

Feb 10th, 12:00 AM - 12:00 AM

NATO Persistence & the Iron Law Model

Ronald Okoye
Old Dominion University

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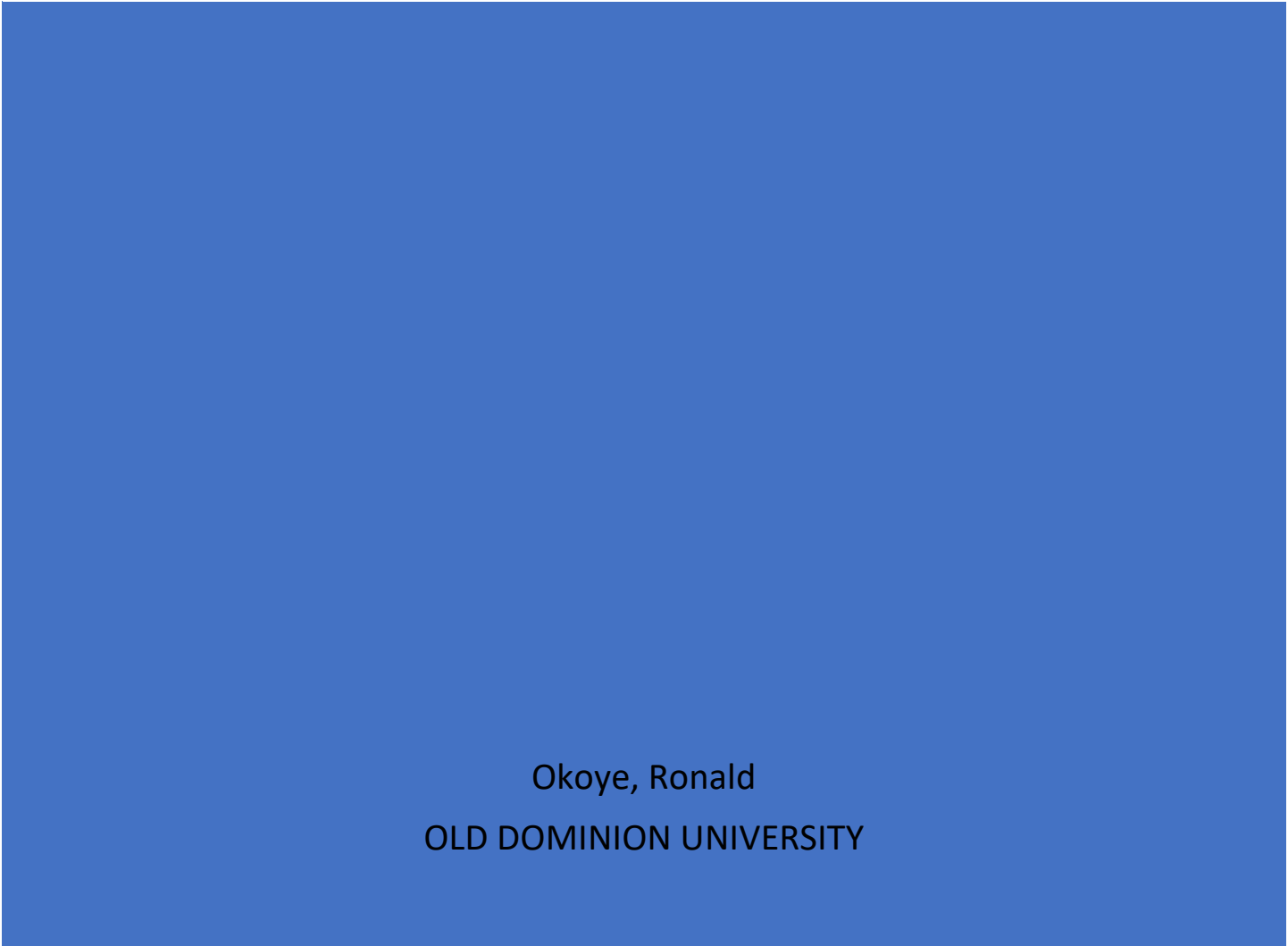
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Okoye, Ronald, "NATO Persistence & the Iron Law Model" (2023). *Graduate Research Conference (GSIS)*.
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NATO PERSISTENCE & THE IRON LAW MODEL



Okoye, Ronald
OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

NATO Persistence & the Iron Law Model

Abstract

The centrality of NATO to the progression of the war is one of the fundamental issues in the current Russia-Ukraine conflict. Analysts generally agree that Russia's motivations for starting the conflict stem from Ukraine's ambitions to join NATO, as Moscow sees such a move as a flagrant encroachment of Western Europe onto its territory. Special scrutiny of NATO as a regional alliance and its ongoing stability that has survived the cold war is necessary in light of the developments in Ukraine. In order to justify the scientific study of NATO's persistence, one must consider the war vis-a-vis the Ukraine-NATO issue and its worldwide repercussions. Global supply chains have been severely disrupted, forcing companies to adjust their practices. As a result, prices of key commodities have increased, and some have even completely disappeared from the market. According to a report by the MIT Sloan School of Management, "One of the most alarming supply chain issues resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war is food shortages, particularly acute in low-income countries in Africa" (Stackpole, 2022, p.2) The report further points out that "Ukraine and Russia account for about a third of the world's wheat and a quarter of barley production, not to mention some 75% of the sunflower oil supply — all critical commodities for keeping humans fed" (p.2). From this report, one can begin a series of inquiries by posing the question, if NATO membership is the catalyst for a war with such far-reaching global consequences, what appeal does membership of this alliance have that justifies the intolerable human toll on the daily lives of people around the globe? The more specific question is, how has a 70-year-old military alliance survived beyond its original raison d'être? One may legitimately ask if the Iron Law¹ model of administration is a key element in the explanation of the continued existence of NATO as an alliance in the process of attempting to respond to the latter question.

Introduction-Iron Law of Oligarchy

The Iron Law of Oligarchy is a proposal advanced by German sociologist Robert Michels. This theory holds that every organization, regardless of whether it is democratic, eventually comes to a point where the leadership departs from its original goals and values to make room for a strong minority that is focused on solidifying its position to the point of resorting to illegal means to do so. The principle of oligarchy in modern democratic parties, therefore, arises from the "technical indispensability of leadership" (Michels, 1962, p. 364). As Michels puts it: "At the outset, leaders arise spontaneously; their functions are accessory and gratuitous. Soon, however, they become professional leaders, and in this

¹ The iron law of oligarchy refers to a provocative and very influential theory posited by German social theorist, Robert Michels.

second stage of development, they are stable and irremovable” (Michels, 1962, p. 364). In other words, every efficient organization needs a hierarchical and permanent bureaucracy with a division of labor and a chain of command. This is both a technical to ensure the smooth running of the party through a process of delegation and a tactical necessity (p.365). This trend is triggered by the fact that an organization must have a system to direct daily activities if it is to operate at the required level. As the organization starts to achieve its goals, the group in charge of the unit gradually begins to specialize in their roles, resulting in the formation of a formal bureaucracy with components like specially trained staff, a set budget, and a physical location. The formal bureaucracy of NATO comprises the following officials who function as powerful administrators with their roles as summed up in the table below.

In a critical assessment of the leadership structure captured by the table, one can legitimately ask if the group tends to monopolize instruments of authority to put their interests above those of the members of the organization. Owing to their access to power, one can hypothesize that the individuals in positions of authority will probably have particular interests in preserving the organization, which in turn upholds their predominance. This is an understandably human response to the allure of power. The top officials in NATO take pride in their position of authority within the organization, and in order to maintain that position, they will, if necessary, redefine the broad aims of the agency and commit to highlighting its “successes” in the face of obvious operational shortcomings and ethical dilemmas. When the Soviet Union collapsed, NATO seemed poised to outlast its original goal leading to the debate as to whether it should have been dissolved. It can therefore be argued that this turn of events is what put most of NATO’s bureaucratic machinery in a position where they have to justify the need of the organization and its achievements in resolving current security questions in Europe and beyond. This argument is reflected in a journal titled “NATO’s Purpose After the Cold War”, where the author contends that, “When the military organization was established in the early 1950s to give full expression to the collective defense commitment of the Washington Treaty, the basis was laid for a large bureaucracy, staffed by many thousands of people dedicated to the organization and its mission. While old soldiers may fade away, large organizations rarely do. After initially resisting the need to change, the NATO bureaucracy responded, like all such bureaucracies, by seeking to adapt its mission and structure in a manner relevant to its new environment” (Brookings, 2001, p.7).

This observation raises the issue of whether the response by NATO bureaucracy was motivated by the necessity to maintain their positions of power or the advancement of the agency's mission. While the debate about who gains more from NATO's continued existence continues, a realistic assessment reveals that, politically, the leadership within NATO is always looking for new tasks to fulfill, from maintaining peace to preventing the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). In the process, NATO has not

only survived but has also undergone a considerable transformation into a politico-military entity that varies significantly from the organization that stood ready to curb the rising threat of the Soviet Union.² This is where the Iron Law comes into play. Although the iron law has many different characteristics, this paper will mostly concentrate on the paradox associated with the theory that results from the effort made by the leadership of the organization to compromise the core mission of the agency in order to ensure its existence. It is no longer debatable if the Soviet Union poses a threat to Western Europe, but it is still unclear why and how NATO is still in existence. The primary goal of the study will be to determine if the imperviousness of bureaucrats to the opinions of certain agency members is a typical occurrence in NATO. The underlying assumption is that the acceptance of these ideas will call the moral direction of the agency in question.

Content Analysis

Content analysis may be used to gauge how resistant NATO officials are to the suggestions made by members. With this approach, sources such as speeches and transcripts of meetings are systematically analyzed, and key sections indicating resistance to suggestions and ideas are highlighted and categorized. Sources like NATO summits and ministerial meetings can be used to analyze advertent or inadvertent attempts by NATO strategists, executives, and political strategists to resist input during deliberations that would come off as indictments of the agency's performance and criticism of the viability of its policy direction. In order to conduct content analysis in a way that is compatible with the hypothesis of the study, it will be necessary to code sources in a manner that demonstrates how NATO officials adopt the iron law model specifically by,

- i. Being unaffected by the rank and file of the organization.
- ii. Expressing values that are at odds with the members.
- iii. Affirming the necessity of the organization.
- iv. Overstating of progress made by the organization.

To increase the validity of the analysis, the study will have to incorporate transcripts of NATO deliberations in the summit and ministerial meetings from different years with a special focus on recent discussions revolving around Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the question of Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership. This special focus is an effort to make the study more relevant and enhance its

² Brookings. (2001). NATO's Purpose After the Cold War. *NATO in the 21st century*.

applicability to current affairs. The Summit and Ministerial Meetings are important tools for examining how members and other high-level executives make decisions in the organization. They provide a window into NATO's major political or strategic concerns and may help people better understand how the alliance operates from the inside. If the transcripts from NATO summit meetings are to be correctly used in the study, one must narrow down the parts of speeches or responses by leaders to reflect a template of performance evaluation since these leaders are given the responsibility of delivering a progress report whenever necessary. If one views the meetings from a progress report angle, one can reasonably anticipate that the material would characterize the state of the agency by showcasing what is working and what is not, as well as providing an overview of how its policies are working.

A content analysis that, for instance, shows a disproportionate amount of statements of progress made by NATO and constant affirmation of the necessity of the organization can prompt investigation into the factors that led to the presentation of a lopsided report and did not adequately reflect the emerging difficulties in the organization. It can also raise concerns about the leaders' transparency. A fitting example would be the remark made by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the Brussels Summit, in which he discussed NATO's role in Europe's collective security and emerging challenges. The following are some of his statements lifted from the transcript.

"We meet at a pivotal moment for our Alliance. And today we will open a new chapter in our transatlantic relations" (NATO, 2021, p.1).

"I am confident that the NATO Leaders will confirm our dual-track approach to Russia: strong defense combined with dialogue. And I'm sure that the NATO Leaders will welcome the opportunity to consult with President Biden ahead of his meeting with President Putin" (NATO, 2021, p.2).

"I welcome that we are on a good track. We now have seven consecutive years of increased defense spending across European Allies and Canada." (NATO, 2021)

"So, all together I'm absolutely certain that the decisions we will make today, they will send a strong message of unity, of resolve and that we are making NATO stronger in an age of global competition" (NATO, 2021).

These are examples of encouraging remarks made by NATO leadership that serve as a model for the rest of the organization. One may argue that different leadership styles have the potential to produce different outcomes that can impact the stability and policy direction of an organization. Therefore, when NATO's Secretary, Jens Stoltenberg makes these statements, it triggers the question of whether they are intended to foster a positive atmosphere within the organization and whether they are at odds with a more

realistic assessment of the challenges the agency is currently facing. If a critical analysis of statements made by various figures in NATO's leadership were to reveal a trend where there is a lack of balance on the performance of the organization and an overemphasis on the success of its policies, it can be reasonably inferred that NATO's leadership style is consistent with the iron law model, where the original aims of the organization are covertly subjugated to the needs of the top bureaucrats to preserve their interest and impose them on the rest of the organization.

Thematic Analysis

Gathering various transcripts of speeches, press conferences, and roundtable discussions held and presided over by officials who are part of the NATO organizational structure would be the first stage in doing a theme analysis using NVIVO. Since the study revolves around NATO's continued existence following the end of the Cold War, three transcripts of speeches and discussions from every decade since 1991 will be selected in order to establish a logical and consistent trail of evidence. From these transcripts, one can create codes by highlighting various parts of the transcript. For purposes of this study, only statements that reflect, or describe the performance of the organization will be coded. The key subjects in the speeches will include Positive Observations (PO), which are statements that illuminate elements like the success of the agency and confidence in the outcomes of its policy and organizational goals. The second theme will be the discernible current challenges (CC) faced by the organization which will reveal various policy dilemmas and low expectations of success in the leadership structure of the agency. The third code, policy failures (PF), will be statements that contain an acknowledgment of the failure of implemented policies by the NATO command structure.

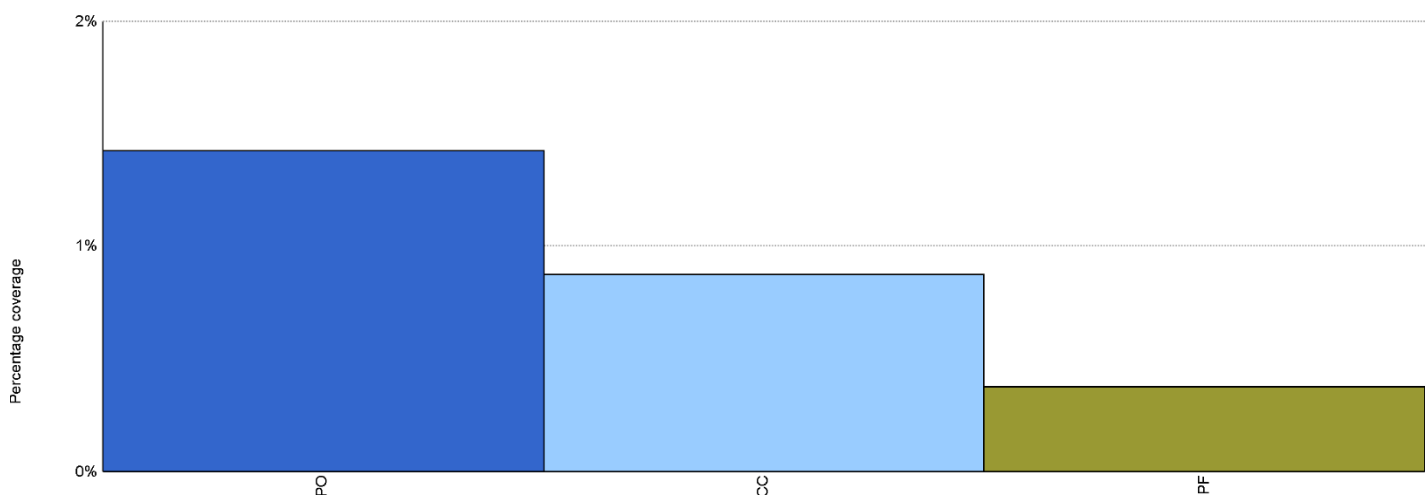
Visual models by NVIVO can be useful in demonstrating that the leaders of NATO consistently rate their organization's performance favorably. Transcripts reveal a multiplicity of positive reviews during the agency's summit meetings, press conferences, joint statements, and internal meetings. This raises the issue of whether the officials are more concerned with survival and face-saving than with adaptation and performance, leading them to emphasize the positive and downplay the challenges that NATO faces, a practice consistent with the iron law principle of leadership. Three themes — Positive Observations (PO), Current Challenges (CC), and Policy Failures (PF) — are coded in this research, and a systematic analysis is conducted to determine how often each topic appears across the whole transcript. For instance, using the chart wizard in NVIVO to automatically chart the findings of the analysis of the transcript titled *"Press conference by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council"*, it is noted that Secretary Rasmussen's delivery tended to be a positive evaluation of the NATO rather than sufficiently focused on the difficulties of policy failures. For example, when

asked about NATO's position on Russian ties and how to make Eastern Europe safer, the secretary responds as follows:

“We will start with a so-called pilot project in the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation. We will establish a trust fund. This will provide the equipment and expertise to dispose of tens of thousands of obsolete bombs and shells, safely. Our decision today launches the first phase of this pilot project. We are also considering a second phase, which will allow us to dispose of tens of thousands of tons of obsolete ammunition in the same region, through a safe and environmentally friendly industrial process. This is an area of cooperation that has great potential. So, I look forward to further cooperation, and further developments” (NATO, 2013).

In this statement, the NATO secretary provides a favorable evaluation of the agency's efforts towards cooperation with Russia in an effort to integrate the region in the Baltics into a single European economy. The accuracy of this statement is up for debate given that there is disagreement among researchers regarding the viability of integrating this enclave into the European system due to its almost-total reliance on imported energy from the Russian mainland and the “persistence of adverse geopolitical orientations in the local populations and persistent stereotypes in the public opinion” (Richard et al. 2015). One could, therefore, argue that although detached from reality, these positive performance reviews and expectations by NATO officials help to maintain the positions of bureaucrats and institutions inside NATO. As visualized using the chart below with the created nodes, positive reviews and the anticipation of progress seem to be the dominant themes in remarks by NATO officials.

Figure 1. Coding chart from NATO Opinion Press conference by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen from meeting of the NATO-Russia Council.



As highlighted by the chart showing coded themes, Secretary Rasmussen’s commentaries during the summit were mostly Positive Observations (PO), with minimal emphasis on challenges and policy failures. This seems to be the trend in other declarations by NATO officials. These charts were generated from transcripts of ministerial and summit meetings held by NATO during the last two decades.

Figure 1. Coding chart from NATO Summit Meeting_ "Adapting NATO in an Unpredictable World" - Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the École militaire in Paris, 19-Dec.-2017

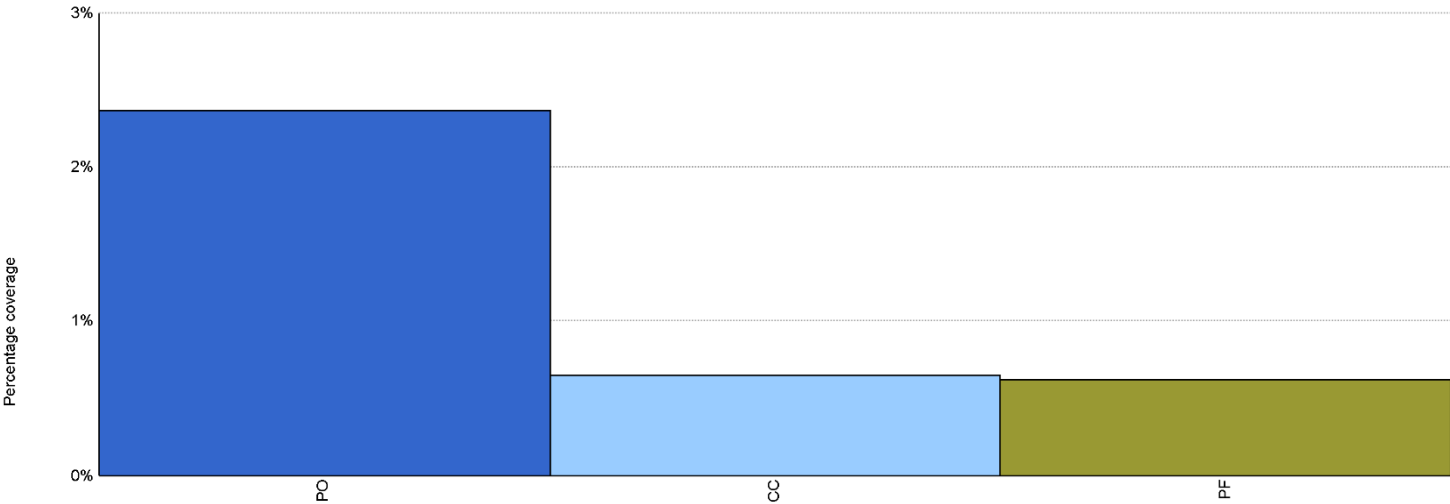


Figure 1. Coding chart from Opinion_ Doorstep statement by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen upon his arrival at the European Council.

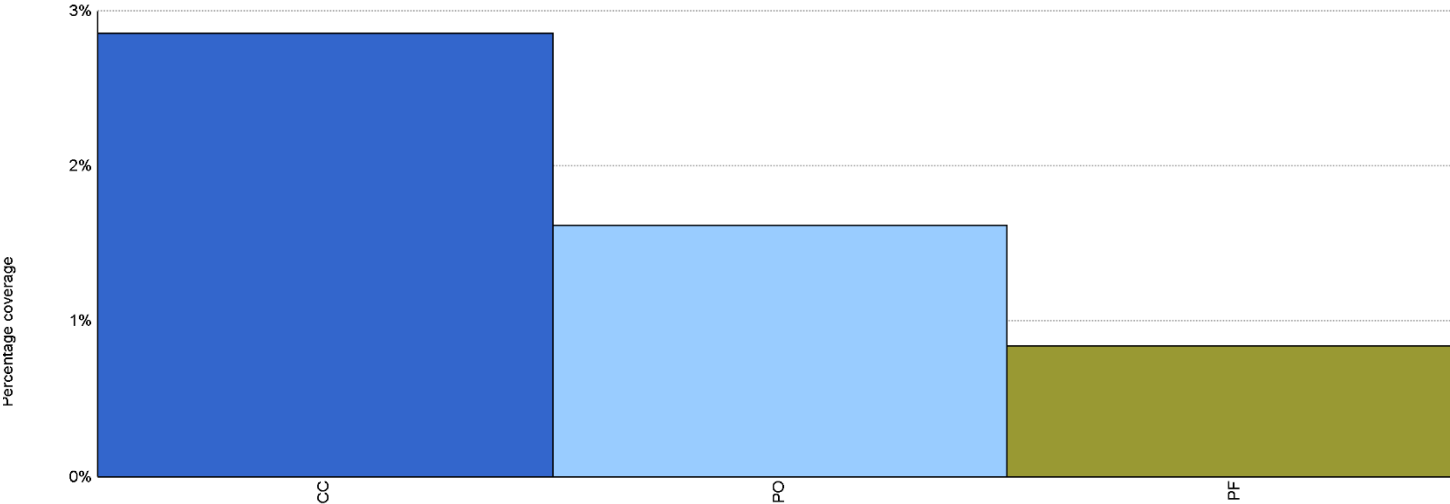
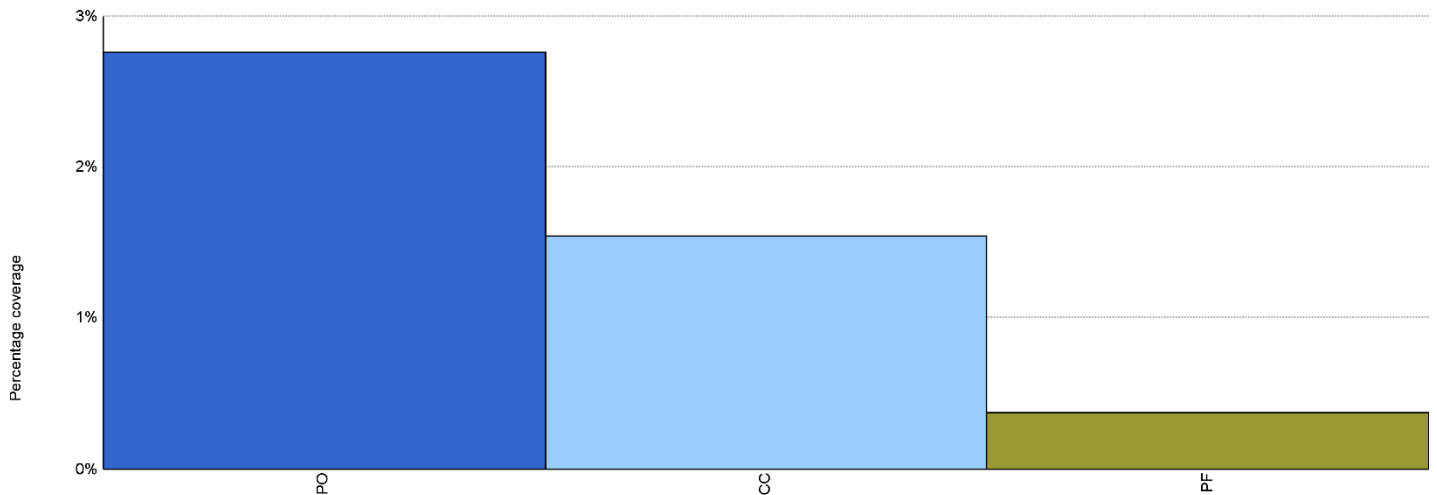


Figure 1. Coding chart from Opinion_ Speech by NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the NATO-Kuwait Public Diplomacy Conference.



The charts show a leaning towards positive evaluation of NATO's performance, policies and expectations. Available research paints a different picture. There are areas where NATO could do better and this is often pointed out by members of the media, scholars and officials from member countries. One could theorize that these charts would look different if different sources of evaluation of NATO's performance in recent times are considered.

Conclusion

Rather than continuously offering glossy performance reviews of the agency, NATO leaders have the opportunity to address serious questions regarding its history, challenges in the last two decades, and role in a changing global security environment that affects Europe, North America, the Middle East, and other regions of the world. While misplaced optimism can preserve the bureaucracy and the institutions in the agency, it prevents NATO's ability to realistically adapt and restructure itself to effectively combat new threats such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, piracy, cyber-attacks, and the disruption of energy supplies. James Goldgeier argues in his book, "The Future of NATO", that NATO must reevaluate its theory of collective defense in order to remain relevant and effective. This entails acknowledging the whole spectrum of challenges that NATO members confront today and reiterating that the alliance will act together to counter any action that endangers the political or economic security or territorial integrity

of a member state.³ It is the recognition of threats that require the confrontation of complex realities by NATO leadership and a change of attitude by its leadership structure that prioritizes effective response to global threats instead of mere preservation of the institution. As Goldgeier aptly summarizes his book, “NATO needs to reassure east European alliance members that Article V ensures their defense against Russian intimidation. That means that NATO needs to take seriously contingency planning for the protection of the Baltic states, particularly Estonia and Latvia. NATO should also reaffirm its commitment to its open-door policy on enlargement in Europe and maintain its current policy of an annual review for Georgia and Ukraine” (Goldgeier, 2010, p.34)

³ Goldgeier, J. M. (2010). *The future of NATO*. Council on Foreign Relations.

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