression can only emanate from the outside; while NATO itself does by definition pose no threat to any actor" (Behnke 2013, p. 81).

This subtext is in line with the image of NATO as a *Community of values* - i.e., a community in which peoples and countries would not feel threatened by each other anymore, having agreed on norms (and practices) of peaceful resolution of conflict (NATO 1949, §1) and being bound by a sense of belonging, mutual sympathy and trust: a form of "Security Community" based on shared values and sense of we-ness (Deutsch 1957). As a matter of fact, a common set of fundamental political values underpins NATO:

> "The Parties […] 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*" (NATO 1949, preamble; emphasis added).

These liberal principles are the natural language of the Alliance and the core of its political subjectivity. If the reference to the shared value of democracy was for some time not matched with fully fledged democratic institutions within some of the member states, the attention to the democratic characteristics of NATO's nations rose over time. NATO Strategic concept since (NATO 1991, §I.1, II.15; NATO

1999, §I.6; NATO 2010, §2, 38) reiterated NATO's core liberal values and NATO played an important role in the democratic transition of Central and Eastern European states after the end of the Cold War. Since NATO's "mirror identity" has been built on the tripartite equation liberal principles-peace-friendship, the resulting "wall identity" links the absence of liberal-democratic values with war and hostility.

It is worth noticing that this ontological self-representation makes membership in the Alliance independent from any natural, material, structurally given characteristic of a candidate. Membership is dependent instead on a vocational choice: the subscription to liberal-democratic values. NATO's "open door policy" (always reiterated in NATO's documents), pre- and post-Cold War waves of enlargement, as well as the Partnerships established with third countries since 1994 prove both the membership's fluidity across time and space and its subordination to the acquisition by the candidate of certain 'best practices' derived from liberal democracy (NATO 1994, §2; NATO 1995). The metaphors used to portray the first post-1989 enlargements are quite telling in this sense (Fierke 1995, p. 150; Klein 1990). Reference to the notion of "family" or "home" recreated a clear distinction between Self and Other (in-group and out-group), between the realm of shared values and that of external challengers. As a result, we may define NATO as a *non-ascriptive community* - i.e., a community where the in-group status is not based on a predetermined fixed factor such as age, sex, language, or ethnicity, but rather on individual achievement. The sole requirement for membership is the adherence to a set of liberal values (and the willingness to contribute to European defence).[8]

The end of the Cold War had the potential to disrupt such core identities, but they proved to be highly resistant to change. Instead of being rejected, they were re-affirmed in accordance with new environmental conditions. NATO shifted from "the practice of talking" to "the practice of doing" (Flockhart 2012), acquiring

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[8] Art. 10 of the Washington Treaty specifies that only a "European State" can be invited to further NATO's principles and this could be tantamount to a structurally imposed criterion for membership. Indeed, as the open door policy, NATO enlargements, and the partnerships show, the concept of "European State" could be interpreted loosely as 'State willing to partake in NATO principles and mission'. The presence of the criterions of Europeanness is linked mainly to the historical context in which the Treaty was drafted.

new functions and enriching its self-representation with two new (sub-)identities: NATO as a *Collective security agent* and *Global NATO*. These have not substituted the core images of *Defensive Alliance* and *Community of values*, but rather stemmed from and reinforced them. NATO's role in the UN System of Collective Security started in the 1990s with its involvement in the war in Bosnia. NATO's actions in the context of the UN System of Collective Security unfold over time and saw for the first time NATO engaged into combat operations (Bosnia, Libya) and playing a relevant role in post-conflict stabilisations (Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq). Developing a self-defining narrative out of a repeated practice, the 2010 Strategic Concept introduced the core task of "crisis management" (next to Collective Defence and Co-operative Security – i.e. Partnerships).

At the same time, a "Global NATO" was developing. Since liberal-democratic values are by definition universal (in time and space), also NATO's community and outreach are perceived to be potentially universal. In the words of Secretary General Rasmussen: "we must take NATO's transformation to a new level - by connecting the Alliance with the broader international system in entirely new ways […] *Security today is about active engagement, possibly very far from our own borders*" (Rasmussen 2011b, emphasis added). Free from the constrains of bipolarism and without the USSR as the existential Other, the Alliance become a "liberal Leviathan"[9] and started to implement more pro-active actions outside of the European region also with the aim of defending or exporting liberal values as such. NATO's partnerships broadened to include "partners across the globe" (including Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand and Pakistan), with whom NATO aimed at developing "support for operations, security cooperation, and enhanced common understanding to advance shared security interests and democratic values" (NATO 2008, §35).

The connection among these several facets of NATO's self-perception emerges evidently from the final *communiqués* of the latest two Summits:

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[9] We borrowed the term by John Ikenberry (2011) who coined the term of refer to the US's role in the construction of a liberal world order.

"NATO Allies form a unique community of values committed to the principles of individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The Alliance is convinced that these shared values and our security are strengthened when we work with our wide network of partners around the globe" (NATO 2014d, §80).

And also:

"The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territory and our populations against attack […] At the same time, NATO must retain its ability to respond to crises beyond its borders, and remain actively engaged in projecting stability and enhancing international security through working with partners and other international organisations" (NATO 2016, §6).

Russia's "mirror image" is radically different from NATO's. The first element of the Russian self-perception is the so called "*Greatpowerness*" (*velikoderzhavnost'*): Russia's feeling of superiority vis-à-vis other countries and its consequent aspiration to be recognised as a great power (Urnov 2014). All strategic documents reflect such self-representation, declining it in very similar terms. *Inter alia*, the National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2009 clearly states that Russia has "sufficient potential to [grant] its entrenchment among global leaders" in economic and political terms (Strategii 2009, §9), in order to achieve a role that—according to the Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) of 2008—is "well-deserved" (Kotseptsiia 2008, section II). NSS 2015 stresses "the Russian Federation's role in resolving the most important international problems, settling military conflicts, and ensuring strategic stability" (Strategii 2015, §8),

thereby reflecting interests that are clearly greater in scope than those of a small or medium power.[10]

Russia communicates its sense of greatpowerness not only in these positive self-referential terms, but also with a negative outward-oriented language. Moscow has voiced many times its deep discontent with an international status quo perceived as inherently inadequate and unjust for it is dominated by the West and not open to Russia (Lavrov 2007, 2008 as quoted in Svarin 2016, p. 133).[11] The alleged refusal by other actors to recognise Russia's *velikoderzhavnost'* frustrates the Kremlin. Even if with some stylistic differences, such rhetoric cuts across the whole political spectrum (Clunan 2009, p. 114; Mankoff 2012, ch. 1, 2; White & Feklyunina 2014, pp. 101-128; Nalbandov 2016, pp. 4-5). Both Medvedev and Putin have shown considerable resentment for post-1991 political developments, stressing the need to avenge Russia's legitimate place in global affairs. Politicians belonging to liberal, nationalist, and Eurasianist traditions all support the need to carve out a relevant space for Russia in the world - even if by employing different means.

Russia's self-entitlement to greatness brings about two complementary types of behaviour. On the one hand, Moscow applies a sort of "copycat behaviour" (Skak 2013, pp. 8-10), designing its grand strategy along the lines of that of the great power par excellence: the US. But while the grandeur of Russia's strategic design formally resembles that of the US', the two strategies have divergent content and aims. Russia's policy in Syria is a case in point. In so doing, Moscow satisfies at once both its image as a mighty power and its sense of moral superiority vis-à-vis Washington. The same reasoning backs Moscow's self-appointment as "a counterbalance in international affairs and the development of the global civilisation" (Kontseptsiia 2013, §25; Kontseptsiia 2016, §22). Russia presents itself as resisting socio-economic contaminations from the outside and as a withholder of moral decay and

[10] See also: Strategii 2009, §21-24; Strategii 2015, §30-31; FPC RF 2000, sections I-III; Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, IV; Kontseptsiia 2013, §4, 42-94; Kontseptsiia 2016, §3, 49-99.
[11] See also: Strategii 2009, §8, 17; Strategii 2015, §15-18, 106; Kontseptsiia 2008, sections I, II; Kontseptsiia 2013, §4, 14; Kontseptsiia 2016, §5, 61, 70. Coherently, both versions of the Military Doctrine mention NATO as a danger for Russia (see references in following sub-sections).

physical destruction - conditions allegedly thriving beyond the borders of the Russian civilisational space (Engström 2014; see Putin, quoted in Remnik 2014).

The second component of Russia's self-perception deals with the sources of such (un-attained) greatness, which does not originate from materialistic considerations but from a perceived sense of representing a *Unique civilisation* with civilisational might, often backed by historical references (Lavrov 2016; Putin 2003, 2007). Traditions and values appear as the fundamental underpinnings of the country's interests and identity (Strategii 2009, §80-84; Strategii 2015, §76-79, 82). As Putin stressed, these transcendent elements "[make] up the spiritual and moral foundation of [the Russian] civilisation" and have prominence over the material domain (Putin 2013; for a similar view by Medvedev, see: Der Spiegel 2009). The *file rouge* connecting "greatpowerness" and traditions is Christian Orthodoxy, which offers a pre-constituted cultural-cognitive layer cutting across faith, political action, and moral ends (Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, III.3; Kontseptsiia 2013, §21, 32; Kontseptsiia 2016, §19, 38; see also: Engström 2014). Orthodoxy elevates Russia above other civilisations and transforms Moscow into a global peacemaker (Nalbandov 2016, p. 31). To drop these values would mean to lose Russia's uniqueness and, with it, the right and duty to participate in the settlement of global affairs. Hence, Russian nature and aspirations are necessary and non-negotiable.

It is worth noticing that, differently from NATO, the constitutive elements of 'Russiannes' are not linked to free choice but rather super-imposed as transcendent entitlements. This makes the Russian community an *ascriptive community*. At the same time, the constitutive elements of 'Russiannes' are not limited to the sole Russian Federation, but thrive beyond its formal borders constituting the so-called *russkij mir*: a unique civilisational space of which Moscow is the moral centre.[12] Superficially, it is not too dissimilar from NATO's image as a "liberal Leviathan". However, no universalist tension is implied in here. Russia's 'duty' to defend the su-

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[12] *Russkij mir* is a term used by the Russian political and cultural elites to designate the unity of all Russian peoples. The concept transcends formal borders, uniting all ethnic Russians and Russian speakers within the same civilisational space. Geographically, the *russkij mir* broadly overlaps with the former Soviet space.

per-ethos allegedly unifying the *russkij mir* does give rise to a paternalistic approach towards this area. Yet such prerogative is constricted within defined cultural borders and therefore Russian behaviour acquires a conservative nature, not an expansionist one. The Medvedev doctrine is a good example of such view (Vesti 2008).

3.2 Worldviews

It follows clearly from the previous discussion that NATO filters the world through the interpretative lens of a *liberal political culture* based on principles of natural law that prescribe universal standards of righteousness (Lawson 2015, ch. 4, 5). Every rational agent should act accordingly and if an actor does not abide to the liberal playbook, then it comes to be seen as irrational by definition. A liberal worldview always implies the possibility to differentiate between right and wrong - and so does the Alliance. In NATO's eyes the world tends to be seen in black-and-white: on the one side there are liberal democracies, which NATO represents and defends; on the other side the illiberal powers. In-between one may posit the existence of a grey area, constituted by those countries transitioning towards liberalism (i.e., towards the Alliance), but *de facto* they still remain outsiders until the end of their transition.

NATO's worldview upholds many tenets of *Wilsonianism* and resonates quite well with Fukuyama's ideas about the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1989; Mead 2002). Force will become obsolete only in the event of the universal achievement of human progress. Moreover, NATO self-represents itself as a source of stability. A recent statement of Secretary General Stoltenberg is quite telling in this sense. After presenting a detailed list of the threats NATO has faced in the recent past, he concludes that "[w]e need a strategy to deal with uncertainty. We have one. That strategy is NATO" (Stoltenberg 2019). By re-iterating the image of NATO as a source of success and stability, the Secretary General also conveys the image of a chaotic and unequal world extending beyond the Alliance's borders. More precisely, his discourse systematically pairs wars and tensions with the lack of freedom and prosperity; conversely, liberal democracy results a necessary and sufficient condition for

peace. As a logical consequence, the active promotion of liberal-democratic values and practices will bring peace to the world, contributing to collective defence and security: "real security is much more than just the military defence of one's territory […] the Alliance [will keep on] looking beyond the borders of its member nations to seek means to project stability and enhance security" (NATO 1998).

NATO's involvement in the wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya all mirror this kind of reasoning.[13] The rhetoric of "peace enforcement" was frequently used to depict and legitimate the operations in the Balkans, and the case was similar in the Middle East with the rhetoric of the "war on terror". In all these cases, post-conflict stabilisation by means of political/military institution-building played a prominent role. Libya was a partial exception, since NATO took part in combat operations but has not contributed to post-conflict reconstruction; yet the logic of the fight against authoritarianism applied to Libya too. As declared by the Secretary General in May 2011: "NATO stands for the values of freedom, democracy and humanity that Osama bin Laden wanted to defeat. We will continue to stand for those values - from Afghanistan to Libya" (Rasmussen 2011a).

Russia's strategic culture differs from NATO's also in terms of worldviews. Overall, Russia's worldview is mechanistic and holistic (Skak 2013, 2016). It is characterised by two main features. Firstly, international relations are conceived of as an organic whole, whose components are tightly interwoven and whereby cause-effect dynamics cut across internal and external domains. Secondly, this thick social web is regulated by Hobbesian zero-sum dynamics and consequently assumes an inherently conflictual nature. It is possible to find a trace of this reasoning in the emphasis put on the "competition for resources" and shifts in the "balance of power", as well as the acknowledgement that "problems may be resolved using military force", according to "a rational and pragmatic foreign policy" (Strategii 2009, §12-13; Strategii

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[13] At the time of writing, approximately 20,000 military personnel are engaged in NATO missions, with operations of several types (from military post-conflict stabilisation to anti-smuggling operations and disaster relief operations) in several parts of the world (Afghanistan, Kosovo, the Mediterranean, support to the African Union, etc.). This, plus the extension of NATO's partnership web show quite clearly that the Alliance has growingly engaged in activities far beyond its traditional thematic and geographic area of concern. For a detailed overview of NATO's military operations, see Sperling & Webber (2018).

2015, §13-14). This Realist-alike thinking is no surprise, given that the Russian intel-
lectual elites filled in the doctrinal vacuum left by the disintegration of the Socialist
ideology by fetishising Geopolitics (Sergunin 2004; Solovyev 2004).

Nevertheless, Moscow's worldview refutes a purely material focus and thus
resembles Realism only superficially. In line with its self-perception, Russia per-
ceives competition mainly in cultural terms, with civilisations as the ultimate units of
international politics. Moral principles, rather than objective interests, are at the en-
gines of the world. All FPCs present this view, highlighting the "civilisational di-
mension" of contemporary global dynamics and the continuous "attempts to im-
pose values on others" in the face of the fact that "cultural and civilisational diversi-
ty […] and multiple development models have been emerging" (Kontseptsiia 2016,
§4-5; see also: Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, III.3; Kontseptsiia 2013, §13-14). This
view brings about a simplification of global affairs in a way not too dissimilar from
NATO's, but here Good and Evil are substituted by oppressor and oppressed.
Once more, however, no trace of universalism emerges from Moscow's rhetoric,
since its mechanistic worldview better supports *mnogopoliarnost'* (Medvedev 2011;
Putin 2014c; see also: Clunan 2009, pp. 54-60, 91-92, 128-130; Mankoff 2012, ch.
1). In such context, the self-representation as civilisational hub plus the aforemen-
tioned worldview lead Russia to assume that conflict with the universalist liberal
West is almost unavoidable.[14]

3.3. Concepts of Security and the Use of Force

Concepts and practices of security are strictly dependent on self-perception
and worldview. The unavoidably community-based approach of NATO, together
with its liberal worldview leads to a *sharp differentiation between internal and external
threats*. Whatever the operational nature of the danger, in the eyes of the Allies it
necessarily comes from outside NATO's 'area of peace' - geographically and onto-
logically. The rise of terrorism did not fundamentally challenge such dichotomy, in
as much as terrorism was and still is perceived as something external (in terms of

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[14] *Caveat*! Conflict does not mean war. It may be tantamount to simple disagreement.

provenience) and extraneous (in terms of existential nature) to the Alliance (Stoltenberg 2019). Even when a terrorist attack happens on European soil, the root cause of it is seen far away, in the Middle East-based militant islamism. The problem of terrorism rather stemmed from its non-State, un-conventional character - a condition that challenged the Alliance's military doctrine.

On the other hand, NATO conceives of it as a means of last resort and a reactive tool, in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This doesn't mean that NATO's actions have always been *de facto* irreproachable from the standpoint of international law; what it does mean is that, in NATO's eyes, allied military operations are inherently just because undertaken in response to a commensurate threat (external) to the Alliance. We could debate whether or not, e.g., instability in the Middle East constitutes objectively a danger of such magnitude for the Alliance to respond militarily. But here it is not a matter of objectivity: it is a matter of perceptions, ultimately decided by the self-representation of NATO as a "liberal Leviathan". NATO's deployment could in principle be admissible and legitimate non only in the event of a direct military threat in Europe, but also when liberal values as such are threatened somewhere in the world. The argument has been used for the intervention in Kosovo, legitimate yet not legally authorised by the UN. Being NATO an alliance of States *and* a community of values, feelings of insecurity are triggered by both direct threats to the members' sovereignty *and* indirect threats to the founding values of the Alliance. We could say that NATO has developed a concept of 'positive security', whereby safety is granted by the lack of physical threats as well as by the presence of fundamental rights.

NATO's ideal-typical use of force is both collective and multilateral in nature (Carati 2010). - i.e., it is supported by the United Nations and carried out by a group of States sharing the same goal. This goal is usually inspired by the protection of human rights or, more in general, democratic values and typically emerges in relation to fragile/failed States. Institution-building is an essential feature of this type of intervention, and regime change its capstone. Be it in the Balkans, Middle East or

elsewhere, all NATO operations but one (Kosovo, which was not authorised by the UN) seem to respond to a similar understanding of the legitimate use of force.

Yet NATO's reaction to perceived (existential or ideational) threats does not necessarily imply the resort to military force. As said, it is a means of last resort. Alternative ways to achieve security have always been part of the Alliance's play-book. Since 1949 NATO has fulfilled multiple roles, conjugating deterrence, *détente*, and a fundamental role as security community (NATO 1967, especially §5; Lucarelli 2005). NATO's understanding of security has broadened even more in response to the post-bipolar turmoil. The "multi-faceted" and "multi-directional" nature of emerging threats has called for a multi-level action coupling deterrence and defence with the support for "the growth of democratic institutions and commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes" (NATO 1991, §20). This translated into the practices of partnership, enlargement, and peace-support operations - all falling within the aforementioned framework of 'positive security' (Locatelli 2015; Sperling & Webber 2018).[15] Yet the modern worldview and Defence-oriented nature of NATO make it difficult to integrate military and non-military instruments of action. The slow-going, partial results of NATO's adaptation in terms of hybrid and cyber capabilities are a case in point, just as the Afghan quagmire in which the Alliance is stuck.

Now let's turn to Russia, recalling the holistic, mechanistic, and highly conflictual worldview ingrained in its strategic culture. This condition sustains a well-known existential anxiety that is voiced especially in the Military Doctrines (MDs). A constant feeling of precariousness afflicts Russia, as if adverse forces were continuously attempting to undermine its existence and inner constitution, generating perils that could strike at all levels both within and outside of Moscow's civilisational space. The very *difference between internal and external sources of harm is blurred* and they all share the same non-Russian origin (Doktrina 2010, §8-10; Doktrina 2014, §12-14). Even classically domestic threats such as subversion and

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[15] Sperling & Webber (2018) mention a number of relevant directives on non-article 5 operations issued by NATO's Military Committee. *Inter alia*, see: MC 327 (1995), MC 400/1 (1996), MC 400/2 (2000), MC 411/1 (2002), MC 472 (2002).

revolution necessarily have an external source. As the rhetoric of foreign-led colour revolutions exemplifies, Moscow tends to externalise domestic problems (Putin 2014b; Skak 2016).

The intermingling of external and internal domains also impacts on the very use of force. It shines through the overall phrasing of the MDs that Russia conceives of force as one of the many ordinary instruments to deal with problems. MDs state that "[…] the Russian Federation uses political, diplomatic, legal, economic, environmental, informational, military and other instruments for the protection of national interests" (Doktrina 2010, §4; Doktrina 2014, §5). Military means rank at the same level as other tools more or less coercive in nature, reflecting Russia's broad conception of (military) security (Doktrina 2010, §6; Doktrina 2014, §8). The restrictions applied to the deployment of armed forces do not ensure that Moscow will not use them, because - coherently with what has been discussed so far - the terms 'aggression' and 'existential threat' may have a different meaning for Russia (Doktrina 2010, §20-22; Doktrina 2014, §22-27). Consequently, we should expect Russia to resort to coercive means and displays of force in times and under conditions incompatible with Western standards (Galeotti 2016). In Moscow, the empowerment of the Ministry of Defence is not a foreign policy failure: it is just another way to deal with other States, an alternative to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This disposition is enriched by an *extensive interpretation of conflict*. As for competition in general, conflict falls outside of the purely military(-conventional) domain, inextricably intertwined with the social dimension of politics (Doktrina 2010, §12-14; Doktrina 2014, §15). For Russia, conflict is everywhere and everything could be an object of conflict (Covington 2016, pp. 26-38). On the theoretical-political side, this means that in Moscow's eyes the barrier between peace and war blur, generating a grey zone in which the conversion between peaceful and conflictual conduct is very rapid and commands a sort of latent, permanent mobilisation (Covington 2016; Fasola 2017). On the practical-military side, asymmetric and non-conventional means of conflict and the so-called hybrid warfare find their

cognitive underpinning (Kipp 2014; Thornton 2017). NSSs, FPCs, and MDs mention soft-power, information warfare, and other non-military means as sources of peril *and* operational opportunities to ensure security.[16] Unlike NATO, Moscow's track-record in these domains is longer and more solid (e.g., see Thomas 2004).

Table 1 - Key components of NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures.

Strategic Culture	NATO	Russia
Self-perception	*Primary*: Defensive alliance & Community of values *Secondary*: Collective security agent & Global NATO	Greatpowerness Unique civilisation
Worldview	Liberal Wilsonian	Mechanistic Holistic
Security and force	Internal domain/threats ≠ external domain/threats Use of force as mean of last resort	Blurring of internal and external domains/threats Extensive interpretation of conflict

Source: compiled by the authors.

3. The Activation of NATO's and Russia's Strategic Cultures During the Ukraine Crisis

In the previous section of this paper we have reconstructed the strategic cultures of NATO and Russia by looking at a range of sources and practices produced and deployed by the two actors over a considerable period of time. Given our theoretical framework, we expect these strategic cultural orientations to inform the thoughts and actions of the two actors within the considered timeframe (and potentially beyond), irrespective of contextual conditions. What we want to do now is to see how

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[16] Strategii 2009, §27, 30, 93; Strategii 2015, §12, 21, 41, 43; Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, III.6; Kontseptsiia 2013, §9-10, 20; Kontseptsiia 2016, §6-9, 17-18; Doktrina 2010, §12-14, 31-34, 41, 46-47; Doktrina 2014, §15, 36-42.

strategic culture has played a role in NATO-Russia relations during the 2014 Ukraine crisis. By using the same methodology employed above, we will try to understand whether the discourse and practices deployed by the two actors at the outbreak of the crisis match their wider strategic cultures. In other words, is the behaviour of NATO and Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis coherent with our strategic cultural model? We conduct this case study focussing on 2014 - the crucial year for the crisis itself.

The Ukraine crisis began in November 2013, when protests erupted against President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to reject greater economic integration with the EU. The violent repression of these demonstrations led to a further escalation of the situation - with more people participating and more violence being used. A month later, this critical situation offered Crimea the opportunity to transform popular discontent with the central government into a claim of secession. Via a blend of direct and indirect political and military support, Putin's Russia helped Crimea to secede from Ukraine and eventually annexed it to the Federation, coherently with the results of a controversial local referendum. Following these events, ethnic tensions grew further in all of Ukraine. Specifically, in the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk pro-Russian separatists wanted to replicate the Crimean scenario and called for independence from Ukraine. This caused new violence and direct clashes between Russia-backed separatists and the Ukrainian armed forces - which later on began to be supported by the West, namely NATO. Passing through a series of ups and downs and while mutating its character, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has not stopped yet. Both NATO and Russia continue playing a crucial role in this crisis.[17]

All the fundamental components of NATO's strategic culture find correspondence in how the Alliance faced the crisis - despite diverging views among the Allies and the different communicative styles of Secretary Generals Rasmussen and Stoltenberg (Böller 2018). Especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea, the

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[17] For a timeline of events, we re-direct readers elsewhere. See for example: http://ukraine.csis.org; https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine.

image of the *Defensive Alliance* emerged as the key self-representation, yet always with reference to shared values (NATO as a *Community of values*). In the Secretary General's communication there has been a constant attempt to emphasise that collective defence has always been and continues to be at NATO's core. The Wales Declaration stated:

> "Based on solidarity, Alliance cohesion, and the indivisibility of our security, NATO remains the transatlantic framework for strong collective defence and the essential forum for security consultations and decisions among Allies. The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territories and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty." (NATO 2014d, §2)

The renewed emphasis on collective defence has scaled down the role of the ancillary self-representations as *Collective security agent* and *Global NATO*. Yet they have not disappeared. NATO still has global responsibilities, which once again link with the defence of liberal democracy (*ibidem*).

Shared values emerge as key to NATO's identity also in the Ukraine context. These values were implicitly or explicitly presented as foundations of Allied "solidarity" and "cohesion" (see above), and they were also used as benchmarks for the assessment of out-group dynamics. Both Ukraine's domestic distress and Russia's behaviour were linked to the absence of liberal-democratic values. Any official press release or declaration of 2014 can be quoted as an example of this.[18] Especially in the early stages of the crisis, NATO insisted that only "inclusive political processes based on democratic values, respect for human rights, minorities and the rule of law" could lead to peace (NATO 2014c). While in the specific context of Ukraine such assertion may be reasonable, socio-institutional processes are by no means the sole cause of the crisis. Hence NATO's focus on regime type to account for patterns of peace and war reflects a subjective view, rather than an objective as-

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[18] Find a list at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/events_107755.htm.

sessment. This 'selection bias' appears even more evidently in a later speech by Rasmussen: "We want to improve the climate, but to do that Russia must show that it is prepared to play by the same rules as everybody else" (Rasmussen 2014f). This statement is unintelligible if not assuming NATO's ideational perspective: as a liberal-democratic community, the Alliance enjoys the moral standing necessary to dictate the terms of peace; and being equipped with a *liberal worldview*, NATO assumes that everyone else should play by the same rules - the universal rules of liberal-democracy. If someone does not abide by them - then it becomes an "adversary" (Rasmussen 2014a). We see here a confirmation of the role of liberal values as the discriminating factor between mirror and wall identity. The following excerpt is an additional case in point:

> "Freedom. Democracy. The rule of international law. The inviolability of borders. And the right of nations to decide their own security arrangements. These values and these norms are essential for our way of life. […] But now, Russia is violating these very values. […] I deeply regret that Russia currently seems to view NATO as an adversary rather than as a partner. This is not an approach we favour. But we are ready to meet the challenge." (Rasmussen 2014b).

A corollary of this whole reasoning is that NATO - as a Defensive alliance *and* a Community of values - cannot pose any harm to anybody, by definition (Boulegue 2017). NATO underestimated the role played by Russia's fear of a possible NATO's enlargement to Ukraine. In the years prior to 2014, instead of reassuring Russia of no intention to admit Ukraine as a member, NATO had kept the door opened to the country rising Russia's concerns. After the eruption of the crisis, analogously the Secretary General affirmed: "All the measures that NATO is taking [as a response to the crisis] are defensive, moderate, proportionate, transparent, and fully compliant with our international commitments […]. They are not a threat to Russia - and NATO is not a threat to Russia" (Rasmussen 2014f). In other words,

NATO could even conceive of being framed as a threat by Russia - or any other actor, for that matters. The enhancement of military exercises and deployments along the Eastern borders, as well as the development of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) appeared in NATO's eyes as due, legitimate, and reactive measures (NATO 2014a,b; Rasmussen 2014c). Once again, a 'selection bias' intervened to rule out alternative perceptions of the Alliance's course of action.

Once the war had erupted, NATO did not intervene militarily in Ukraine and has continuously called for the suspension of armed hostilities. This is coherent with both the Alliance's self-representation and its view of the use of force. Given the *Wilsonian component* of NATO's approach to security, the possibility of direct military intervention by the Alliance could not be ruled out *tout court*. In the case of Ukraine, a military intervention may have been a credible option in the early stages of the crisis, when the main concern was with the stability and nature of the country's regime (e.g., Rasmussen 2014d,e). Then, however, the consolidation of a liberal-friendly government in Ukraine shifted NATO's perception of the crisis. Rather than being the result of internal instability per se, the crisis started to be seen as the consequence of Russian meddling. NATO decided to contrast Russia's nefarious action by a two-front compartmentalised strategy: on the one hand, non-military support to Ukrainian institutions (NATO 2018); on the other hand, military deterrence of Russia at the international level - as per above. Such separation (and the nature) of the Allied (counter-)measures somehow reflects the *differentiation between internal and external domains* proper of NATO's outlook.

On the other side, the way Moscow framed and reacted to the crisis in Ukraine reflects first of all a deep *dissatisfaction with the international status quo* and a *feeling of 'unattained greatness'*. Russia accused the West of applying double moral and political standards and piloting externally the Ukraine crisis "for the benefit of personal geopolitical interests" (MFA RF 2014b; see also: Lavrov 2014a; MFA RF 2014a). In Russia's eyes, NATO is not the liberal guardian of the international order, but the instrument of a tyrant - the US - to impose "universal recipes" onto others

(Putin 2014f). As underlined by a press release of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

> "We again state that the United States, hiding behind appeals not to prevent the Ukrainian people from making a free choice, are in fact attempting to impose a 'Western vector' on their development, dictating to the authorities of a sovereign country, what they should do" (MFA RF 2014e).

The Ukraine crisis has been seen by Russia as a particular manifestation of two sets of problems lying at different levels. Firstly, it reflects a problem of global nature - namely the inadequacy of the contemporary international order. "These developments were the logical consequence of serious, system-wide problems that have accumulated since the end of the Cold War" - Lavrov told Interfax (Lavrov 2014c). Secondly, Russia perceives the crisis as a consequence of Ukraine's own internal dynamics - political extremism, corruption, and the dis-regard for minority rights (MFA RF 2014c). At the same time, the crisis is not merely the result of pre-existing conditions, but also a cause of the further deterioration of East-West strategic relations *and* of the socio-political situation within Ukraine (*ibidem*; Putin 2014e). Overall, the complex Russian rhetoric on the Ukraine crisis reflects the *mechanistic and holistic worldview* of the country, which perceives reality as the complex product of intermingling levels influencing each other reciprocally.

Moscow believes that the assertion of equal relations among all stakeholders is essential for the restoration of peace. This means, on the one hand, to recognise Russia's legitimate role as a *great power*. As Putin declared in October 2014: "we simply want for our own interests to be taken into account and for our position to be respected […] We are ready to respect the interests of our partners, but we expect the same respect for our interests" (Putin 2014f). On the other hand, Russia asks to involve those (Russian-speaking) regional political forces who do not side with the centre of Ukrainian power - i.e., the separatists, in Western terms (MFA RF

2014d). These two levels once again intermingle with each other in as much as the assertion of Moscow's international role passes through the defence of the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. This connection is made possible and legitimised by Russia's role as the *warrantor of the russkij mir* - within which Ukraine falls at least in part (Putin 2014e; Putin 2014a; Lavrov 2014b). Putin expressed this with a quite telling metaphor during 2014's meeting of the Valdai International Club:

" […] the bear will not even bother to ask for permission. Here we consider it the master of the taiga, and I know for sure that it does not intend to move to any other climatic zones - it will not be comfortable there. However, it will not let anyone have its taiga either. I believe it is clear." (Putin 2014f)

These words convey a conservative message. Russia aims at preserving the status quo of its civilisational area from the chaos spread by the West via colour revolutions. "Revolutions are bad" - Putin said plainly (*ibidem*).

While denying to be responsible for military escalation, Russia presents itself as the only actor really attempting to do something to settle the crisis (MFA RF 2014c; Lavrov 2014c). To do so, Russia has deployed "the entire arsenal of political, diplomatic and legal methods" at its disposal (Lavrov 2014b). The evolution of Russia's moves within the early phases of the Ukraine conflict has been described by Cimbala (2014) as an example of "military persuasion". By supporting its political claims with military actions - and vice versa -, Russia has been able to control conflict escalation and dictate the rhythm of the crisis, in favour of its own position vis-à-vis the other parties (Freedman 2014). In addition, military and political moves have been supported by non-conventional means - the so-called informational operations. Far from constituting a revolutionary type of (hybrid) warfare (Charap 2015; Renz 2016), these measures aim at achieving set goals with minimum effort by hitting the enemy at multiple levels contemporarily. They also reflect Russia's

stated objective to avoid a "costly arms race" while securing the country's interests (Putin 2014d). Overall, Russia's *modus operandi* in Crimea and Donbass confirms our strategic cultural analysis, which underlined the *blurring of domains* and the *extensive interpretation of conflict* in Russia's security outlook.

Overall, the words and deeds of NATO and Russia during the first phase of the Ukraine crisis follow the strategic cultural script that we reconstructed in the previous section of this essay. The behaviour displayed by the two actors in that context is coherent with our general strategic cultural model. The specific traits of the two actor's strategic cultures manifest themselves in opposite readings of the context, divergent attributions of faults, and different approaches to the crisis. As previously said, given opposite strategic cultures, the other's actions are by themselves unconceivable and are either rejected or mis-interpreted. Therefore today's persisting disagreement between NATO and Russia over Ukraine should come as no surprise. On the basis of this empirical confirmation, our model could be applied to other scenarios in order to attempt to retroactively understand or even forecast NATO's and Russia's behaviours.

4. Conclusion: Cognitive Dissonance and Political Disagreement Between NATO and Russia

The concept of strategic culture provides researchers with an analytical lens to understand the socio-cognitive roots of amity-enmity patterns and international behaviour. In this article, we have applied strategic culture to the case of NATO-Russia relations. Our aim was to give a constructionist explanation of the hostilities emerging recursively between these two actors.

Our analysis shows that the strategic cultures of NATO and Russia differ significantly in many respects (Table 1). These two actors construe their in-groups, roles, and the boundaries of what is legitimate and appropriate in opposite terms. NATO's identity is based on a set of shared political and civic values with no immediate connection to religious beliefs or ethno-cultural roots. The liberal values on which the NATO community is founded (liberty, democracy, rule of law) are by

definition non-ascriptive and can be made one's own through a process of socialisation (and civilisation). In this sense, NATO is a cosmopolitan agent, in as much as it perceives moral, ethical, and political standards as universally valid. Achievement, transformation, and socialisation make the broadening of the value-based community possible, and the Alliance acts as a promoter of such transformative process. Conversely, Russia's core values are those of an ascriptive community in which the borders of the referent in-group (the *russkij mir*) are defined by language and historically shaped cultural features. Russia is a communitarian agent according to which standards of appropriateness are culture-specific and do not apply necessarily outside of given civilisational borders. As a consequence, Russia's community has a fixed, static composition and the role of Moscow in respect to it is conservative, rather than expansive. Although both NATO and Russia have been engaged in a process of 're-actualisation of the past' through which they have decoded the other side's practices in light of previous experiences, NATO's cognition is *modern* (progress oriented, evolutionary, state-based), while Russia's is *pre-modern* (conservative, static, community-based).[19] Such dissonance also extends to the domain of security proper. While NATO applies a 'modern cut' also in security affairs - sharply differentiating between internal and external domains/threats -, Russia's holistic worldview conceives of threats and counter-measures in a more fluid way. This is accompanied by a higher proclivity to the use of force and/or conflictual means for crisis-management than the West, which is restrained by a legalistic use of force (democratic military intervention is no exception).

These findings have been confirmed by our case study. The analysis of NATO's and Russia's discourse and behaviour during the first year of the Ukraine crisis (2014) have highlighted the presence of all the major features of the actors' strategic cultures, reaffirming the concept's utility as a tool for understanding. While across-case observations would have strengthened our research design, a single-shot case is still sufficient for a theory-confirming aim and coherent with the broader

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[19] Neither of the two actors is *quasi post-modern* (progress oriented, evolutionary, but with a re-defined concept of sovereignty), as is the European Union.

theoretical nature of this article (Lijphart 1971; Gerring 2001, ch. 8; Seawright & Gerring 2008). We are confident that other researchers will take up the challenge to further prove or disprove our claims on empirical grounds.

NATO and Russia move from considerably different strategic cultural assumptions. The two actors perceive their roles, entitlements, and reality at large in quite incompatible ways and this raises considerably the likelihood of conflictual relations and incommunicability. Do these differences necessarily imply conflict? Not necessarily, but they can. They represent an ever-present layer of perceptual dissonance that is ready to be activated by each and every environmental condition. In particular, the transformative and expansive nature of NATO easily clashes with Russia's 'existential anxiety' and 'civilisational protectionism'. At the same time, Russia's provocative behaviour in areas of its Cold War sphere of influence, its unrestrained attitude towards the possibility of using force, and the blurring distinction between peace and war, are all perceived as a direct threat to the Alliance. The threat is both to the safety of NATO's nations and to the internal solidarity among the Allies - put under strain by Russia's mix of conventional and un-conventional means of pressure.

Overall, this state of things bears the risk to transform the relations between NATO and Russia into a question of reciprocal ontological (in)security.[20] Either the two actors will be able to deconstruct such images by means of real confidence building measures, or hostilities will continue to emerge recursively, whit the risk to pass from a 'new Cold War', to a hot peace, to conflict *tout court*.

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[20] On the concept of ontological security see: Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008.

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