



Unpacking the “Mess” of Multilateral Crisis Management: NATO’s Defense Posture from Afghanistan to Ukraine

Julien Pomarède 

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, the development of crisis management operations has been central to multilateralism. Crisis management covers a wide range of civil-military activities (logistical support, development programs, low-intensity peacekeeping, warfighting), which aim at stabilizing conflict-torn countries from the Global South. The most important international organizations, such as the UN, NATO and the EU, have been involved, through their member states, in such missions in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa. In spite of its important rise on the contemporary international security agenda, crisis management remains

J. Pomarède (✉)
University of Liège, Liège, Belgium
e-mail: Julien.Pomarede@uliege.be

an immense challenge to multilateralism. The reason lies in the multiplicity of its objectives and underlying national interests. The overarching goal of crisis management being the peaceful stabilization of conflict-torn societies, various civil and military tools, as well as objectives, are needed to be deployed and coordinated, which constitutes the main difficulty of multilateral operations. A well-developed literature shows that most of the crisis management missions conducted from the early 1990s to nowadays are characterized by strongly competing objectives, motives or institutional cultures among the states' diplomacies, armed forces and agencies (Fassin & Pandolfi, 2013). Therefore, the multilateral organizations are subject to fierce disagreements among their member states, which often result in a fragmentation of crisis management operations into poorly coordinated, contradictory and inefficient civil and military initiatives.

The obstacles of international crisis management have been largely commented, but the question of how it works in practice remains opened. It is certain that the contemporary interventions display significant contradictions but their longevity indicates that a consensus is at work. Without a minimal consensus, crisis management missions could not even exist. How is multilateral consensus in crisis management built and how does it stand in spite of the disagreements inhabiting the negotiations? What makes the so-called mess of international operations work? To answer these questions, the chapter argues that the “constructive ambiguities” at play in multilateral negotiations has a substantial role in maintaining crisis management alive. The categories used to qualify and coordinate the interventions, such as “comprehensive approach”, “counterinsurgency” or “counterterrorism”, are often vague, ambiguous and unclear in their definition, given the variety of the interests at stake. Rather than seeing this vagueness as a pathology of crisis management, I conceive this semantic flexibility as a constructive component of both power relations and consensus building. As it has been demonstrated in a recent sociological literature in international relations, the functionality of ambiguities is to facilitate consensus but their core logic lies in (the mitigation of) conflicts. Constructive ambiguities facilitate the meaningful aggregation of different and potentially incompatible views (Jegen & Mérand, 2014; Rayroux, 2014). They are individually strategic (serving political influence) and collectively functional (making consensus possible). They catalyze the structuration of political relationships among players involved in the disputed game of multilateral crisis management.

To illustrate the hypothesis, the chapter focuses on the trajectory of NATO’s crisis management. Crisis management has been a central component to NATO’s post-Cold War transformation into a security organization mainly directed against risks to the stability of the Euro-Atlantic era rather than against existential threats (the USSR during bipolarity). It is part of NATO’s “three core-tasks”. The two others being collective defense, the main legacy of the Cold War era, entrenched in the famous Article 5 of the Washington Treaty¹ and cooperative security, which consists in partnerships with non-member countries. NATO has conducted an important quantity of crisis management missions, in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Libya and is now reacting to the threat of Russia’s invasion warfare at its border, in Ukraine. I will pay a specific attention to NATO’s deployment in Afghanistan and I will open the debate to the context of the conflict in Ukraine. In comparing the two cases, my intention is to extend the reflexions I have been conducted about the central role of ambiguities in NATO’s crisis management. The Afghan part of the chapter results from an extensive PhD fieldwork on NATO’s counterterrorism after 9/11, conducted between 2015 and 2018. This is why I rely on anonymized interviews with officials working for the Alliance, such as members of NATO’s International Staff and International Military Staff, diplomats and military officers from national delegations. NATO’s reaction to the war in Ukraine is the object of a more recent research. For that reason, it is explored through publicly available sources whose analysis echoes my conclusions drawn from the Afghan case.

NATO’s operation in Afghanistan, the International Assistance Security Force (ISAF), is a typical case of the strong tensions inhabiting crisis management. Launched as a reaction to the 9/11 attacks and aiming at stabilizing Afghanistan “to ensure [that it] would never again become a safe haven for terrorists” (NATO, 2022),² NATO’s mission endured extreme tensions among the member states over the implementation of this common objective and resulted in a dramatic escalation of violence

¹ As such, NATO’s reaction to the Ukraine war can be seen as a mix between crisis management and collective defense. The Article 5 has not been formally evoked (Ukraine is not a NATO member) and the Alliance is officially responding to a “crisis” at its boarder. But the spirit of NATO’s reaction—the reinforcement of its deterrence posture against Russia to prevent an aggression against the Alliance’s Eastern members—is often associated with collective defense.

² The ISAF lasted from 2001 to 2014. For reasons of word length, I will stop to 2012, from when NATO’s military effort significantly decreased.

(Dorronsoro, 2021). Therefore, NATO's ISAF is an interesting case to explore how crisis management consensus lives in spite of the failures it led to in Afghanistan. On the contrary, the Alliance's reaction to the war in Ukraine revitalizes NATO's crisis management after the Afghan quagmire. Russia's aggression strengthened NATO's cohesion by redirecting the Alliance to its historical task: deterring a major and conventional attack from Russia. Even if the rapid and significant consolidation of NATO's dissuasion on the Eastern flank indicates that crisis management might live on more stable and less disputed bases, an attentive analysis of the multilateral debates in the Alliance about the situation in Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 also shows significant divergences. Therefore, the comparison between the ISAF and NATO's reaction to the war in Ukraine is an interesting case to demonstrate that the ambiguity of consensus constitutes an inescapable property of crisis management.

2 NATO IN AFGHANISTAN: THE RATIONALITY OF VIOLENCE ESCALATION

In response to 9/11, the US-led coalition Enduring Freedom intervened in Afghanistan, resulting in the fall of the Taliban regime, which provided a safe harbor to the Al-Qaeda operatives responsible for the attacks. To ensure a peaceful transition, the UN quickly created a stabilization force, the ISAF. Under the pressure of the Bush administration, desiring a more substantial military implication from the other contributing countries, ISAF's command was transferred to NATO in 2003. From 2003 onwards, NATO's collective leitmotiv about the ISAF was to make sure that "Afghanistan would never become again a safe haven for terrorists". Nevertheless, this consensual objective covered important diplomatic struggles, especially about the use of force. A fracture emerged between the member states heavily involved in combat missions (the US, Great Britain, Canada) in the Southern and Eastern provinces of Afghanistan and the NATO states deployed in the more stable Northern and Western regions (Germany, Italy, Spain) (Rynning, 2012: 125–127). The first ones pleaded for an increased involvement of the second ones in the fights. Consequently, NATO's diplomatic and military players struggled to define ISAF through the prism of counterinsurgency, comprehensive approach or counterterrorism. At NATO, between 2003 and 2009, the US insisted on the qualification of the ISAF as a counterterrorist and/

or counterinsurgency operation in order to encourage a greater participation of European countries in combat missions (Rynning, 2012: 95–97). The latter were nevertheless “opposed to the adoption of these terminologies because it associated ISAF with a war force that would have pushed them to reinforce their presence. This is why European allies preferred to use the term comprehensive approach, through which the use of force was understood as one tool among other non-military means. It was also the case for counterinsurgency of course, but the comprehensive approach had the virtue of being a political euphemism concerning violence” (Interview, September 2015).

The comprehensive approach was, therefore, the consensual notion agreed upon by the allies between 2003 and 2009 to conduct the ISAF. It struck a balance between the US and European diplomatic positions concerning the use of force. Due to these tensions, the comprehensive approach became a vague terminology. For most of the European contributors, the comprehensive approach meant a limited military engagement, in support of the US leadership, to be combined with a development effort coordinated by civil agencies (Pomarède, 2021: 78–19). For the US, the comprehensive approach was a euphemism for what they considered as a conflict of strong intensity in which the priority is to get larger military resources from the allies (Pomarède, 2021: 80). The US diplomacy played on this plasticity to forge its domination. Being by far the predominant provider of troops and combat forces (see Table 1), the US used the comprehensive approach “to maintain an apparent consensus among NATO allies about the overall orientation of ISAF, while working at the same time to persuade the Europeans about the added-value of a more aggressive counterinsurgency approach” (Interview, April 2015).

Consequently, even if the US progressively dominated the campaign, the ISAF was ambivalent in its objectives. The elusive nature of the counterinsurgency/comprehensive approach shows that the political negotiations resulted in a US-European compromise. The US did not monopolize the significance of the ISAF but, on the contrary, had an interest in maintaining the ambiguity to secure a minimal political-military support of the European allies.

The effects of the counterinsurgency/comprehensive approach ambivalence on NATO’s power dynamics were also visible at the military level. The composition of the multilateral chain of command, a central element in states’ strategies to influence the conduct of operations, is an interesting example. The diplomatic ambiguity over the CA

Table 1 Evolution of troops contribution among ISAF main contributors, 2007–2012

	<i>US</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>
January 2007	14000	5200	1000	3000
December 2007	15038	7753	1292	3155
December 2008	19950	8745	2785	3600
January 2009	31855	9000	3070	4245
November 2010	90000	9500	3850	4341
Décembre 2010	90000	9500	3916	4818
July 2011	90000	9500	3935	4812
Décembre 2012	68000	9500	543	4318

Source NATO ISAF placemats (<https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/107995.htm>)

was articulated to the US military domination in the chain of command, where the US generals hold key positions. For instance, from 2006, all the ISAF Commanders (COMISAFs) nominated were Americans, on the basis of the recommendation from the US Department of Defense (DoD). If the US COMISAFs reported to NATO’s Strategic Command (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe—SHAPE) and implemented NATO’s positions, they also played on the ambiguity of the CA to promote counterinsurgency. Before 2009, the US COMISAFs were indeed appointed by the US administration on the basis of their aggressive reputation in campaigns, as it was the case with Dan McNeill (COMISAF in 2007–2008). Nicknamed “Bomber McNeill”, he was previously in charge of the US Combined Joint Task Force 180 (2002–2003) in Bagram, where he supervised targeted killings against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The DoD recommended McNeill as COMISAF “because he was known for his experience in the conventional use of force, which meant the elimination of the enemy” (Interview, June 2015; Auerswald & Saideman, 2014: 98). Supporter of an aggressive COIN approach to defeat the insurgency, McNeill declared that the CA “includes a strong military option [...]. Those who talk about a comprehensive approach should not forget the combat element” (MacNeill, 2008). From this perspective, the ambiguous logic of the US ascendancy was also a product of European tactics of resistances in the chain of command. To counter-balance the US military influence, Deputies position to the COMISAF were created and attributed to European commanders. The objective was to promote the CA into the ISAF and to contain the US’s way, but, in

reality, the Deputies had a very limited influence on the top Commander (Pomarède, 2021: 90–92).

The coercive dynamic of the US dominance was accentuated after the surge in 2009. It was a turning point both in the escalation of violence and in the US-European relationships. Between 2009 and 2011, the American presence in ISAF skyrocketed from 40 000 to 90 000 troops (see table). The objectives of the surge were the destruction of the insurgency’s capacities with the aim to transfer as quickly as possible the security missions to the Afghan authorities (Woodward, 2010: 284). Due to the increase in US troops, the European allies accepted the adoption of counterinsurgency in late 2009. In the following years, NATO’s declarations nevertheless marginally referred to the ISAF as a counterinsurgency operation, mentioning rather the comprehensive approach: “COIN was adopted at NATO because the US significantly strengthened their presence in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, European allies such as France or Germany were still not comfortable with COIN. They wanted to preserve their military and political leverage in the campaign. The comprehensive approach still made sense to them, and this is why NATO’s declarations started to mention the two notions in an interchangeable way” (Interview, August 2015).

On the military side, Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of the lethal Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC—2003–2008) that mainly operated in Iraq, was appointed ISAF Commander in 2009. Relying on the counterinsurgency discourse (with a greater accent put over the protection of populations than his predecessors), but with experience in Special Operation Forces accumulated at the JSOC, he used the surge to launch large military offensives (such as Moshtarak in 2010, the biggest ISAF operation since 2001) and to increase SOF raids (McChrystal, 2014: 366). This continuous comprehensive approach/counterinsurgency ambivalence influenced the evolution of the power setting of domination in the ISAF: “it allowed the US to take the ascendancy over the ISAF and it preserved the continuous reluctance of the Europeans to be militarily and politically constrained by the war consonance of the US counterinsurgency” (Interview, October 2015).

The US diplomatic-military personnel also relied on their simultaneous positions in both the ISAF and the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom. Qualified as counterterrorist, Enduring Freedom was special forces targeted killings coalition acting against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban insurgency. The cooperation between ISAF and Enduring Freedom was

a result of internal struggles at NATO. The US continuously insisted on the necessity to unify the two missions in order to support ISAF in combat missions (Rynning, 2012: 95–97). The European allies like France, Germany or Spain “wanted to keep the operations under a separate command, due to their reluctance to see NATO evolve into a lethal counterterrorist war force” (Interview, July 2015).

In 2005, the diplomatic solution found to conciliate the US-European views was called the “synergy”. It meant an ISAF/Enduring Freedom collaboration through a partial unification of the chains of command. The ISAF/Enduring Freedom synergy was ambiguous, as it “remained difficult to differentiate a delimited superposition of the missions from their effective separation” (Interview, May 2015). This ambivalence mainly resulted from the US intent to merge the missions and was reflected by the American domination (focused on the importance of combat) over NATO’s operations. Indeed, the positions at the intersection of the ISAF/Enduring Freedom chains of command were held by US generals. This dynamic was even more explicit after 2008, when it was decided that the US ISAF Commander will be “double hatted”. He had under his control both ISAF and Enduring Freedom forces. This decision crystallized the US supremacy in the ISAF with the surge. This power shift was articulated through a strengthening in the multi-positions of the US diplomatic-military personnel within the ISAF/Enduring Freedom chains of command. Indeed, Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus (ISAF Commander in 2010–2011—also previously accustomed to the intense use of special forces in Iraq) increased the volume of special forces operations to support the ISAF (Kaplan, 2013: 344).

In spite of the increased cooperation between ISAF/Enduring Freedom, “NATO’s mission was officially kept separate from counterterrorism and continued to be qualified through comprehensive approach and counterinsurgency” (Interview, August 2015). This ambiguity marked the evolution of NATO’s consensus over the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan. The US took growing control over NATO’s mission through the adoption of counterinsurgency and the blurring of the ISAF/Enduring Freedom chain of command. At the same time, the formal separation between the two operations allowed for a working consensus between the US and the Europeans on the ISAF.

The Afghan campaign shows that the multiplicity of practices and meanings at the core of multilateral crisis management is not the pathological result of a chaotic and disorganized aggregation of states’ individual interests. While this “mess” and its ambiguities certainly participate to endless and sterile escalations of violence, it remained regulated by power relationships having their own logic. Through these struggles, state representatives made sense of armed crisis management and assembled an imperfect but actionable consensus.

3 AMBIGUITIES ON THE EASTERN FLANK: NATO’S POLITICS OF DETERRENCE AGAINST RUSSIA

NATO’s reaction to the war in Ukraine is different in nature from the Alliance’s mission in Afghanistan, where it fought an insurgency. First, NATO is performing its historical mission, deterring a conventional attack from a state enemy, Russia. The last NATO’s summit in Madrid (June 2022) is a significant marker of this evolution. The new Strategic Concept of the Alliance adopted at the occasion of the summit relegates Russia from the status of partner to the rank of “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security”. The war in Ukraine does not only revitalize NATO but makes it even more attractive to other European states. At the Madrid summit, the allies formally invited Sweden and Finland to join the Alliance, following their demand of membership. The other significant difference with Afghanistan is that NATO is not at war in Ukraine, but adopts a deterrence posture aimed at preventing an aggression against its Eastern member states. These two differences also explain why NATO’s reaction to the conflict in Ukraine is often described as a crisis management success, a “NATO revival”, which strongly contrasts with NATO’s failure in Afghanistan: the Alliance is refocused on its core-mission and, being in a deterrence context, does not have to face the immense political and operational difficulties inherent to an open-war situation. Nevertheless, the “great return of NATO” does not mean that the member states perfectly agree on the means to deter Russia. On the contrary, the Ukraine war suggests that dissension and ambiguity remain a core-component of multilateral crisis management.

My argument is that the category of the “Russian threat” drives a consensus between essentially two positions at NATO. On the one side, the Eastern European members (Baltic states, Poland, Romania,

Slovakia for instance), often supported by the US, push for a strong military posture toward Russia. On the other, the Western and Southern European members (France, Germany, Spain, for instance) promote a more balanced approach mixing dialogue with Russia and reasonable military dissuasion. Analyzing the Warsaw Summit of 2016, a decisive moment in NATO's response to Russia's military proactivity, Patrick Keller explains: "This was the dichotomy reiterated by pundits before the Warsaw Summit: that of an eastern flank led by Poland and the Baltic republics demanding significant steps to strengthen NATO's deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, versus a southern flank represented by Italy, Greece, Spain and France insisting that the actual danger Russia represents for the Alliance should not be exaggerated, and focusing instead on the security problems along Europe's southern border" (Keller, 2017: 54).

The Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) is an interesting example of how this dichotomy works and is conciliated in practice. The EFP is one of the main NATO's tools to react to the Russian aggression. It was initially created at the occasion of NATO's Warsaw Summit in 2016, in reaction to the Russian aggressive behavior in and around Ukraine: the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the political-military support to the separatist forces in the Donbass, and a broader military build-up in the region, especially in the Black Sea. Deployed in 2017, the EFP comprises four multinational battalion-size battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The battlegroups are respectively led by "framework nations", the UK, Canada, Germany and the US. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EFP was strengthened. NATO member states agreed to deploy four more multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. Since then, the EFP is composed of 8 multinational battlegroups (400 to 10 500 allied troops stationed in each country) and, in NATO's official words, "demonstrate[s] the strength of the transatlantic bond and make clear that an attack on one Ally would be considered an attack on the whole Alliance".

The very logic of the EFP is the result of a compromise between Eastern and Western European positions. In the negotiations prior to the Warsaw summit, the first ones insisted on the necessity to deploy permanent forces on their soils, in order to build a strong deterrence structure against Moscow's aggressiveness. Nevertheless, countries, such as France and Germany disagreed, arguing that permanent military structures stationed in NATO countries bordering Russia would be an excessive measure of escalation. More importantly, it would constitute a

violation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, which excludes the “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” in Central and Eastern Europe. The Allies came to the following consensus: the EFP will be a “permanent rotational presence”. The force will be physically positioned but its military components will rotate. The compromise makes possible the reassurance measures that Eastern European states need, while the rotational character of the presence satisfies the other concerned by a possible escalation with Russia.

If NATO’s official headlines describe the EFP as the “biggest reinforcement of Alliance collective defence in a generation”, the military rationale of the presence is more complex. Again, it is inhabited by a logic of European Eastern-Western compromise. In the EFP negotiations, NATO had to choose between two types of deterrence policies. The first is the “deterrence by denial”. Supporting by a sufficiently important military capacity, this strategy “seek[s] to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives” (Mazarr, 2018: 2). “Denial” was promoted by NATO’s Eastern flank countries and was consistent with their insistence on the necessity of permanently stationed forces. On the other hand, the “deterrence by punishment”, favored by Western European countries, “threatens severe penalties, such as nuclear escalation or severe economic sanctions, if an attack occurs. [...]. The focus of deterrence by punishment is not the direct defense of the contested commitment but rather threats of wider punishment that would raise the cost of an attack” (Mazarr, 2018: 2). Associating the EFP with the first option, “denial”, was merely impossible for the Allies. Denying the access to a territory of an army with the size of the Russian one would have meant a considerable NATO’s military reinforcement on its Eastern flank, with what most of the Western and Southern European countries disagreed on, for budget reasons and because of the difference in threat perception. “[U]nwilling to undertake forward deployment of anything as large as or larger than a brigade (around 5,000 troops)”, NATO had no other choice “than to fall back on the other option ‘deterrence by punishment’” (Ringrose & Rynning, 2017: 19). From this perspective, the EFP is not a presence designed to inflict immediate unbearable costs to Russia, but is thought as a “tripwire” which, once triggered, would generate, in theory, NATO’s consecutive full response, namely the deployment of the NATO’s Response Force (NRF). In this deterrence format, “NATO accepts that part of its domain—say, the Baltic states—are vulnerable to

Russian aggression, but it pledges to meet such aggression with a response [...] so fierce that Russia will desist” (Ringmose & Rynning, 2017: 19). In other words, “deterrence by punishment” is the only acceptable option to NATO. It is the result of a compromise “between those who see permanent and more substantial NATO presence as the only viable deterrence [Eastern European countries] and those who see it as an escalatory measure [Western and Southern European countries]” (Allers, 2017: 30). The reinforcement of the EFP with 4 more battlegrounds in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a continuation of this compromise.

Consequently, the EFP compromise involves some limits. The first is the limited scope of the EFP, driven by a very classical reading and practice of deterrence. Indeed, the EFP is articulated around the core-consensual meaning of Russia as an aggressive state motivated by territorial conquest. The invasion of Ukraine proves that open war is a real option for Putin’s Russia. But the previous political-military sequence that goes back to the annexation of Crimea also shows that Russia relies on a variety of political-military tools which remain under the EFP’s scope of conventional military response and deterrence. This so-called hybrid warfare would probably be Russia’s privileged mean to destabilize NATO’s security (even more after the unintended difficulties encountered in the Ukraine campaign), rather than risking an open war with the Alliance. The discrepancy between the classical deterrence logic of NATO’s EFP and the more likely subversive character of the actions conducted by Russia against the Alliance is qualified by some observers as an obvious “irony”: “EFP deters what’s arguably the least likely form of aggression from Moscow, leaving the alliance far more vulnerable to the Kremlin’s most likely tactics, namely operations that fall short of an Article 5 violation”, such as “cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns conducted against the Baltic states and Poland. [...]” (Deni, 2018).

Secondly, the EFP is not immune to the dissensions between the Allies. In deterrence, showing resolve and cohesion is essential to persuade the potential aggressor that he would suffer intolerable damages. It is even more the case in “deterrence by punishment”. In contrary to “deterrence by denial”, in which the physical visibility of a consequent military presence is enough to dissuade an attack, the “punishment” option, adopted by NATO, only works if a coherent message is sent to the opposing power about the level of retaliation following the aggression. Put it briefly, the “punishment” needs to be credible, in terms of both intention and

capabilities. Nevertheless, constructing a strong and unified message in deterring Russia is a challenge to NATO, due to the internal differences in the perception of the Russian threat that continues to be publicly displayed even after February 2022. Disunity among the allies might have concrete consequences on the viability of NATO’s defense posture. At some point, it could lead Russia to militarily “exploit.

NATO’s political fault lines”, to put under pressure and undermine allied cohesion. In this scenario, Russia’s limited military actions “could be directed against those areas and allies judged by Moscow to be less likely to fight or to opt for escalation” (Zapfe, 2017: 155). A limited military attack on some parts of NATO’s EFP contingents would put the Alliance in the delicate situation of designing an adequate response in the middle of the divergences among the allies’ perception of the Russian threat. The consequence for the allies would be to choose between non-reaction in the fear of escalation—synonymous with a significant loss of credibility in NATO’s deterrence posture—or military response leading to an unpredictable horizon of escalation.

As such, NATO’s forward presence in Eastern Europe confirms that the ambiguities and compromises driving multilateral crisis management come with limits. Of course, the EFP does not reach the level of inconsistency that characterized the Afghan campaign, but still: due to the differences in the perception of the Russian threat among the Allies, NATO’s deterrence encompasses a series of persistent weaknesses.

4 CONCLUSION

The aim of the chapter was to analyze the way militarized crisis management work in multilateral negotiations. In contrary to the widespread idea that crisis management in international organizations is a fragmented set of uncoordinated decisions and measures, the chapter looked at what makes sense in multilateral power settings. NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan and recent military reinforcement of its deterrence posture toward Russia served as examples to show that constructive ambiguities maintain crisis management alive. The consensus of crisis management is imperfect, ambivalent and might result in questionable or, worst, dramatic outcomes. But, sociologically speaking, the multilateral players find a way to solve their dispute and produce working agreements. In brief, multilateral crisis management is a socially organized reality, full of challenges.

NATO's contemporary trajectory brings to the fore the different degrees in which ambiguity plays in crisis management. The human and material costs generated by the open-war situation in Afghanistan unsurprisingly involved much more disagreements among the allies, than in the strategic deterrence configuration at NATO's Eastern flank. In a nutshell, the multilateral dynamic of NATO's reaction to Russia's aggressiveness is more consensual and successful than NATO's mission in Afghanistan. While the ISAF degenerated into an escalation of violence, NATO's presence on the Eastern flank undoubtedly contributes to deter Russia from crossing the borders of the Baltic states. Yes, a Western-Eastern divide is at play among the European Allies. But the big picture suggests a stronger cohesion than in Afghanistan, where the common objective was hardly identifiable, if not inexistent. At least, the Allies agree on a common purpose on NATO's Eastern flank, deterring Russia through the conventional means. The EFP measure reflects this consensus and the decision of strengthening it after February 2022 was taken quickly and without major oppositions. Nevertheless, even in the EFP, which draws back NATO to its historical mission, consensus does not mean harmony. Ambiguities and semantic ambivalences are, at different degrees, a key condition of multilateral crisis management and its limits. From this perspective, the demonstration could be enlarged to other international settings of militarized crisis management, starting with the counterterrorist operations in the Sahel. Under the lead of France and its military engagement (first Serval and then Barkhane until November 2022), different organizations, such as the UN, G5 Sahel, the World Bank, were involved in the region. The competition between these divergent approaches and the construction of ambiguities among the actors to stabilize the overall architecture of the intervention could help to explain its limited capacity to jugulate the protracted logics violence in the region (Carayol, 2023; Frowd & Sandor, 2018).

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