Why NATO survived Trump: 
the neglected role of Secretary-General Stoltenberg

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NATO only just survived the presidency of Donald Trump. Once in office, Trump—who had distinguished himself from virtually all US presidents since the Second World War in his active hostility towards the alliance during the presidential campaign—repeatedly toyed with the idea of withdrawing from NATO, and was on the verge of doing so publicly at the 2018 NATO summit.1 But while the president withdrew the United States from the Iran Nuclear Deal, the Paris Climate Agreement and UNESCO, and undermined the WTO, WHO, UN Refugee Agency and Green Climate Fund from within, he eventually changed his public position on NATO in 2019. In his State of the Union speech in February, he described his tentative change of mind: ‘For years, the United States was being treated very unfairly by NATO—but now we have secured a $100 billion increase in defence spending from NATO allies’; and at the London leaders’ meeting in December, he declared that ‘NATO serves a great purpose’.2

Given that the United States is the de facto indispensable power within the alliance, the intuitive explanation for NATO’s survival would be that it successfully adapted to Trump’s demands. However, the empirical record suggests that NATO only partially adapted to Trump’s demands for greater transatlantic burden-sharing and resisted his calls for closer relations with Russia. Two specific questions therefore emerge. First, why did Trump change his stance on transatlantic burden-sharing, even though increases in allied defence spending remained

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1 On Trump’s unprecedented opposition to the liberal international order, see Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, Exit from hegemony: the unravelling of the American global order (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); G. John Ikenberry, A world safe for democracy [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020]; Mira Rapp-Hooper, Shields of the republic: the triumph and peril of America’s alliances [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020]; Joseph S. Nye, Jr, ‘The rise and fall of American hegemony from Wilson to Trump’, International Affairs 95: 1, 2019, pp. 63–80.

2 Donald J. Trump, ‘Address to the nation: State of the Union’, Washington DC, 5 Feb. 2019; Donald J. Trump, ‘Press point by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US President Donald Trump’, Brussels, 3 Dec. 2019.
significantly below his demands? Second, why did the United States go so far as to reinforce NATO’s defence and deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia, despite Trump’s calls to the contrary?²

While the dust has barely settled on the Trump presidency, three types of explanations can be deduced from general analyses of Trumpian foreign policy. The first locates the sources of Trump’s relatively continuous NATO policy on the domestic level. Some argue that the US foreign policy establishment constrained the Trump administration’s foreign policy impulses and ensured continued support for NATO. Others point to inherently expansionist tendencies within liberalism, allegedly entrenched in US society, that prevent a constrained foreign policy and the withdrawal of support for NATO.⁴ The second camp emphasizes that continued support for NATO is the rational utility-maximizing behaviour associated with US hegemony.³ The third camp directs attention to Trump’s idiosyncratic personality and cognitive features to explain his erratic and seemingly inconsistent foreign policy behaviour.⁶

These three perspectives are to a degree complementary and have some explanatory power, but they remain incomplete. The domestic argument cannot explain why Trump changed his stance on burden-sharing relatively late in his term, when the ‘adults in the room’ such as Defense Secretary Mattis or Chief of Staff Kelly—the major constraints on the president—had departed the administration. The structural argument fails to explain why Trump was repeatedly on the verge of withdrawing from the alliance and who were the actors persuading the reluctant Trump of the merits of continued support for NATO. And the psychological argument is by itself insufficient to offer a comprehensive account of Trump’s NATO policy: discerning the effects of Trump’s personality requires understanding how they interact with the alliance’s institutional and political environment.⁷

To explain Trump’s puzzling NATO policy, this article incorporates but goes beyond the domestic, structural and psychological arguments to focus on the neglected role played by NATO’s Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, and senior officials in Brussels. The omission of these actors from analyses to date is not surprising. Most scholars view NATO as a traditional military alliance,

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³ On NATO’s adaptation post-2014, see e.g. Thierry Tardy, ‘The risk of NATO’s maladaptation’, European Security 30: 1, 2021, pp. 24–42.
⁴ Patrick Porter, ‘Why America’s grand strategy has not changed: power, habit and the US foreign policy establishment’, International Security 42: 4, 2018, pp. 9–46; Stephen Walt, The hell of good intentions: America’s foreign policy elite and the decline of US primacy (New York: Picador, 2018); John J. Mearsheimer, ‘Bound to fail: the rise and fall of the liberal international order’, International Security 43: 4, 2019, pp. 7–50.
⁵ Mark Webber, James Sperling and Martin Smith, What’s wrong with NATO and how to fix it (Cambridge: Polity, 2021); James Sperling and Mark Webber, ‘Trump’s foreign policy and NATO: exit and voice’, Review of International Studies 45: 3, 2019, pp. 434–56; Trevor McCrisken and Maxwell Downman, “Peace through strength”: Europe and NATO deterrence beyond the US Nuclear Posture Review’, International Affairs 95: 2, 2019, pp. 277–96.
⁶ Michael N. Barnett, ‘What is International Relations theory good for?’, in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Royn and Diane Labrosse, eds, Chaos in the liberal order: the Trump presidency and international politics in the twenty-first century (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 8–21.
⁷ On this point, see Daniel W. Drezner, ‘Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency’, International Affairs 96: 2, 2020, pp. 383–4.
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which lacks meaningful institutions and thus constitutes merely an instrument of state power. As Frank Schimmelfennig observes, ‘strong versions of institutional theory [which emphasize the agency of the Secretary-General and the wider bureaucracy] have not been prominent or supported in studies of NATO’.9

But NATO is more than a narrow military alliance held together by common threat perceptions: it is a security organization, undergirded by strong institutions, interdependencies and shared foundational values.10 Indeed, recent contributions to the scholarship affirm the growing importance of NATO senior officials,11 echoing an emerging wider research agenda on the significance of secretariats in fending off contestation.12 Julia Gray, for example, shows that the quality of its bureaucracy is a key determinant of the vitality of an international organization (IO), while Maria Debre and Hylke Dijkstra demonstrate that IOs with greater bureaucratic capacity are less likely to die when challenged and more likely to exploit crises as opportunities for organizational growth.13 Thus, the outcome of contestation is in many cases not predetermined but dependent on how the IO leadership responds.

Drawing on 23 original interviews with senior NATO and allied officials (from delegations in Brussels and national capitals), this article sets out to trace how the NATO Secretary-General and other senior officials responded to Trump’s contestation and to evaluate how causally relevant these responses were for NATO’s survival.14 It focuses on Trump’s two central demands: for greater transatlantic burden-sharing and for closer relations with Russia.15 The article finds that Secr-

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8 Adrian Hyde-Price, ‘NATO and the European security system: a neo-realist analysis’, in Mark Webber and Adrian Hyde-Price, eds, Theorising NATO (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 41–60; Stephen M. Walt, ‘Why alliances endure or collapse’, Survival 39: 1, 1997, pp. 156–79; Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of international politics (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1979).
9 Frank Schimmelfennig, ‘NATO and institutional theories of international relations’, in Webber and Hyde-Price, eds, Theorising NATO, pp. 93–115.
10 Wallace Thies, Why NATO endures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Celeste Wallander, ‘Institutional assets and adaptability: NATO after the Cold War’, International Organization 54: 4, 2000, pp. 705–35; David Yost, ‘NATO’s evolving purpose and the next strategic concept’, International Affairs 86: 2, 2010, pp. 489–522.
11 John Deni, Security threats, American pressure, and the role of key personnel: how NATO’s defence planning process is alleviating the burden-sharing dilemma (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2020); Heidi Hardt, NATO’s lessons in crisis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Seth Johnston, How NATO adapts (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); Sebastian Mayer, ed., NATO’s post-Cold War politics (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). For classic accounts, see Robert Jordan, Political leadership in NATO: a study in multinational diplomacy (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1979); Ryan Hendrickson, Diplomacy and war at NATO (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).
12 Michael W. Bauer, Christoph Knill and Steffen Eckhard, eds, International bureaucracy: challenges and lessons for public administration research (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Leonard August Schuette, ‘Forging unity: European Commission leadership in the Brexit negotiations’, Journal of Common Market Studies, publ. online 14 Jan. 2021, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13171; Monika Sus, ‘Supranational entrepreneurs: the High Representative and the EU Global Strategy’, International Affairs 97: 3, 2021, pp. 823–40.
13 Julia Gray, ‘Life, death, or zombie? The vitality of international organizations’, International Studies Quarterly 62: 1, 2018, pp. 1–13; Maria Debre and Hylke Dijkstra, ‘Institutional design for a post-liberal order: why some international organizations live longer than others’, European Journal of International Relations 27: 1, 2021, pp. 31–39.
14 Due to the circumstances of the pandemic, all interviews were conducted via video conference tools.
15 This article only touches upon Trump’s later demand for NATO to focus on China, because the chosen two cases were arguably more significant for NATO’s survival. Before NATO started discussing China in 2019, Trump had already changed his public position on the alliance. Nonetheless, the case of China also illustrates incidences of strategic behaviour by Stoltenberg, as shown below.

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Secretary-generals, IO leadership and hegemonic contestation

This section theorizes how and when IO leaders can blunt hegemonic contestation. Secretary-generals are most likely to spearhead the responses to hegemonic contestation, but they tend to be supported by other senior officials who can draw on the IO’s bureaucratic machinery, such as the deputy secretary-general, director of the private office or heads of divisions. Hegemonic contestation here refers to public criticism by a hegemonic member state, accompanied by demands for institutional changes and implicit or explicit threats of withdrawal. Hegemonic contestation poses a grave danger to the survival of IOs, as they tend to be extremely dependent on, and thus vulnerable to, the hegemonic member state, which makes unrivalled material contributions and possesses superior sources of influence. When the IO’s very existence is called into question, its leadership should therefore naturally seek to exploit all its formal and informal levers of power to fend off contestation.16 For survival-seeking IO leaders, however, hegemonic contestation poses a dilemma.

On the one hand, hegemonic contestation generates enormous pressures to adapt to the hegemon’s demands. In IOs where the power distribution among members is balanced, IO leaders must weigh up the potential costs of inaction in the eyes of

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16 Joern Ege, ‘What international bureaucrats (really) want: administrative preferences in international organization research’, Global Governance 26: 4, 2020, pp. 577–600; Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, Emergency powers of international organizations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
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the contesting state against the costs of adapting in the eyes of the non-contesting states, which have not exerted pressure for change and thus appear satisfied with the status quo. However, in IOs characterized by stark power asymmetry—such as NATO—leaders must prioritize the preferences of the hegemon over those of other member states to avert potentially fatal sanctions or withdrawal. On the other hand, hegemonic contestation often also creates heavy pressures to resist. Hegemonic contestation is likely to address core rather than peripheral features of the organization because hegemons tend to possess sufficient influence within organizations to reform technicalities. This threat to core features is reinforced when the sources of hegemonic contestation lie in the nationalist populist turn at home, which explicitly rejects the foundational multilateral principles of IOs. Thus, adaptation risks undermining the very material or ideational raison d’être of the IO, with which officials tend to identify.

Navigating this trade-off between the potentially high costs of both adaptation and resistance is a difficult task. Nonetheless, IO leaders may be able to do so if they respond strategically; that is, if they proactively formulate and implement a response deliberately tailored to overtly embrace those hegemonic demands least harmful to the organization while subtly resisting those deemed harmful to its integrity. Recognizing that outright resistance to the hegemon is infeasible, IO leaders must adapt sufficiently to placate the hegemon while prioritizing certain features of the organization to protect them from the hegemon’s encroachment. Strategic responses thus contrast with passive responses, which may take the form of simply following the orders of the hegemon, trying to sit out the contestation or following a pre-existing script.

Whether the IO leadership can respond strategically depends on three conditions. First, secretary-generals and senior officials need to have internal levers of power, here referred to as institutional capacity; otherwise they are little more than toothless administrative actors. Formulating a strategy requires a secretariat of sufficient size to provide secretary-generals with enough policy-grade personnel (i.e. not linguists, administrative assistants or manual workers) available to analyse the challenge and devise a response. In order to go on to implement the strategy, the IO’s leaders need to possess formal and/or informal powers to set the agenda or take decisions. The greater the level of delegation, the greater the

17 Catherine E. De Vries, Sara B. Hobolt and Stefanie Walter, ‘Politicizing international cooperation: the mass public, political entrepreneurs, and political opportunity structures’, International Organization 75: 2, 2021, pp. 306–32.
18 David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse, ‘Challenges to the liberal order: reflections on international organization’, International Organization 75: 2, 2021, pp. 1–33.
19 Sarah von Billerbeck, ‘“Mirror, mirror on the wall”: self-legitimation by international organizations’, International Studies Quarterly 64: 1, 2020, pp. 207–19.
20 Nitsan Chorev, The World Health Organization between North and South (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Louisa Bayerlein, Christoph Knill and Yves Steinebach, A matter of style? Organizational agency in global public policy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
21 Debre and Dijkstra, ‘Institutional design for a post-liberal order’; Eugenia Heldt and Henning Schmidttke, ‘Measuring the empowerment of international organizations: the evolution of financial and staff capabilities’, Global Policy 8: 4, 2017, pp. 51–61.
22 Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Tobias Lenz, Jeanine Bezuïjen, Besir Ceka and Svet Derderyan, Measuring international authority: a postfunctionalist theory of governance, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
array of potential responses available. Furthermore, IOs with public communications units should be better able to promote their strategy, particularly given the increasingly mediatized environment of international politics. 23

Second, IO leaders rely on a favourable opportunity structure because they operate in a complex environment where they are rarely the most powerful actors. 24 In the case of NATO and Trump, the constellation of US domestic political actors and the role of other member states are relevant. The greater the internal resistance towards the hegemonic contestation, the greater the opportunities for IO leaders to build coalitions to resist hegemonic demands. Furthermore, the role of other member states—in the case of NATO, especially the big three European members, Germany, France and the United Kingdom—should not be discounted, even if the IO’s dependency on the hegemon is pronounced. Should other member states be in broad agreement with the leadership, they will be more likely to mount a strong defence of their preferences, and vice versa.

Third, aligning the latent institutional powers with external opportunities does not happen automatically but requires astute leadership by secretary-generals and senior officials. They need to acknowledge the existential nature of the contestation, recognize the external constraints and opportunities, and then mobilize the institutional capacity. Both the public administration and political leadership literatures highlight the significance of leaders’ personal qualities, such as intelligence, diplomatic talent and empathy, as well as their seniority in terms of their previous positions, and thus their diplomatic networks and reputation among heads of states and governments, in influencing how effectively IOs respond to contestation. 25 In addition, they ‘must get along with the United States’. 26

If these three conditions are met, IO leaders can respond strategically to hegemonic contestation. Such a response can be expressed in four mechanisms: agenda-setting, shielding, coalition-building and brokering. While these mechanisms are analytically distinct, in practice they may overlap, or may be employed in combination. Agenda-setting usually involves secretary-generals, as the most prominent officials, venue-shopping for the most receptive location, raising public awareness and framing issues favourably, and shaping internal proceedings. 27 Shielding entails isolating the organization from the interference of the contesting hegemon by keeping a low profile, using procedural tricks to exclude controversial policies from the agenda or preparing summit conclusions in advance to lay out the

23 Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, ‘Self-legitimation in the face of politicization: why international organizations centralized public communication’, Review of International Organizations 13: 4, 2018, pp. 519–46.
24 See e.g. Hylke Dijkstra, ‘Collusion in international organizations: how states benefit from the authority of secretariats’, Global Governance 23: 4, 2017, pp. 601–18.
25 See e.g. Arjen Boin, Paul t’Hart, Eric Stern and Bengt Sudelius, The politics of crisis management: public leadership under pressure (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
26 John Mathiason, Invisible governance: international secretariats in global politics (Sterling: Kumarian, 2007), p. 80.
27 Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, ‘Agenda dynamics and policy subsystems’, Journal of Politics 53: 4, 1991, pp. 1044–74; John W. Kingdon, Agendas, alternatives, and public policies (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984); Michael Schechter, Leadership in international organizations: systemic, organizational and personality factors, Review of International Studies 13: 3, 1987, pp. 197–220; Jonas Tallberg, ‘The power of the chair: formal leadership in international cooperation’, International Studies Quarterly 54: 1, 2010, pp. 241–65.
tracks.\textsuperscript{28} Coalition-building implies that the IO leadership cultivates close relations with like-minded actors to alter the balance of power between proponents and opponents in the IO leaders’ favour. In pursuit of this end, the IO leadership can variously collude with like-minded member states, orchestrate closely connected intermediaries in pursuit of shared objectives, or bring non-governmental actors on board.\textsuperscript{29} What is missing from the existing literature is recognition that IO leaders can also build coalitions with political actors from within the contesting state if the hegemonic demands are domestically controversial. Finally, brokering consists of facilitating compromises between the contesting hegemon and other member states in a way that furthers the secretariat’s own preferences.\textsuperscript{30} Secretary-generals frequently act as formal or informal chairs in negotiations to overcome deadlock.\textsuperscript{31}

In sum, hegemonic contestation poses an existential challenge to IOs, but IO leaders may be able to manage it if they respond strategically. Success in this enterprise depends in turn on the personal traits of the secretary-general and other leaders, the institutional machinery and powers of the particular IO, and the external environment.

\textbf{NATO’s strategic management of Trump}

This section analyses NATO actors’ management of President Trump. Trump’s demands for greater burden-sharing generated strong pressures for NATO leaders to adapt, while his calls for closer relations with Russia created strong pressures to resist. After briefly demonstrating that NATO met the three conditions that enable strategic responses, the following section examines how NATO actors navigated this dilemma between January 2017 and November 2020.

\textbf{NATO’s institutional powers, the US foreign policy establishment and Stoltenberg’s leadership}

To respond strategically to Trump, NATO needed to have the institutional capacity to formulate and implement a strategic plan, find like-minded supporting actors and benefit from astute leadership. NATO remains a largely intergovernmental organization, in which member states take decisions by unanimity in the North Atlantic Council, and the international staff and the secretary-general possess very limited decision-making authority.\textsuperscript{32} In a formal sense, NATO’s institutions are

\textsuperscript{28} Derek Beach and Sandrino Smeets, ‘The unseen hands: collaborative instrumental leadership by institutions in the British re-negotiation case’, \textit{European Journal of Political Research} 59: 2, 2019, pp. 444–64; Leonard A. Schuette, ‘Comparing the politicisation of EU integration during the euro and Schengen crises’, \textit{Journal of Contemporary European Research} 11: 4, 2019, pp. 380–400.

\textsuperscript{29} Dijkstra, ‘Collusion in international organizations’; Kenneth W. Abbott, Philipp Genschel, Duncan Snidal and Bernhard Zangl, eds, \textit{International organizations as orchestrators} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jonas Tallberg, Thomas Sommerer, Theresa Squatrito and Christer Joenssen, \textit{The opening up of international organizations} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

\textsuperscript{30} Derek Beach, ‘The unseen hand in treaty reform negotiations: the role and influence of the council secretariat’, \textit{Journal of European Public Policy} 11: 3, 2004, pp. 408–39.

\textsuperscript{31} Tallberg, ‘The power of the chair’.

\textsuperscript{32} Hooghe et al., \textit{Measuring international authority}, pp. 731–40; Mayer, NATO’s post-Cold War politics.
principally designed as supporting bodies for the allies. A closer look, however, reveals that the secretary-general in particular has diplomatic and communicative powers at his disposal. As the permanent chair of the North Atlantic Council, he can set the agenda and facilitate compromises. He is also the organizer of NATO summits and acts as the spokesperson of the alliance. NATO ranks among the largest IOs, with 1,000 civilians working in the international staff in Brussels, almost 500 of whom are policy-grade officials. The international staff includes a dedicated public diplomacy division, while the secretary-general’s private office also includes a policy planning unit, an internal think tank that offers policy expertise and strategic insights.

In addition, NATO relies on like-minded actors to build strategic coalitions. Most other allies were privately in support of NATO’s leaders but, as shown below, had very little influence on the US president. Political actors in the United States, however, offered greater opportunities for coalition-building. In the US, a plethora of actors are involved in foreign policy-making, including Congress, the State Department, the Pentagon and the National Security Council, as well as private actors including think tanks and business groups. Indeed, there was bipartisan support in Congress for the alliance; key figures in the administration such as Defense Secretary Mattis were ardent champions of NATO, and so were most non-governmental actors.

Finally, Jens Stoltenberg was a former prime minister of Norway before becoming NATO’s secretary-general in 2014. Former heads of state tend to view themselves as equals rather than servants of those who were previously colleagues in the North Atlantic Council, and generally have strong networks among senior politicians in member states. The recent trend towards selecting a former head of state as secretary-general is indicative of the increasing diplomatic status of the office. With a European but non-EU background, Stoltenberg was widely perceived as trusted broker without a personal agenda. Moreover, Stoltenberg’s deputy from 2016 to 2019, Rose Gottemoeller, was a former US under-secretary in the State Department with extensive connections in Washington. Thus, the three enabling conditions were sufficiently met, and NATO could consequently be expected to respond strategically to Trump’s contestation.

**Secretary-General Stoltenberg and Trump’s burden-sharing demands: agenda-setting and brokering**

Trump’s complaints about inequitable burden-sharing dominated his discourse on NATO in the early stages of his presidency, when he went so far as to make US collective defence guarantees conditional on allies meeting the 2 per cent defence...
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spending rule. Threatening to upend the 70-year-long US grand strategy towards Europe at a stroke, he demanded that allies must pay up, including for past deficiencies, or they have to get out. And if that breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO. He also questioned the underlying logic of unconditional support for allies when positing that he would only defend Baltic allies against Russian aggression if they had fulfilled their obligations to us. The issue therefore posed a veritable threat to the very survival of NATO. Had Trump carried out his threat to revoke US guarantees in the event that allied defence spending did not meet his demands, this would in effect have terminated the alliance built on the principle of unconditional solidarity in the face of external threats.

Trump’s demands for greater transatlantic burden-sharing were largely shared by NATO’s institutional actors, which had long been supportive of greater allied defence investment to meet the diverse security challenges in an increasingly hostile international landscape. Adaptation would therefore not pose a threat to the integrity of NATO; the main risk for the NATO leadership lay in allies not increasing their defence spending sufficiently to satisfy Trump. As a result, they had to walk a fine line. On the one hand, they needed to side with Trump in public and put pressure on allies to spend more on defence. On the other hand, they had to sell even modest increases as successes to please Trump. Indeed, senior officials were aware that allies would not immediately be able to increase defence spending sharply, given the political complexity and long-term nature of budgetary allocations and spending plans. In order to lobby allies and simultaneously convince Trump, and in the absence of formal means to compel allies to increase defence spending, Stoltenberg used public communications strategies and procedural means to set the agenda and broker compromises in the background.

The Secretary-General chose the public realm as the principal venue through which to pursue his strategy. In close liaison with NATO’s public diplomacy division, he used his prominent position to put public pressure on allies to increase their defence spending and credit the US president for allegedly achieving greater burden-sharing. As early as the day prior to Trump’s inauguration on 20 January 2017, Stoltenberg expressed ‘absolute confidence’ that President Trump was committed to NATO and lauded Trump for his ‘strong message’ on defence

36 For the debate around NATO defence spending, see Leonard A. Schuette, Toward a meaningful metric: replacing NATO’s 2% defence spending target, security policy brief no. 138 (Brussels: Egmont Institute, March 2021).
37 Quoted in Jacopo Barigazzi, ‘NATO chief counterattacks against Donald Trump’, Politico, 27 Sept. 2016, https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-chief-counterattacks-against-donald-trump-jens-stoltenberg/. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 18 Sept. 2021.)
38 Quoted in Max Fisher, ‘Donald Trump’s ambivalence on the Baltics is more important than it seems’, New York Times, 21 July 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/world/europe/donald-trump-nato-baltics-interpreter.html.
39 See exemplary statements by the last three NATO secretary-generals: Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, ‘Speech at Munich Security Conference’, Munich, 9 Feb. 2007, https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2007/070209d. html; Anders F. Rasmussen, ‘The Atlantic alliance in austere times’, Foreign Affairs 90: 4, 2011, pp. 2–6; Jens Stoltenberg, ‘Secretary General: NATO and the EU can achieve more if we work more closely together’, European Parliament, Brussels, 30 March 2015, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_118367.htm.
40 Interview 7.
41 Interview 1.
spending, pledging to ‘work with President Trump on how to adapt NATO’.\footnote{Quoted in Ryan Heath, ‘NATO chief seeks to be Trump BFF’, Politico, 29 Jan. 2017, https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-trump-strategy-stoltenberg-davos-world-economic-forum/}

On his first visit to Washington in April 2017, Stoltenberg embraced Trump’s criticism of allies’ insufficient defence spending, and also expressed gratitude to Trump for his ‘strong commitment to Europe’.\footnote{Louis Nelson, ‘NATO’s Stoltenberg: I agree with Trump on terrorism and defence’, Politico, 13 April 2017, https://www.politico.eu/article/natos-stoltenberg-i-agree-with-trump-on-terrorism-and-defence/} And appeasing Trump and playing to his ego seemed to be the purpose of Stoltenberg’s visit to the White House in May 2018, when he thanked the US President for his ‘leadership … on the issue of defence spending [which] has really helped to make a difference’, a sentiment he echoed at the Brussels summit in July 2018.\footnote{Eli Okun, ‘NATO chief thanks Trump for leadership on military spending’, Politico, 17 May 2018, https://www.politico.eu/article/jens-stoltenberg-donald-trump-nato-chief-thanks-trump-for-leadership-on-military-spending/; Jens Stoltenberg, ‘Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at a meeting with the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump’, Brussels, 11 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_166834.htm?selectedLocale=en.}

In 2019, the Secretary-General intensified his tailored communicative efforts aimed at Trump, repeatedly referring to what emerged as NATO’s new mantra on burden-sharing. In the run-up to Trump’s State of the Union speech in February, Stoltenberg appeared on the President’s favourite US news channel, Fox, crediting him for an ‘extra $100 billion’ allies would have added to their defence spending by the end of 2020.\footnote{Gregg Re, ‘NATO head: Trump’s tough talk has added $100B to alliance, helped deter Russia’, Fox News, 27 Jan. 2019, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/nato-head-says-trumps-tough-talk-has-helped-alliance.} When invited by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to be the first secretary-general of any IO to speak in front of both Houses of Congress in April 2019, he lauded President Trump’s positive impact on the alliance and again referred to the burden-sharing slogan.\footnote{Jens Stoltenberg, ‘Statement to the press by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg after meeting with US President Trump’, Brussels, 14 Nov. 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/ru/natohq/opinions_170788.htm?selectedLocale=uk.} Prior to the London leaders’ summit in December 2019, Stoltenberg reiterated to Trump that ‘your leadership on defence spending is having a real impact’, citing new defence spending figures that showed a $130 billion increase to members’ defence spending budgets, expected to rise to $400 billion by 2024.\footnote{NATO, ‘Defence expenditure of NATO countries (2012–2019)’, communiqué PR/CP(2019)069, 25 June 2019.}

Thus, the Secretary-General strategically promoted the view that Trump had prevailed over opposition from other member states. Importantly, the Secretary-General always chose to compare the spending figures to 2016—the year of Trump’s election—rather than 2015, when the allies’ budgets first showed increases, to obscure the possibility that factors other than Trump could be responsible.\footnote{Interview 2; interview 11; interview 12; interview 15, national official, 23 July 2020; interview 18.} The Secretary-General not only understood the power of the media in public discourse in general and for the US president—reportedly an avid consumer of US television—in particular, but also consciously adopted a simplistic and servile communication style to flatter the egocentric Trump.\footnote{1872}
interviewee adds that Stoltenberg would always present the defence spending figures in very simple bar charts to capture the president’s attention and cater for his alleged short attention span and inattention to detail.\textsuperscript{50}

Stoltenberg also used his procedural powers as chair of the North Atlantic Council to set the burden-sharing agenda at the most perilous moment for NATO during the Trump presidency—the NATO summit in July 2018. Trump’s ‘America First’ rhetoric had been particularly pronounced during that summer, and in June he had refused to sign the G7 statement. Trump was also due to fly to Helsinki for a controversial bilateral meeting with President Vladimir Putin right after the NATO summit, and there was a distinct fear among officials that he might decide at short notice to skip the NATO summit.\textsuperscript{51} While in the event Trump did attend the summit, he bore out officials’ concerns when he unleashed a personal attack on German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a bilateral meeting on the first day of the summit (11 July). The next day, tensions escalated further, and the summit was on the verge of collapse when President Trump hijacked a working meeting originally aimed at fostering relations with Ukraine and Georgia to threaten fellow allied leaders that the United States would ‘go its own way’ should his burden-sharing demands not be met.\textsuperscript{52} According to one interviewee, the US delegation had ‘no idea what was happening’.\textsuperscript{53}

Sensing the impending danger, Stoltenberg used his procedural powers as chair of the North Atlantic Council to turn the working meeting into an impromptu crisis meeting on burden-sharing. This was a highly unusual, strategic decision by the Secretary-General, as NATO summits tend to be ritualistic and formulaic. It proved to be of critical importance in appeasing Trump, playing to the narcissistic propensities of the US president by allowing him to vent his frustration and put pressure on Europeans to make concessions before taking credit for almost all NATO reforms undertaken since 2014 in the subsequent press conference, letting him walk away with a sense of victory.\textsuperscript{54}

Alongside the agenda-setting strategy, Stoltenberg also sought to exert complementary diplomatic pressures and broker compromises among other member states. His private office included several senior seconded officials, and he used them as ears and mouths in the capitals.\textsuperscript{55} He also regularly toured those capitals to persuade Europeans and Canada of the need for greater defence spending. While some allies felt unease about Stoltenberg’s overriding focus on defence spending as the principal indicator of burden-sharing, his reputation as an honest broker and skilled mediator allowed him to overcome these concerns.\textsuperscript{56} He also

\textsuperscript{50} Interview 7.
\textsuperscript{51} Guy M. Snodgrass, \textit{Holding the line: inside Trump’s Pentagon with Secretary Mattis} (New York: Sentinel, 2019), p. 272.
\textsuperscript{52} Robin Emmott, Jeff Mason and Alissa de Carbonnel, ‘Trump claims NATO victory after ultimatum to go it alone’, Reuters, 12 July 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit/trump-claims-nato-victory-after-ultimatum-to-go-it-alone-idUSKBN1K135H.
\textsuperscript{53} Interview 21, former national official, 9 March 2021.
\textsuperscript{54} Interview 3, national official, 4 June 2020; interview 10, national official, 17 June 2020; interview 21.
\textsuperscript{55} Interview 1.
\textsuperscript{56} Interview 2.
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tended explicitly to invoke the threat of US withdrawal to strengthen his case. In November 2019, senior officials in Stoltenberg’s private office helped broker a new common funding formula for NATO’s budget. In order to alleviate Trump’s criticism of allied, and in particular German, under-spending, Stoltenberg’s office worked behind the scenes with officials from the German chancellery and the US National Security Council to increase German contributions to match the reduced US level. While this was largely symbolic, given the relatively insignificant sums involved, it subsequently allowed Stoltenberg to claim another public victory for Trump’s burden-sharing agenda.

By the end of 2019, Trump had proclaimed his satisfaction at several points that ‘people are paying and I’m very happy with the fact that they’re paying’, despite the fact that increases were well below his demand that every ally meet the 2 per cent target (not to mention spending 4 per cent of GDP on defence, a demand he made at the 2018 summit). While national defence budgets have been on the rise since 2015, only seven out of 29 allies met the target in 2019 and only 15 had set out plans to reach 2 per cent of GDP of overall defence spending by 2024. There is therefore a correlation between Trump’s conversion on burden-sharing and Stoltenberg’s strategic responses; indeed, there are several pieces of evidence that suggest that the Secretary-General and senior officials played a causal role in that conversion.

First, Trump’s own comments suggest that Stoltenberg played a critical role in persuading him. Throughout his tenure, NATO’s Secretary-General maintained an amicable relationship with Trump, a rarity for any leader. Trump heaped lavish praise on Stoltenberg, describing their relationship as ‘outstanding’ and stating that he had ‘done an excellent job’—a judgement reinforced when Trump supported extending Stoltenberg’s term as secretary-general for another two years. Crucially, he established a direct link between Stoltenberg and burden-sharing, exclaiming that ‘the media never gives me credit but he gave me credit, now we’re up to way over $100 billion’. Moreover, Stoltenberg’s $100 billion slogan evidently gained traction with Trump, especially after the Secretary-General trumpeted it on Fox News, an announcement which Trump immediately retweeted and then cited for the first time in his State of the Union address just one week later.

Second, several closely involved national and NATO officials confirm that Trump began changing his stance after encounters with Stoltenberg, whose adroit

57 Interview 2; interview 13; interview 18.
58 Interview 17; also John Bolton, The room where it happened (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 135.
59 Quoted in Ryan Browne, ‘Trump praises NATO chief, says he’s happy allies are paying’, CNN, 2 April 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/02/politics/trump-stoltenberg-nato-praise/index.html.
60 NATO, Defence expenditure of NATO countries.
61 Interview 21.
62 Jens Stoltenberg, ‘Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US President Donald Trump during the NATO–US bilateral meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House’, Washington DC, White House, 2 April 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_165349.htm?selectedLocale=en.
63 David M. Herszenhorn, ‘Jens Stoltenberg’s (Trump) mission accomplished’, Politico, 3 Dec. 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/jens-stoltenberg-donald-trump-nato-secretary-general-brain-death-emmanuel-macron-mission-accomplished/.
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flattery pushed the right buttons with the president. 64 Close observers confirm this impression: the then British Ambassador in Washington characterized Stoltenberg as the ‘master Trump-whisperer’, 65 while one interviewee noted that the Secretary-General was always one of the first points of contact when defence decisions were impending and that ‘Trump looked to Stoltenberg for advice’. 66

Third, the beginning of Trump’s conversion can be traced to the 2018 summit, which was a critical moment for the alliance. The outcome of the summit hung in the balance; US officials attending the summit feared that Trump would announce the US withdrawal from NATO at the press conference on 12 July and had even instructed lawyers to analyse NATO’s founding treaty for advice on the legal mechanisms (though Congress would have prevented a formal withdrawal). Secretary Mattis was strikingly absent from the stage when Trump gave the press conference and, in private, implied his willingness to resign that day. 67 Without Stoltenberg’s unscripted and spontaneous decision to call the emergency session, all indicators suggests that Trump would at least have caused severe damage to the alliance.

And fourth, the principal alternative explanation that the US foreign policy establishment, or other allies, tamed Trump cannot account for his conversion, which began with the 2018 summit and culminated in his first public embrace of NATO’s turnaround on defence spending in February 2019. By then, the ‘adults in the room’ had long lost influence in the administration, and some had even left. 68 Secretary of State Tillerson was fired in March 2018, and National Security Advisor McMaster resigned in April 2018. Defense Secretary Mattis and Chief of Staff Kelly resigned in December 2018 and January 2019 respectively, and had reportedly lost the president’s ear long before their departures. 69 One official directly involved with the US president confirmed that they ‘had no intellectual impact on Trump’ and ‘never made a dent’ in his views on NATO.70 Other NATO allies helped to bring Trump round in a more passive way by moderately increasing their defence budgets, a point which NATO actors could then exploit, but they too had little direct influence on the President. 71 While the then British prime minister Theresa May successfully extracted a vague commitment to NATO from Trump at their first bilateral meeting in January 2017, their relationship quickly soured when Trump openly criticized her approach to Brexit. 72 Similarly, good relations between Trump and French President Macron were short-lived. With

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64 Interview 5, national official, 4 June 2020; interview 6, national official, 5 June 2020; interview 7; interview 13; interview 21.
65 Kim Darroch, Collateral damage: Britain, America and Europe in the age of Trump (London: William Collins, 2020), p. 212.
66 Interview 21.
67 Interview 21; also Snodgrass, Holding the line, p. 279.
68 Thomas Wright, ‘Trump’s foreign policy is no longer unpredictable’, Foreign Affairs, 18 Jan. 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2019-01-18/trumps-foreign-policy-no-longer-unpredictable.
69 Jennifer Jacobs, ‘Kelly loses White House clout as Trump blazes own path’, Bloomberg, 29 March 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-29/kelly-is-said-to-lose-white-house-clout-as-trump-blazes-own-path; also Snodgrass, Holding the line, pp. 202–3.
70 Interview 22, national official, 12 March 2021.
71 Interview 22.
72 Darroch, Collateral damage, pp. 239–56.
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German Chancellor Merkel, Trump appeared to have a personal feud, although she helped Stoltenberg manage Trump at the 2018 summit by stoically enduring his attacks.\(^{73}\) One official stressed that Stoltenberg was ‘the only one in Europe who had Trump’s ear’.\(^{74}\)

In sum, there is ample evidence that Stoltenberg responded strategically to Trump’s contestation by tailoring NATO’s public agenda-setting to the idiosyncrasies of the US president and adroitly employing procedural powers to manage the 2018 summit. Indeed, it appears that these activities were a causal factor in eventually persuading Trump that NATO was heeding his calls for greater transatlantic burden-sharing, despite very limited affirmative evidence. A critical role here was played by Stoltenberg’s personal leadership, as manifest in his conscious decision to build a close personal rapport with Trump and his diplomatic skill in doing so. He also understood the power of the media in shaping Trump’s thinking, and used his procedural powers as chair most effectively during the 2018 summit to avert the worst-case scenario. Several interviewees observed that Stoltenberg’s predecessor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, would have never managed to handle Trump, given his allegedly more pronounced ego.\(^{75}\) Trump’s narcissistic disposition and vulnerability to flattery were also key factors in the success of NATO’s agenda-setting strategy.

Interestingly, Stoltenberg and the NATO leadership employed similar strategies in the case of China. Senior officials were aware how much importance the Trump administration attached to putting China on NATO’s agenda, but also of the reluctance of many European allies to militarize relations with Beijing and distract NATO’s focus from Russia.\(^{76}\) Placating Trump required once again walking a fine line of setting the agenda on China while subsequently selling the mere reference to China in the 2019 London Declaration as substantial progress. After Stoltenberg helped broker a compromise at the summit,\(^{77}\) allies ‘recognise[d] that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges’.\(^{78}\) This represented another incidence of NATO demonstrating ostensible responsiveness to the US President, even if the declaration implied no operational consequences.\(^{79}\)

Stoltenberg and NATO’s Russia policy: coalition-building and shielding

Both during the presidential campaign and when in office, Trump made a string of interventions that suggested he wanted to re-establish cordial relations with Russia. He repeatedly expressed his admiration for Putin, calling him a ‘strong leader, a powerful leader’, and saying ‘I would love to be able to get along with

\(^{73}\) Interview 21.
\(^{74}\) Interview 9, former NATO official, 15 June 2020.
\(^{75}\) Interview 1; interview 10; interview 21.
\(^{76}\) Interview 5.
\(^{77}\) Interview 2; interview 4, NATO officials, 4 June 2020.
\(^{78}\) NATO, London Declaration, 4 Dec. 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm.
\(^{79}\) See Jeffrey Michaels, ‘A very different kind of challenge? NATO’s prioritization of China in historical perspective’, International Politics, 2021, doi: 10.1057/s41311-021-00334-z.
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Russia. He also lobbied for Russia’s re-integration in the G7, denied Russian interference in the 2016 US election, implicitly acknowledged Russia’s annexation of Crimea and cast doubt on whether his administration would uphold the sanctions regime. Moreover, his foreign policy team and trusted circle was full of Russophiles with close connections to Moscow (including Paul Manafort, Carter Page and Newt Gingrich).

Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, however, NATO had shifted back to its original purpose of providing territorial security to its member states against Russia. Hence, Trump’s ambiguous benevolence set off alarm bells, prompting concern among NATO and national officials that Trump would reduce the US investment in Europe and subvert NATO initiatives. One official said that the ‘Russia question was looming large over Brussels’. Such a dilution, or even reversal, of NATO’s defence and deterrence posture towards Russia would have undermined the very raison d’être of the alliance originally founded to defend Europeans against Soviet aggression. NATO leaders were steadfast in their opposition to a thaw in relations with Russia, but were caught in the dilemma of hegemonic contestation that rendered overt resistance to Trump unfeasible. Consequently, the NATO leadership set out to resist Trump’s demands in subtle fashion by building coalitions with favourable actors in the United States and shielding Russia policy from Trump.

The case of Russia policy involved a different logic from the case of burden-sharing. Rather than being a matter of political deliberation, NATO’s stance on Russia was a matter of concrete policy-making, which necessarily gave the US foreign policy bureaucracy a much greater role. Stoltenberg sought to exploit the political support NATO enjoyed among the US foreign policy establishment by building coalitions with supportive actors to coordinate policy and maintain US domestic support for the alliance. Relying on both his own and his deputy’s personal network, the Secretary-General worked through two channels in the US system: first, the traditional transatlantic establishment in the State Department, Pentagon and parts of the National Security Council; and second, Congress. Trump’s initial appointments of NATO-sceptical officials and foreign policy advisers proved short-lived, and transatlanticist establishment figures soon took over. General McMaster was appointed National Security Advisor in the summer of 2017 (later replaced by NATO-supporting John Bolton) and swiftly brought in experienced foreign policy experts such as Fiona Hill, while General Kelly became White House chief of staff. Together with Secretary of Defense Mattis, these

80 See ‘Trump on Russia: in his own words’, Russia Matters, 13 July 2018, https://russiamatters.org/analysis/trump-russia-his-own-words.
81 For a critical analysis of Trump’s Russia sanctions policy, see Edward Fishman, James Lamond and Max Bergmann, ‘No, Trump has not been “tough” on Russia’, Washington Post, 13 Oct. 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/10/13/no-trump-has-not-been-tough-russia/.
82 On Trump’s connections to the Kremlin, see Catherine Belton, Putin’s people: how the KGB took back Russia and then took on the West (New York: William Collins, 2020).
83 Interview 2; interview 7; interview 13; interview 14, national official, 13 July 2020.
84 Interview 14.
85 Interview 17.
individuals formed a strong alliance that sought to tame Trump’s anti-NATO instincts.86

General Mattis emerged as a particularly strong supporter of NATO’s eastern policy and became the main point of contact for senior alliance officials.87 It was General Mattis who devised NATO’s Readiness Initiative, eventually agreed in 2018 with limited involvement from the White House, which committed the alliance to have 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 naval combat vessels ready to use within 30 days.88 NATO, with active support from the United States, also implemented the Enhanced Forward Presence initiative in 2017, agreed at the Warsaw summit in 2016, deploying four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to bolster its deterrent posture. Mattis also reinforced Stoltenberg’s reputation in private meetings with Trump.89 Throughout Trump’s term in office, the Secretary-General also cultivated relations with members of the US Congress. He regularly hosted US delegations in Brussels, and spoke as first Secretary-General of any IO in front of both Houses of Congress in April 2019 to rally domestic support for NATO.

Besides coalition-building, the NATO leadership also sought to shield NATO’s Russia policy from Trump. In an attempt to keep the issue beneath Trump’s radar, Stoltenberg prioritized burden-sharing over Russia policy in his public communications with Trump.90 In the press conferences or remarks following their six bilateral meetings between April 2017 and December 2019, Stoltenberg always emphasized the need for greater burden-sharing; in three of the press conferences he did not mention Russia policy at all, while in the others he addressed Russia only cursorily.91 By selectively engaging with Trump’s demands in public, the Secretary-General tried to focus his attention on the agenda items that were supported by NATO leaders and were least harmful to the organization, thereby illustrating that NATO’s responses to Trump’s demands on burden-sharing and Russia were intimately connected.

The most visible and consequential instance of shielding occurred in the run-up to the summit of July 2018. In the light of Trump’s refusal to sign the G7 communiqué, senior officials tried to ‘Trump-proof’ the summit. The Secretary-General, together with US diplomats, successfully put pressure on ambassadors to agree upon a declaration prior to the summit to prevent any last-minute interference from Trump.92 They decided to keep the text ‘short and sweet’ and publicly downplay the achievements to keep them beneath Trump’s radar.93 After Stoltenberg successfully appeased Trump, allies agreed on the Readiness Initiative,

86 Porter, ‘Why America’s grand strategy has not changed’, pp. 43–4; Walt, The hell of good intentions, pp. 221–3.
87 Interview 7; interview 20, national official, 8 Feb. 2021; interview 21.
88 Interview 3; interview 23, national official, 12 March 2021.
89 Snodgrass, Holding the line, pp. 166–7.
90 Interview 17; interview 21.
91 See e.g. Nelson, ‘NATO’s Stoltenberg’; Okun, ‘NATO chief thanks Trump for leadership on military spending’; Stoltenberg, ‘Statement to the press by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg after meeting with US President Trump’; Browne, ‘Trump praises NATO chief’.
92 Interview 3; interview 9; interview 10; interview 17; interview 19, EU official, 26 Jan. 2021; see also Bolton, The room where it happened, p. 137.
93 Interview 21.
criticized Russia, invited North Macedonia to join, and established an Atlantic Command post to facilitate swift response to a potential war in Europe. NATO actors’ efforts at shielding were further manifest in their decisions to reorganize summits where Russia policy was a central discussion point. One of the Secretary-General’s first decisions was to postpone Trump’s first visit to NATO’s headquarters to May 2017. Officials in the alliance’s international staff hoped that Trump’s anger would dissipate over the months and that he would be taught the value of NATO by the ‘adults in the room’, that is, General Mattis and his then chief of staff John Kelly. In an attempt to prevent Trump from disrupting the celebrations, the Secretary-General also downgraded NATO’s 70th anniversary summit in April 2019 in Washington DC to a foreign ministerial meeting, which was attended by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo instead.

NATO maintained a robust defence and deterrence posture towards Russia throughout Trump’s tenure, despite the US President’s calls to the contrary. NATO’s new Readiness Initiative would, if implemented, be a significant step towards preparedness for conflict with Russia. The United States also steadily increased the budgetary allocation for the European Deterrence Initiative, actively participated in military exercises (20,000 US troops participated in the Trident Juncture exercise in 2018) and took command of one multinational battle-group in Poland under the umbrella of the Enhanced Forward Presence. Notwithstanding Trump’s announcement of the withdrawal of almost 12,000 troops from Germany—plans which have since been put on ice by the Biden administration—Trump did not substantially undermine NATO’s posture vis-à-vis Russia.

Whereas NATO leaders played a causal role in converting Trump on burden-sharing, they played a lesser but still significant part in maintaining a robust Russia policy. The effects of Stoltenberg’s strategic neglect of Russia in his public communications are difficult to discern empirically, but it probably helped to distract Trump. The most consequential episode of agency on the part of NATO actors was their shepherding of the 2018 summit, which proved to be among the most consequential in years in terms of new policy measures on Russia. Nevertheless, the unwavering commitment to NATO in the Pentagon, the State Department, the National Security Council and Congress was essential in resisting Trump’s demands for closer relations with Russia.

Conclusion

NATO survived one of the gravest contestations in its history, and this outcome was not predetermined. This article’s point of departure lies in two puzzling observations: first, that President Trump changed his stance on transatlantic burden-
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sharing despite increases in allied defence budgets remaining significantly below his demands; and second, that the United States reinforced NATO’s defence and deterrence posture towards Russia notwithstanding Trump’s preferences to the contrary. Inspired by flaws in existing accounts of Trump’s NATO policy and an emerging research agenda on the agency of IO leadership under pressure, this article has examined the role played during these years by the NATO leadership, in particular Secretary-General Stoltenberg. It has traced how NATO actors responded to Trump by setting the burden-sharing agenda, shielding Russia policy from the US president, building coalitions with favourably inclined actors in the US foreign policy machinery, and brokering compromises among allies in the background. The empirical section has demonstrated that NATO leaders strategically navigated the dilemma of hegemonic contestation by signalling sufficient adaptation to placate the US president while protecting core features of the alliance from Trump’s demands.

Whether Trump truly changed his mind on NATO is impossible to ascertain, but Stoltenberg and senior officials were a necessary factor in persuading him to change his public position on burden-sharing and in managing the critical 2018 summit, while also playing a supportive role in maintaining a robust Russia policy. Thus, NATO leaders exhibited a striking degree of agency in helping NATO survive. Indeed, had NATO leaders acted as passive servants, as most writing on the subject presumes, Trump could have been much more destructive. Congress would have prevented Trump from formally withdrawing the United States from NATO—in 2019, both the House of Representatives and the Senate passed legislation to prevent him from using federal funds to bring about such a withdrawal. But without the actions of Stoltenberg, it is plausible that if Trump had still expressed his intention to withdraw, the mere announcement of that intention would have meant the de facto end of NATO in its current form. A passive secretary-general would have also been unable to build a close rapport with Trump and convince him in 2019 that he had successfully imposed his will on allies to achieve greater burden-sharing.

In addition, passive NATO actors would have been unable to manage the highly contingent 2018 summit. National officials would have still tried to shield the proceedings from Trump; but without senior officials heaping pressures on allies to agree to a summit declaration early and, crucially, without the Secretary-General strategically using his procedural powers to provide Trump with the opportunity to voice his grievances, the US President would probably have refused to sign the summit declaration (as he did at the G7), and in doing so blocked important NATO initiatives and massively undermined the credibility of the alliance. It is entirely conceivable that he would have continued publicly berating allies, toying with the idea of withdrawal, and potentially politicizing NATO membership during the 2020 presidential election campaign.

99 Joe Gould, ‘Would Trump drive NATO exit? Congress works on roadblocks’, Defence News, 16 Dec. 2019, https://www.defencenews.com/congress/2019/12/16/would-trump-drive-nato-exit-congress-works-on-roadblocks/.

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The analysis presented here broadly vindicates the theoretical claim that IO leaders can protect their preferences, even under conditions of hegemonic contestation. It has demonstrated that this strategic capacity was contingent on Stoltenberg’s astute leadership, the often overlooked institutional levers of power at the disposal of IO leaders (such as the agenda-setting powers of the chair of the North Atlantic Council), and strong support for the alliance from the US foreign policy establishment. Other allies played a minor role in directly managing Trump, though without their moderate increases in defence spending, even the ‘master Trump-whisperer’ Stoltenberg would have been unable to influence the president. The fact that these defence spending increases would probably not have happened in the absence of Russian aggression in Ukraine constitutes one of the many fortunate contingencies for NATO.100

On a broader level, the article’s counter-intuitive findings on NATO’s agential qualities should moderate the prevalent state-centric view of NATO. Some insights are probably specific to the Trump presidency; his particular susceptibility to flattery and inattention to policy detail, which helped NATO’s strategic behaviour, appear seldom if ever among heads of state or government. However, NATO has gradually become a stronger institution, and the office of the secretary-general has also been empowered. The case of Trump’s contestation testifies that NATO is a resilient security organization with greater power than is traditionally attributed to it. This observation is particularly relevant because the fundamental debate about the future of the alliance shows no sign of abating. French President Macron’s allegation that NATO is ‘brain-dead’ highlights persisting tensions in the alliance.101 However, while the rise of China, enduring conflicts among some of the allies, democratic decay across the West and new security challenges, to name but a few factors, will raise questions about the relevance of NATO, its leaders have demonstrated that they will not be passive pawns in the game.

100 Interview 8, NATO official, 9 June 2020.
101 ‘Emmanuell Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead’, The Economist, 7 Nov. 2019, https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead.