

## **Ontological Security of International Organizations: NATO's Post-Cold War Identity Crisis and "Out-of-Area" Interventions**

**Abstract:** *This article tackles the issue of the NATO's post-Cold War identity crisis. More precisely, with the employment of the ontological security concept, it seeks to account for NATO's struggles to position itself in the new security environment that seems to be constantly changing. The overall argument is developed in three stages. First, I have conceived of international organization's identity through the purpose it fulfills. Second, this entailed the conclusion that a stable purpose renders international organization ontologically secure and, vice versa, absent or unstable purpose renders it ontologically insecure or in other words "anxious". In the third stage, I have made an inquiry into the nature of the behavior of the ontologically insecure organization through the combination of Jenifer Mitzen's exogenous ("role identity") and Brent J. Steele's endogenous ("intrinsic identity") accounts about identity formation. Accordingly, I have argued that the behavior of an ontologically insecure international organization is, first and foremost, identity not interest driven behavior. These propositions were then put against the case of the post-Cold War NATO.*

**Key Words:** *NATO, ontological security, international organizations, idenity*

### ***Introduction***

Prior to 2012 NATO Chicago Summit, Atlantic Council has published a report titled *Anchoring Alliance*.<sup>1</sup> In it, Nicholas Burns, Damon Wilson and Jeff Lightfoot urge member states to dedicate more resources and more enthusiasm to the Alliance that seems to be entering a new period of crisis. The United States "pivot" towards the Asian-Pacific region and the global

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Burns, Wilson Damon and Jeff Lightfoot, *Anchoring the Alliance* (Washington: Atlantic Council, 2012).

economic crises are the main causes of these new NATO's troubles. However, this is not an unknown situation for NATO. Many argue that, since the end of the Cold War, the Alliance is in the constant state of crisis. For over twenty years since the disappearance of the Soviet threat NATO has been struggling in determining its exact purpose and identity. On this point, it is interesting to note that during almost fifty years of the Cold War NATO forces were not involved in a single military engagement, although a clear threat on the part of Soviet Union existed. Contrary, after the end of the Cold War it undertook a number of military actions (e.g. intervention in Kosovo, Gulf of Aden and Afghanistan) even though one cannot say with the certainty what threatens the present-day NATO, what is its *raison d'être*. How can this transformation be explained? In what way has this key global security international organization transformed after the Cold War?

I seek to answer these questions by employing the concept of ontological security. My aim is to contribute to the recent developments in the security studies, namely to the process of broadening (What is the threat?) and deepening (What is threatened?) of the security concept.<sup>2</sup> The primary goal of this broadening and deepening "business" was to escape the pitfalls of the traditional international relations and security scholarship, specifically the "fetishization of state"<sup>3</sup> which conceives it as the ultimate referent of security and sees military power as the only possible type of threat. I continue in the course of these endeavors by arguing that with the help of the ontological security concept even international organizations can be perceived as entities with security concerns.

By choosing international organizations as the new referent of this kind of security, this study moves the concept of ontological security upwards on the "deepening axis". In this way it is argued that such international relations' entities like international organizations can deal with security problems that are not in any relation with the outside threats but with its ability to continue to exist as "such and such" entity, to continue to exist as the instance of an international organization. In order to back up this argument I offer the following proposition. International organizations derive their identity from the objectives and purposes they are set to perform. Thus, clear objectives and purposes provide an international organization with ontological security. Conversely, the absence of clear purpose will render it ontologically insecure. Should this happen, international organization will either disappear or embark on ontological security seeking. The focus of this research is precisely on the process of "ontological security seeking" and its purpose is to demonstrate

<sup>2</sup> Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, ed. *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1997), 230.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wyn Jones, *Security, Strategy and Critical Theory* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 1999), 76.

that different behavior can be observed when the international organization is ontologically secure than when it is ontologically insecure.

This article will consist of the following parts. In the first part, I clarify the meaning of the ontological security concept in the international relations and security studies. In the second part, I offer a new theoretical framework that connects ontological security and international organizations. I do this by conceptualizing international organization's identity through the purpose it fulfills, and thus through the role it assumes in the international system. Further, I combine partly opposing approaches of the two most prominent ontological security scholars, Jennifer Mitzen and Brent J. Steele, in order to explain the behavior of the ontologically insecure international organization. In the third and last section, this theoretical framework is tested against the case of the post-Cold War NATO.

### ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

Ontological security found its place within international relations and security theory as a result of the interdisciplinary work. In that respect, all international relations theorists who engage with this concept borrow heavily from sociologist Antony Giddens. In his 1991 book *Modernity and Self-Identity*<sup>4</sup> he uses the ontological security concept to refer to: "A sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual."<sup>5</sup>

As such, the concept entails a close connection with the individual's self-identity in the sense that it represents his need to see himself as one, unchanging and continuous person in time.<sup>6</sup> Giddens posits that this is done through the ability of human beings to reflexively monitor their day-to-day activities. In other words, at any given time they should be able to interpret discursively the reasons and the nature of their behavior. Or as Giddens puts it, "to be a human being is to know, virtually all of the time, in terms of some description or another, both what one is doing and why one is doing it".<sup>7</sup> However, if the individual's basic belief that the social environment will produce and reproduce itself as expected is disrupted in any way, that individual will experience an "existential anxiety" which consists in his inability to continue to grasp the reality in a cognitive way.

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<sup>4</sup> Antony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12-3 (2006): 342.

<sup>7</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 35.

Due to the overwhelming feeling of chaos, that individual's sense of agency will also be compromised.

However, once "imported" into the international relations and security theory, theorists did not "agree" upon one possible way of further conceptualization and operationalization of the ontological security approach. Here I briefly present the works of Jef Huysmans, Brent Steele and Jennifer Mitzen.

Huysmans was the first to introduce the concept of ontological security into security studies in his seminal 1998 article.<sup>8</sup> By positing that security can be studied as a self-referential concept, he makes the difference between "daily security" and "ontological security".<sup>9</sup> "Daily security" consists of "trying to postpone death by countering objectified threats".<sup>10</sup> "Ontological security", on the other hand, has to do with the ability to perform the function of "objectifying death", of transforming strangers (which defy categorization and ordering) into enemies (which are known, categorized and, as such, a part of the order). On the whole, "ontological security" mediates order and chaos, while "daily security" mediates friends and enemies.<sup>11</sup>

Mitzen and Steele are the two security studies' scholars that most directly engage with the concept of ontological security.<sup>12</sup> Their starting positions are much the same: they both scale-up the level of analysis from individuals to states and they both use the concept to argue that states' behavior is not motivated, as realist assume, only by the need to survive physically but also by the need to serve their self-identity. Thus, for both Steel and Mitzen, the ontological security signifies "security of the self, not of the body".<sup>13</sup> However, they differ significantly in their conceptualizations of how this type of security is achieved.

Whether ontological security is provided through the factors exogenous to the social interaction (first and second image) or to the ones that are

<sup>8</sup> Jef Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean? : From Concept to Thick Signifier," *European Journal of International Relations* 4-2 (1998): 226-255.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 242-243.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See: Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12-3 (2006): 341-370; Jennifer Mitzen, "Anchoring Europe's Civilizing Identity: Habits, Capabilities and Ontological Security," *Journal of Public Policy* 13-2 (March 2006): 270-285; Brent J. Steele, "Ideas That Were Really Never in Our Possession: Torture Honor and US Identity," *International Relations* 22, (2008): 243-261; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self, Identity and the IR State* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", 344.

endogenous to it (third image) is the core question upon which Mitzen and Steele's approaches part ways. Steele uses the concept of ontological security to make sense of the three forms of state behavior: moral, humanitarian and honor-driven.<sup>14</sup> He starts off by noting that traditional international relations have largely ignored the possibility that these kinds of normative concerns of states can be internally generated. In other words, states do not embark on humanitarian or moral behavior because this kind of behavior is intersubjectively constructed or universally moral, but because it serves states' self-identity needs and in turn provides them with ontological security.<sup>15</sup> Simplified, Steele's argument would be that an altruist is not an altruist because of a strong feeling of empathy, but because that particular person, identity-wise, wants to be seen as an altruist. Accordingly, Steele does not give much attention to the social interaction, but focuses on such concepts as "biographical narratives", "critical situation" and "shame".<sup>16</sup> Consistent self-conceptions sustained through the narratives are thus central to Steele's notion of ontological security. In the case of NATO's Kosovo intervention Steel attempts to build an argument that the United States were prompted to engage in the humanitarian operations in Kosovo in order to do what they failed to do previously in Somalia, Haiti and Rwanda, which made them experience "shame".

Mitzen, on the other hand puts greater emphasis on the social interaction as a generative power behind ontological security. She strongly opposes realists' assumptions, accepted by Steele, that state's type (identity) is self-organized and "given by nature" rather than constituted through social interaction. Her theoretical accounts come out of the empirical puzzle posed by a security dilemma. If states are really security seekers, as defense realists claim, why are they unable to communicate their true types (identities) during the long period of engagement in the security dilemma? Further, how are we supposing to conceive of these states as security seekers if they constantly display aggressive behavior? As a part of the response to these questions, Mitzen posits that this "realist types" are just "aspirations" or "possible selves", cognitive conceptions of what the state would like to be if the conditions were perfect.<sup>17</sup> But since conditions are never perfect, states' identities become dependent on social interaction, presumably with other states, and, more precisely, on the type of roles state perform within those social relationships.<sup>18</sup> Types or state identities are thus intersubjective, both on the level of knowledge and on the level of practice. This is so because states do not have the final word

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<sup>14</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-13.

<sup>17</sup> Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", 355.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 354, 357.

in determining whether they are security-seekers or power-seekers but need acknowledgment from the others who infer a state's type from its behavior and see it as a fulfillment of a particular role. For all these reasons, rather than speaking about "biographical narratives", "shame" and "honor", Mitzen opts for "routinization", "attachment", "stable cognitive environment" and "capacity for agency". Thus, although the internally held state's identity did not reach its fulfillment through a particular social interaction, the state is not left without benefits to its ontological security. Any longstanding relationship with a significant other, such as the security dilemma, leads to a "routinized" relationship. This routinization means that "states got invested in socially recognized identities",<sup>19</sup> that they got attached to them. The main reason is the need for a stable, cognitive environment that provides behavioral certainty by ensuring that things will unfold tomorrow as they did today.

Bearing in mind all the finesse of the ontological security concept in international relations and security studies, but drawing mostly on Mitzen's and Steele's accounts, this study develops two themes in the following section. First, ontological security concept is scaled-up from the level of states to the level of international organizations. Second, by finding *via media* between Steele's socially independent and Mitzen's socially dependent process of identity construction, a theoretical framework is built. This framework should help us shed light on the models and patterns of behavior of those international organizations that find themselves detached from the changed international environment, due to the fact that the primary reason of their formation has seized to exist.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND MAIN CONCEPTS

Although a substantial amount of studies have dealt with the adaptability of NATO, it can be noted that their focus was predominantly on the questions "why" (Why does NATO still exist?; Why was it able to adapt?) rather than on the question "how" did the process of adaptation unfold and what were the driving forces behind it. Furthermore, none of these approaches is sufficient to explain the actual process of the "adaptation" of an international organization. From the perspective of organizational theory, it would be hard to answer how it was possible for the bureaucracy of, for example NATO, to involve this organization in a rather costly humanitarian and out-of-area interventions, just so that they could keep their jobs. Would not smaller scale interventions and operations be sufficient? On the other hand, the obvious limit of the institutionalist theories, as Steve Weber point out, is that they are

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 359.

unable to tell us which institutional mechanisms will ultimately be utilized – only that the member states will turn to existing institutions as a first step.<sup>20</sup>

Ontological security approach, by contrast, makes an inquiry into the processual side of the behavior of international organizations in the changed conditions of international environment. Their behavior is seen, for the most part, as being driven by the identity needs, regardless of organization's bureaucracy or member states' interests (although it is not argued that such interests do not exist or that all behavior of international organizations is driven by identity needs). This point will become especially salient in the third section, where it will be argued that the narratives and actions adopted by those organizations are, by their nature, especially suited to the fulfillment of the identity needs.

The rest of this section will proceed as follows. First, a strategy for elevating the concept of ontological security from the level of states to the level of international organizations is presented. Next, theoretical propositions are offered on how international organizations and ontological security can be put together in order to shed new light on the behavioral aspect of these organizations. This is done through the development of the following concepts: *purpose, identity, crisis and anxiety*. Special attention is given to the concepts of "intrinsic" and "role identity". In the final part, methods that will be used in the case study of this research are elaborated.

#### ***Level of Analysis: From Individuals to States then All the Way to International Organization***

In his seminal article, Alexander Wendt examines the phenomenon that is almost ubiquitous within the international relations and security studies.<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon consists of tendency of scholars within these fields to accept the notion that "states are people too."<sup>22</sup> Wendt notes: "In a field in which almost everything is contested, this seems to be one thing on which almost all of us agree."<sup>23</sup> However, even though almost everybody accepts it, it is not an easy job to justify this "individual-to-collective ascription."<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, scholars have proposed a multitude of different strategies for the

<sup>20</sup> Steve Weber, "Shaping the postwar balance of power: Multilateralism in NATO," *International Organization* 46 (1992): 675-677.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Wendt, "The State as a Person in International Theory," *Review of International Studies* 30 (2008): 289-316.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 215.

<sup>23</sup> Wendt, "The State as a Person in International Theory", 286.

<sup>24</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 15.

task. In this study, it is not my wish to open up yet another debate that would entail justification of personification of international organizations. Instead, the approach that already exists in discussions about the same problem with respect to states will be adopted. Wendt puts it like this: “The concept of state personhood is a *useful instrument* for organizing experience and building theory, but does not refer to anything with ontological standing in its own right.”<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, in this paper an instrumental justification for the use of the concept developed with regards to one entity and its application to the entirely different one is adopted. This is not because this strategy is entirely without problems, but because it enables theoretical fruitfulness.

***Ontological Security and International Organizations:  
Via Media between Mitzen and Steele – Purpose, Identity  
and International Environment***

It is so far clear that the identity and ontological security go hand in hand, regardless whether we talk about individuals or states. This is also true for an international organization. The question, however, is how can we conceive of an international organization’s identity.

As Steel points out, it is possible to distinguish between three general ways of theorizing about identity formation within international relations theory.<sup>26</sup> The first proposes that identity is formed by the role actor assumes within a collective. The other adopts “Self-Other nexus” where the self is shaped with regards to the oppositional Other. The third possible way of identity formation is intentional and rational construction by the agent itself, regardless of the environment, or social interaction with the significant Other.

When approaching the question of international organizations’ identity, this paper opts for the dependency of identity on the “collective” or more precisely on the international environment, thus for the approach presented by Steele. Environment is essential for the formation and behavior of the international organizations. The international organization is formed with the purpose to serve the needs of the international environments and it has to be “called into the existence by the nurturing environment.”<sup>27</sup> The international environment is critical for the identity formation of an international organization because it creates challenges and opportunities to which international organization, as a purposive entity, is a response. Fulfilling this required purpose, or to put in terms in which Mitzen conceives ontological

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<sup>25</sup> Wendt, “The State as a Person in International Theory”, 290.

<sup>26</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 39.

security, performing a particular role is in itself telling of the international organization's identity. To continue with the same example, if there is an issue within the international environment that needs dealing with, it is likely that an international environmental organization will be formed. Thus, in terms of its identity, this organization will be referred to as an environmental and not a trade organization and as long as there are external environmental challenges that need addressing it is justified to assume that this organization will maintain its particular kind of identity. From these accounts the following conclusion arises: if ontological security is the security of the Self conceived as the stability of the identity, than this kind of uninterrupted relationship between international organizational and international environment renders that organization ontologically secure.

### *Identity Crisis and Anxiety*

The above, almost commonsensical accounts, necessarily entail the reverse logic. Changed conditions of the external environment will, perhaps only for the brief period but nevertheless, cause the identity crisis and by the same token ontological insecurity of the international organization at question. To understand this further I now turn to the elaboration of the two important concepts: *critical situation* and *anxiety*. In brief, "critical situation"<sup>28</sup> represents a change in the external environment within which international organization performs its functions. In the ontological security terms, this kind of situation will render international organization unable to continue as its "old self" because routines and "biographical narratives" that were once part of its everyday life will not cohere anymore with the external conditions of the international environment. This new environment is most likely to appear, as it was initially the case with the immediate post-Cold War world, as a "chaotic condition" in which, as Huysmans notes, there are no certainties anymore and where "uncertainty itself has become the primary threat."<sup>29</sup> This will become a sign of organization's ontological insecurity or anxiety (these two terms will be used interchangeably) and in order to restore the stability of identity that no longer exists, international organization is likely to start exhibiting a new and different kind of behavior. And it is precisely the nature of this behavior that is of primary concern for this study.

Anxiety is the experience that actualizes itself when an agent is overwhelmed by the uncertainty of external conditions and when he has not yet ordered pieces of this external environment in such a way that it would

<sup>28</sup> See: Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 10-12; and Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 243.

<sup>29</sup> Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean?," 240.

allow him to get by with a sufficient amount of predictability. Thus anxiety is the state that precedes ontological security. Ontological security in this respect plays a role of anxiety-controlling mechanism and, when anxious, an agent (international organization) is expected to invest a sufficient amount of energy in order to reach ontological security. Accordingly, anxious behavior equals process of ontological security seeking. In a struggle to order things in such a way that again it becomes clear what issues, enemies, dangers and threats need addressing, in order for them to be constitutive of the new purpose of the international organization and at the same time, of its identity, some actions and some narratives will be more and some will be less successful. In the next section, a further inquiry into the process of ontological security-seeking of international organizations is made by finding the *via media* between Mitzen's and Steele's accounts about ontological security.

#### *From "Intrinsic" to "Role" Identity: Between Mitzen and Steele*

The main source of contention between the two most prominent ontological security theorists, Mitzen and Steele, is whether state's identity is constructed endogenously or exogenously, and thus whether ontological security is dependent on or independent of social interaction. As I have already shown, Mitzen opts for the former approach. She asserts that the true identity of a state should be derived from the role it assumes in the interaction with other states. Moreover, states tend to hold on to these roles, to develop attachments that in turn provide them with behavioral certainty and thus with ontological security. Steele, on the other hand, advocates "individualistic" approach to state identity construction and ontological security.<sup>30</sup> He thus pays special attention to so-called "biographical narrative" which is defined as "the story or stories by which self-identity is reflexively understood, both by the individual concerns and by others".<sup>31</sup> These narratives are expressions of states' internally generated self-identity conceptions and needs from which social action proceeds.<sup>32</sup> Hence, narratives give life to routinized foreign policy action, not the other way around.

Even though it has been argued in this study that the identity of an international organization, and in turn its ontological security, depends on the social context, i.e. international environment, I argue that, in the case of ontologically insecure and anxious international organization, the rules somewhat change. To understand how, I proposed a combination of Mitzen's

<sup>30</sup> See: Ayse Zarakol, "Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan," *International Relations* 24-1 (2010): 3.

<sup>31</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 243.

<sup>32</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 2-3.

and Steele's approaches, similar to the one made by Ayse Zarakol.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, this study claims that in the circumstances in which international organization outlives its original *raison d'être*, when it survives for non-purposive reasons and generally "feels" detached from the changed conditions of the international environment, it becomes forced to generate its identity internally in order to justify its own existence as an instance of international organization. In this respect special attention has to be given to the following concepts, all inherent to the Steele's theorizing about ontological security: "biographical narratives", "possible self or aspiration", "discursive consciousness", "intrinsic identity", "capability for ordering" and "inside construction of person".

In the rest of this study term "intrinsic identity" will be used as an all-encompassing label for this self-organized identity. Also it should be stressed that the purpose of this kind of identity is to create a seamless linkage between doing (action and practice) and being (identity and knowledge).<sup>34</sup> This kind of identity, expressed in the certain kind of narrative, offers the interpretation of organizational history, its old and new purposes and achievements. It is independent from the social interactions and they are not necessarily recognized by the others. They are just "aspirations" or narratives that constitute so-called "practice of talking."<sup>35</sup>

However, for the international organization this is the "artificial way" of identity generation. There is a specific kind of relationship between "being" and "doing" as well as between "identity" and "action" in the case of such an entity in international relations. Because fulfilling a purpose is an essential ontological component of the international organization, something that makes certain international entity an instance of what we know as international organization, "intrinsic identity" becomes insufficient to justify the prolonged existence of certain organizations. That is why it is necessary to go back to Mitzen's approach and borrow the category of "role identity." This role identity is a perpetuated behavior that systematically connects ends with the means. It is a necessary shift from "practice of talking" to the "practice of doing".<sup>36</sup>

While the ontologically secure international organization's identity is entirely socially dependent (since it is a result of the uncontested role that

<sup>33</sup> Zarakol, "Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes", 2-23.

<sup>34</sup> Felix Ciută, "The End(s) of NATO: Security Strategic Action and Narrative Transformation," *Comparative Security Policy* 23-1(2002): 35-62.

<sup>35</sup> Trine Flockhart, "Towards a Strong NATO Narrative: From a 'Practice of Talking' to a Practice of Doing'," *Working Paper Series, Danish Institute for International Studies* (2010), <http://stockholm.sgir.eu/uploads/Flockhart%20NATO%20Practices.pdf> (accessed: December 05, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

it performs in the international environment), in case of an ontologically insecure organization a specific kind of process starts unfolding. International organization must first resort to the internal and self-organizing generation of identity, the one that is detached from any uncontested purpose. But since the primary ontological characteristic of the organization consists of fulfilling the purpose with tangible results, the organization becomes compelled to act. Ontological security-seeking thus becomes a difficult process of “fine-tuning” between “intrinsic identity” and “role identity”, where both of these identities can either reinforce or undermine one another. The aim is to reach the equilibrium where, as Mitzen notes, internally held identity matches externally recognized roles.

#### **CASE STUDY: POST-COLD WAR NATO AND ONTOLOGICAL (IN)SECURITY**

In this section, theoretical propositions made in the second section will be put against the case of the post-Cold War NATO. It will be demonstrated that in the times of ontological insecurity, characterized by the disruption between the purpose of an international organization and the needs of international environment, the behavior of international organizations corresponds more to the Steel’s notions, in a sense that organization is now has to generate identity from within itself rather than in relation with external environment. However, because of the specific ontological nature of international organization that requires it to perform a particular purpose with tangible, problem-solving results, this newly formed “intrinsic identity” has to be actualized as a “role identity” in a sense that an organization must begin to *do* something, not just to *exist*. Therefore, instead of being interpreted as the result of the needs of international environment, or of someone’s specific interest (member states or international organization’s bureaucracy), such a behavior is in this study interpreted as an instance of identity-driven behavior. The rest of this section follows NATO’s post-Cold War search for ontological security through mapping the following instances of its behavior: the loss of its purpose, the “feeling” of being overwhelmed by the new and cognitively unfamiliar environment and the specific interplay between its “intrinsic” and “role identity” that this new situation triggers. This is done through the analysis of thirty-five speeches delivered in the period between 1990 and 2010, as well as of declaration and strategies that NATO adopted in the same time period.<sup>37</sup> I also take a closer look at so called “out-of-area” interventions that the Alliance undertook during

<sup>37</sup> See: *The Alliance’s New Strategic Concept*, 7 November 1991; *The Alliance’s Strategic Concept*, 24 April 1999; *NATO 2020: Assured Security, Dynamic Engagement. Analyses and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO*, 17 May 2010.

these post-Cold War years, with special attention to operations in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

### *Post-Cold War NATO without Purpose*

It is by now widely recognized that, when put against other historical examples of alliances, there is nothing “traditional” or “classical” about NATO.<sup>38</sup> There are no historical examples of the alliance with such a high level of institutionalization, or of the alliance that has been described with such an amount of value-imbued adjectives. For instance, Celeste A. Wallander prefers defining NATO not as an alliance but as a “political security community of countries with common values and democratic institutions.”<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, it is impossible and in fact misleading to separate NATO from the context of the Cold War and from the challenges that this specific international system put in front of Western countries. From its inception and throughout the Cold War one thing was constant: the threat posed by Soviet Union.

This kind of “uninterrupted” relationship between the Alliance and its external environment rendered it ontologically secure. In other words, through the longstanding purpose, which was a result of the existence of the concrete and worthy opponent, NATO’s identity was solidified. Thus, identity-wise, NATO was not just a defense organization, but also a defense organization aimed against a clear and uncontested threat. This, in Mitzen’s terms “basic trust system”, created a special pattern of NATO’s behavior. It became “overly concerned with maintaining stability and avoiding change”<sup>40</sup>. With the external definer of its purpose (and thus of its identity) NATO could have afforded to be just a “talking shop” that was for forty years mostly concentrated on drawing and redrawing plans for operations against one enemy. But the pattern of this behavior has changed with the end of the Cold War in such a way that, as Trine Flockhart notes, NATO shifted its practices from “talking” to “doing”. It engaged itself in a multitude of actions: from the process of enlargement to the interventions in former Yugoslavia, operations in Afghanistan and recent involvement in Libya. How can we explain this shift?

By relying on the theoretical framework developed in the previous section, it is here argued that once a cognitively familiar environment of the Cold War ceased to exist, NATO became an “anxious”, ontologically insecure, organization. In other words, without a clear purpose in the new world, it

<sup>38</sup> Wallace J. Thies, *Why NATO Endures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 88.

<sup>39</sup> Celeste A. Wallander, “NATO’s Price: Shape Up or Ship Out,” *Foreign Affairs* 81-6 (2002).

<sup>40</sup> Flockhart, “Towards a Strong NATO Narrative”.

started experiencing an “identity crisis”. This state is often recognized by scholars and various NATO officials. “Today it is fashionable to speak of an ‘identity crisis’ of the Alliance, because the security environment that gave birth to NATO, and with which it had lived for forty years, has suddenly gone”, said Manfred Wörner in his 1990 speech.<sup>41</sup> However, these notions are immediately followed by a praise of NATO’s remarkable adaptability. This study, by contrast, argues that, rather than being described in terms of adaptability, NATO’s post-Cold War behavior should be depicted as *anxiety*. This is so because the multitude of operations that NATO engaged in after the Cold War are seen as signs of its weakness and as a part of ontological security-seeking process, rather than as its strength.

Now, as it is established that it is hard to conceive of the post-Cold War NATO as of purposive and ontologically secure international organization, I turn to examine the way NATO has depicted its international environment over the years. The frequent recurrence of the words such as “uncertainty”, “unpredictability”, “change” and “complexity” is taken as a clue that supports my anxiety argument because it is telling of the organization’s inability to cognitively grasp the international environment, to know with certainty (as it did in the Cold War period) from which direction the threats are coming and how to respond to them adequately.

### *How Does NATO Perceive Its Own Environment?*

In Huysmans terms, now that NATO is left without the old enemy to fight, its ability to order, to “fix social relations into a symbolic and institutional order”, has been put to the test. If unable to construct a stable friend – enemy mediation, everyday life is always on the brink of slipping into chaos. I chose to label this ongoing struggle as anxiety (or ontological insecurity). Thorough the examination of NATO’s official speeches and documents, from 1990 to 2010, I aim to support my claims regarding the state of the post-Cold War NATO.

Starting from the 1990 London Declaration which signified the beginning of the transformation of NATO, all the way to the recommendations of the group of experts for the new strategic concept (NATO 2020) adopted in 2010, the Alliance keeps on depicting its environment by such nouns as “uncertainty”, “unpredictability”, “change”, “complexity”.<sup>42</sup> One would expect that twenty years after the collapse of the Cold War, the Alliance would

<sup>41</sup> Speech: Manfred Wörner, 1990.

<sup>42</sup> See: *The Alliance’s New Strategic Concept*, 7 November 1991; *The Alliance’s Strategic Concept*, 24 April 1999; *NATO 2020: Assured Security, Dynamic Engagement. Analyses and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO*, 17 May 2010.

manage to order the pieces of its reality in a more stable and comprehensive way. However, this did not happen. Even though the level of uncertainty has not been constant, as will be shown in the next section, the recurrence of this kind of a discourse is striking and it is indicative of NATO's "existential anxiety".

The First Strategic Concept after the Cold War, adopted in 1991, posits that "the risk to allied security that remain are *multi-faced* and *multi-directional* which makes them hard to predict and asses".<sup>43</sup> By gradually moving towards the 1999 Strategic Concept, it can be tracked within the speeches of NATO officials that the involvements in war in Bosnia, generally perceived as successful, have enabled NATO to acquire a certain level of cognitive mastery over the external environment. The uncertainty and unpredictability have been transformed into the concrete "enemy" embodied in the barbarian nationalism followed by ethnic conflicts. For these reasons, in the speeches examined from 1991 to 1999, "crises management" and "peacekeeping", as well as NATO's responses to these new risks, become prioritized NATO tasks and they appear as the second or third priority on the agenda. Nonetheless, 1999 Strategic Concept sends the 20th century off by revisiting the decade-long problem of lingering uncertainty. It is asserted that "[t]he security of the alliance remains subject to a wide variety of military and non-military risks which are *multi-directional* and often *difficult to predict*".<sup>44</sup> A decade into a new century, although terrorism has taken a central stage on the global security agenda, group of experts with the task of giving recommendations for the new strategic concept for NATO begin their document with the following sentence: "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization enters the second decade of the twenty-first century as an essential source of stability in an *uncertain* and *unpredictable* world."<sup>45</sup>

### ***From "Intrinsic Identity" to "Role Identity"***

From the ontological security approach follows the claim that it is not possible to develop behavioral routines and thus behavioral certainty in the conditions that appear to be constantly changing. Lack of certainty hampers the ability of the international entity, in this case of NATO, to continue as the old agentic "self" because "tomorrow" may not correspond with what "self" was made for. With the old purpose gone, NATO has to find a "new self" in the "new

<sup>43</sup> *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept*, 7 November 1991.

<sup>44</sup> See: *The Alliance's Strategic Concept*, 24 April 1999.

<sup>45</sup> See: *NATO 2020: Assured Security, Dynamic Engagement. Analyses and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO*, 17 May 2010.

world”. However, the trouble is double for NATO. The “new” world appears to be fluid, uncertain and constantly changing. Hence NATO has to come up with the way of existing as a “person that constantly changes”. However, ontological security imperatives pull this entity in a different direction. In order to know how to act, it has to have a stable conception of the Self.

However, since the identity of an international organization is highly dependent on the purpose it fulfills in the international environment, as it has already been argued throughout this study, the lack of that purpose forces the organization to generate identity internally. The construction of this so-called “intrinsic identity”, connected with the imperative of the historical continuity of identity, is interesting when one takes a closer look at NATO. In the post-Cold War NATO the forefront of its identity narrative has been taken by the assertions that, perhaps, NATO was never just a military alliance held together by a sense of a common external threat, but, first and foremost, a community of liberal and democratic values. “Community of values” and “community of destiny” discourse as the most solid foundation of NATO’s identity that existed from its inception enables it to reflect on itself as “whole continuous person in time”. Huysmans puts it like this:

“The affirmation of an Atlantic civilization transformed from a ritualistic confirmation of values into a key aspect of the security strategy of NATO.”<sup>46</sup>

Javier Solana, who was in the position of Secretary General from 1995 to 1999, continues in the similar manner:

“In 1949, the drafters of the Washington treaty envisaged the Atlantic Alliance as the cornerstone of a broader community of European and North American democracies – a community based on common values rather than common fear.”<sup>47</sup>

From this representation of its own identity logically follows the conclusion that the purpose of the Alliance remains very much the same as during the Cold War – the purpose of the Alliance is the *defense* of its members and of their respective values. But what is striking here is that the post-Cold War *defense* activities of NATO have in fact become *offensive* in nature.<sup>48</sup> The Alliance has become more dynamic than ever. It started the process of enlargement, it engaged into so-called “out-of-area” operations and interventions in places like Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Gulf of Aden and, most recently, Libya.

<sup>46</sup> cf Huysmans, “Shape-Shifting NATO: Humanitarian Action and the Kosovo Refugee Crisis.” *Review of International Studies* 28-2 (July 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Speech: Javier Solana, 1996.

<sup>48</sup> The term offensive is used here to highlight the proactive behavior of NATO, not as value imbued term.

The ontological security approach can perhaps shed a new light on this seeming paradox. It shows that if an international organization wishes to continue to exist as an international relations entity, it must, in a tangible sense, fulfill the purpose for which it claims to exist. In the absence of a clear and uncontested outside threat, this means that it must support its “intrinsic identity”. In NATO’s case this is its defense identity, which is just an aspiration, with “role identity” which gives tangible content and concrete meaning to the purpose conceptualized as defense. Thus, due to the ontological security imperatives, the word *defense* has for NATO changed its meaning from “we will never strike first” to the offensive and proactive engagement aimed at preventing threats that may come as a result of the unpredictable nature of the post-Cold War world. This is perhaps best put by Javier Solana: “Today, we tend to judge institutions more by what they can actually achieve than by what they represent.”<sup>49</sup>

However the ontological security seeking is not a linear process in which, once “intrinsic identity” is confirmed through some kind of role-play, things get, ontological security-wise, resolved for the international organization. Rather, as pointed out in the second section, it is a process that starts with the construction of “intrinsic identity” and then unfolds through the interplay of “intrinsic” and “role identity”. Finally, depending on the success of the performed role, overall identity and ontological security of an international organization are undermined or reinforced. Ontological security-seeking is thus a process of fine-tuning, of finding the right measure of “doing” that will support “being”. Accordingly, the operations that NATO undertakes are mutually dependent in such a way that if a previous operation resulted in a higher level of ontological security (or a lower level of ontological insecurity), the next operations will be handled with more confidence, and *vice versa*. Thus, I now turn to tracking of this process. The attention is on the Alliance’s recent “out-of-area” operations: the war in Bosnia, intervention in Kosovo crisis and the involvement in Afghanistan.

NATO’s first post-Cold War operations were in Bosnia. When looked at through the ontological security lens, these operations come through as the logical extension of the new “offensive defensive” identity that NATO adopted after the Cold War. This was an offensive operation since it was not provoked by a direct attack on one of the Alliance’s member states, although it was conceived as a defensive one, a preventive operation against the uncertain consequences of a potential spill-over effect. At the same time, this operation contains an important reference to history, necessary for presenting NATO as the “same continuous person in time”. It supports the idea that assumed the forefront of NATO’s identity discourse – that it is a “community of values

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<sup>49</sup> Speech: Javier Solana, 1998a.

and destiny”. In that respect it is helpful to borrow Ole Waever’s argument. He posits that Europe’s, and I would add NATO’s, post-Cold War “Other“ was in fact its own past made up of ethnic violence rather than any concrete enemy such as “the Russia“, “Islamic fundamentalism“ or even the Balkans.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, this “community of values“ was not going to allow its past to become its future. Thus, from the ontological security perspective, the Alliance’s engagements in Bosnia were, more than anything else, its way of affirming a particular kind of identity, rather than performing a role of a defender against a concrete threat.

The success that the Alliance achieved in the conflict in Bosnia had a positive, reinforcing effect on its ontological security. Accordingly, when in 1995 Javier Solana became Secretary General, an increasingly self-confident rhetoric is noticeable and two general themes can be distinguished. The first is that of a success, predominantly connected with the achievements in Bosnia. The other is marked by the approaching 21st century. Success in Bosnia provided NATO with the “feeling” of cognitive mastery over its environment and, with confidence that followed, NATO was going to shape the new century, not be overwhelmed by it. Solana describes it like this:

“In short, the NATO of today can legitimately be called a “new” NATO – a NATO that has moved from safeguarding security to actively promoting and widening it.”<sup>51</sup>

At this stage NATO experienced a high level of congruence between its “intrinsic identity“ and “role identity“ which rendered it far from irrelevant. Rather it began conceiving itself as the most important and indispensable builder of the European security architecture. With this new role and with rhetoric that reveals high level of self-confidence, one could have perhaps predicted that the next security risk was going to be handled with even stronger determination in order for this new “intrinsic” identity to be further reinforced.

In 1999 NATO got involved in yet another Balkan crisis: Kosovo. After the 1999 Rambouillet negotiations between Albanians and Serbs fell through, NATO was set to intervene, in what was, due to the massive human rights violations, termed a “humanitarian crisis”. Between 24 March and 11 June 1999 NATO embarked on its first broad-scale, out-of-area military action which entailed both a bombing campaign, called Operation Allied Force, and providing humanitarian aid to refugees from Kosovo. The questions that Kosovo case raises are the following. How is it possible to account for

<sup>50</sup> Ole Wæver, “Insecurity, Security, and asecurity in the West European non-War community,” in: *Security Communities*, ed. Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, 90. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> Speech: Javier Solana, 1997.

the fact that NATO was ready to start a large scale military operation when its members did not have immediate national or strategic interest in it, but which nevertheless compelled them to break international law and to enter the field that NATO did not traditionally belong to, the field of humanitarian interventions? Ontological security approach can offer the following answer. Motivation for this intervention is perhaps the result of the previous Balkan “success story”, to which NATO developed a certain level of “attachment” because it rendered it agentic and in control of its own environment. The high level of NATO’s self-esteem was expressed in the belief that “the transatlantic link is not just in the good shape; it is shaping history”<sup>52</sup> meant that breaking rules for the noble cause is a legitimate move. The Alliance’s choice to be a part of the humanitarian endeavor is also not random. As vaguely mentioned in the theoretical part of this research, those in search of ontological security are likely to resort to actions that have strong emotional, value and moral aspect. It is thus not surprising that NATO, which longs for stable identity, becomes a part of this kind of operation, much like, as Kinnvall notices, the people who feel ontologically insecure in the increasingly global world resort to groups with strong nationalistic and religious characteristics.<sup>53</sup>

The congruence that existed between NATO’s “intrinsic” and “role” identity prior to Kosovo operations was no longer there before the engagements in Afghanistan. Kosovo intervention was a “role identity” play that did not deliver when it comes to further reinforcement of NATO’s ontological security. An overly confident approach to the Kosovo case that caused NATO to breach a few international rules along the way, encountered severe criticism that undermined NATO’s legitimacy and damaged its self-perception. The paradox of humanitarianism by military means has taken its toll and it could have been expected that from Kosovo onwards NATO would keep a lower profile.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that the Alliance did not react upon the historical invocation of article 5 in the case of Afghanistan, in ontological and identity terms, opens up very important question: what is NATO for if not for what it was originally made? Clearly it was the United States and not the questionable engagements in Kosovo crisis that prevented it from doing so, but both of these factors played an important role in the way NATO continued to behave once it become a player in Afghanistan. Without another full scale “success story” that could feed new narrative and allow for the intervention on the basis of familiar attachment and with the environment that seems to be escaping the cognitive grasp, again the Alliance signified a new cycle of low level of ontological security (or higher level of ontological insecurity). If one takes

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<sup>52</sup> Speech: Javier Solana, 1998b.

<sup>53</sup> Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism”, 714-767.

<sup>54</sup> Huysmans, “Shape-Shifting NATO”, 605-608.

even a vague look at the post-9/11 speeches held by the Alliance officials, instead of 1990's rhetoric of the confident and strong NATO that confronts and changes history, a new episode of the overwhelming "feelings" towards external environment is encountered:

"Since 11 September, our world has been rendered unfamiliar. The mundane has become dangerous. Who can ever look up again at an airliner or go to work in a high-rise office building without, at the back of their mind, recalling the horrific images of the World Trade Center?"<sup>55</sup>

NATO was once again detached from the familiar situation and it once again "experienced" disorientation. Further analyses of Lord Robertson's speeches demonstrate this clearly. In the year 2001 his rhetoric fluctuated between positioning NATO in the center of the fight against terrorism and clearly distancing it from this central position. Nevertheless, terrorism has become the theme number one in all post-9/11 speeches examined for this research. And this was clearly a major shift from the previous discourses about NATO's purpose, where terrorism was barely mentioned.

On the whole, two concluding points can be made. First, the attempts at establishing ontological security through the assertive approach full of confidence clearly did not pay off, so NATO decided to assume a more low-profile position. However, and this is the second point, NATO promises to be in the "variety of roles" and in that way announces the continuation of ontological security struggles and anxious behavior which is a characteristic of an organization without a clear and uncontested purpose.

## CONCLUSION

This study was a conceptualization exercise that sought to answer the question of whether it is possible to speak in security terms with respect to such entities of international relations as international organizations; whether international organizations can be regarded as the referent objects of security. With the help of the ontological security concept I have attempted to develop an argument that even international organizations can be seen as entities with security concerns.

The argument has been constructed in three stages. First, I have posited that the primary ontological characteristic of the international organization is the purpose it fulfills. Accordingly, uninterrupted relationship between international organization's purpose and challenges in the international environment render that organization ontologically secure. In the second stage, I note that this is not always the case and that many post-Cold War

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<sup>55</sup> Speech: Lord Robertson, 2001.

organizations have in fact lost their original purposes, which caused them to become “anxious” and ontologically insecure. In the third stage, through the combination of Mitzen’s exogenous and Steele’s endogenous accounts about identity formation I have made an inquiry into a theoretically viable model of behavior of the ontologically insecure international organization. This has been done by regarding the behavior of the ontologically insecure organization as the interplay between “intrinsic identity” (to which ontologically insecure organization resorts first and which has nothing to do with the need of the external environment) and “role identity”, a concrete organization’s actions which in tangible way reinforce or undermine its “intrinsic identity”.

These theoretical assertions were then put against the case of the post-Cold War NATO, for which I accept the claim that it has survived for non-purposeful reasons. Through the analysis of its strategic concepts, its highest officials’ speeches, as well as its so-called “out of area” operations, I have in fact detected signs of ontologically insecure behavior. From the “anxiety” expressed in the way NATO depicts its external environment with such nouns as “uncertainty”, “unpredictability”, “change”, “complexity”, all the way to unraveling the change in the meaning of the concept of *defense*, from “we will never strike first” to preventive but offensive behavior, a result of the interplay between “intrinsic” and “role” identity.

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*Резиме*

Јелена Цупаћ

**Онтолошка безбедност и међународне организације:  
после хладноратовска криза идентитета НАТО-а и  
„Out-of-Area” интервенције**

**Кључне речи:** *НАТО, онтолошка безбедност, међународне организације, идентитет*

У овом чланку аутор се бави кризом идентитета коју је НАТО доживео након Хладног рата. Помоћу концепта онтолошке безбедности, чланак настоји објаснити напоре НАТО-а да се позиционира у новој безбедносној средини која се константно мења. Основни аргумент је развијен на следећи начин. Идентитет међународних организација је прво концептуализован помоћу сврхе коју организација испуњава. Потом је закључено да стабилна сврха чини међународну организацију онтолошки безбедном и, обратно, нестабилна сврха је чини онтолошки небезбедном или, другачије речено, „анксиозном”. Комбинацијом егзогеног („идентитета улоге”) и ендогеног („интринзичног идентитета”) аутор даље гради теоријско оруђе којим објашњава природу понашања онтолошки небезбедних организација. На основу ових теоријских налаза, чланак тврди да је после хладноратовско понашање НАТО-а пре свега вођено потребама идентитета, а не интересима држава чланица и бирократије.