

## **Grasping the Everyday and Extraordinary in EU-NATO relations: The Added Value of Practice Approaches**

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### **Introduction**

Scholars analysing European security and defence cooperation have often lent themselves to the study of the field as ‘high politics’, where states and governments, particular national interests and ‘power games’, as well as geopolitics, strategic and military affairs dominate. EU-NATO relations have generally been studied as part of these overarching, strategic level factors and actors, where scholars have addressed the situations and conditions that reinforce or weaken the conditions for cooperation and, eventually, how this affects European security. The Berlin Plus agreement from 2002 defined the conditions under which the EU may draw on NATO planning capabilities, resources and assets, for the exchange of classified information, and consultation when and if the EU is to lead a crisis-management operation (EU and NATO 2002), and several cooperation formats were established as part of the Agreed Framework in 2003. The only current operation conducted under these auspices is Operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina, initiated in 2004. When Cyprus entered the EU in 2005, without having a security agreement with NATO, its political conflict with Turkey put the Berlin Plus agreement and framework in a political stalemate.

The literature on EU-NATO relations has generally departed from this long-term deadlock on formal cooperation, focusing on competition and functional overlaps between the two organisations as well as political inertia and (lack of) results. Also, military and other capability shortages – especially on the EU side – have led scholars to dismiss EU-NATO cooperation as politically obsolete and operationally irrelevant (see next section for specific references). While not dismissing the difficulties in EU-NATO relations from 2005 onwards, existing encounters generally overlook important activity and ‘the strength of weak ties’, to quote Granovetter’s (1973) seminal article. Such ties are essential for the spread of ideas and knowledge beyond a specific clique or social system, potentially leading to cooperation and community-building. In

view of this, the current article turns to practice approaches, which zoom in on how EU-NATO relations are acted out through ‘thin’, largely informal cooperation ‘on the ground’. ‘On the ground’ here refers to venues and sites where EU and NATO practitioners (e.g. civilian and military staff, diplomats) interact.

A practice approach provides a different and more nuanced account of how both the everyday and extraordinary in EU-NATO relations can be identified and understood under and beyond the political blockage on formal cooperation caused by the ‘Cyprus issue’. Existing research has shown that some of the achievements of EU-NATO cooperation – of which there are not too many – can be traced back to ‘micro-politics’, be it practical solutions carved out ‘under the radar’ of national governments (Smith 2011), decisions made by military commanders in field operations, informal passing of information between staff in the EEAS and NATO, or encounters involving other informal networks of practitioners (Græger 2016). Studying practice, the article picks up on two central goals for this special issue: First, by zooming in on what constitutes practice and where interaction happens a practice approach seeks to identify and analyse the drivers and spoilers of NATO-EU cooperation. Studying shared repertoires of practice and – although to a variable degree – the existence of a sense of ‘joint enterprise’ among EU and NATO staff involved in the production of European security also highlights and gives practice at micro level more leverage and space in explanations of European security cooperation than strategic level analyses.

Second, despite taking a ‘view from below’ and focusing on the doings and sayings of people involved in specific practices, a practice approach also highlights the importance of the wider discourses and social realities of which these practices form part, and what a certain practice leads to. Investigating the effects of EU-NATO practices for the broader field of European security speaks to another goal set out in the current special issue, notably how EU-NATO relations are central to European security cooperation (Smith and Gebhart in this volume).

Furthermore, by offering a different perspective on EU-NATO relations, the article furthers the practice turn in IR and the ‘security as practice’ research agenda (e.g. Pouliot 2010; Bueger 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2016). It also contributes to a scholarly trend, which emphasizes the importance of informal EU-NATO, micro-level cooperation (e.g. Lachmann 2010; Smith 2011; Græger 2014), potentially also leading to community-building (e.g. Græger 2016). This trend is also observable within EU studies, where practice theory increasingly is used to grasp what

drives European integration within foreign and security policy (e.g. Adler-Nissen 2008, 2015; Bicci 2011, 2016; Bremberg 2015; Mérand 2006) but also within studies of EU institutions like the EEAS (e.g. Lequesne 2015).<sup>1</sup>

The article is organised as follows: The next section reviews existing literature on EU-NATO relations, before briefly introducing what practice is some scholarly debates about practice theory. It then discusses some key dimensions of practice (the extraordinary and the everyday, knowledge and skills, learning and communities of practice), using empirical illustrations from sites where EU and NATO diplomats, militaries and staff engage with each other in practice. The conclusion summarises the argument and how practice approaches fertilise future studies of EU-NATO relations.

### **Gaps in the literature on EU-NATO relations**

As a field of study, EU-NATO cooperation has attracted a lot of political and academic interest over the past decade. Scholarship is rich and generally emanates from two strands of literature. From the mid-1990s onwards scholars centred on the question of what kind of independent role the EU could or should fulfil alongside the Western European Union (WEU) and NATO (e.g. Cornish 1996; Deighton 1996; Howorth 2000, 2007; Lenzi 1998; Manners and Whitman 2000; Missiroli 2002; Shake, et al. 1999; Whitman 2004). This literature was also concerned with the transatlantic relations, and the ‘division of labour’ between the USA and Europe, concluding that the latter should take more responsibility for its own security, for securing its neighbourhood, and in the fight against global threats.

Another strand of literature grew out of the Berlin Plus negotiations on how the EU could benefit from cooperation with NATO, primarily to draw on alliance assets and resources, when NATO did not wish to engage itself (EU and NATO 2002). Scholars quickly came to focus on the successes and, overwhelmingly, failures of EU-NATO cooperation, and the consequences for European security (Cornish 2006; Duke 2008; Howorth 2003, 2010; Lachmann 2010; Yost 2007). A main concern is how the ambitions for the EU-NATO relationship in the Berlin Plus Agreement and Agreed Framework and subsequent declarations, statements and speeches

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of EU literature that converges towards accounts of practice, see Adler-Nissen (2015, p. 89-90).

largely has remained unaccomplished, because of the mutual blocking of cooperation by Cyprus and Turkey and conflicting national agendas (also beyond the two countries).

Many of these scholarly contributions portray the EU as the weak link in the EU-NATO relationship, both militarily and regarding its willingness to take decisions in due time when action is required. Within the security and defence policy field, the EU has often been compared with powerful states like the U.S. or international organisations like NATO. This is somewhat unfair, because states normally have less complex decision-making processes and most IOs have a narrower agenda, than the EU. A general feature of EU studies, Jørgensen (2015: 24) claims, is that they are ‘obsessed with actor characteristics’, leading to a focus on agency. Being conducted by a community of scholars and experts who share an interest in the EU, these analyses are often premised, implicitly or explicitly, on themes derived from the EU’s strive to forge an ‘effective’, ‘coherent’ and ‘common’ foreign, security and, increasingly, defence policy. Institutional innovation or policy initiatives related to the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) or other parts of the union’s so-called external action have been analysed in terms of what it might mean for the EU as an international actor and its capacity to respond to events or shape outcomes in the international system, alone or together with others.

Moreover, a focus on ‘actorness’ often invites a normative approach or policy focus centred on why the EU should take on a more important role in international affairs, and how. For instance, outright disappointment was expressed when the type of crisis management operation that the union had been preparing for was initiated in Libya in 2011, and the CSDP was not even mentioned as a candidate to lead the mission (e.g. Howorth 2013).

Recently however, micro-analyses of interaction in the EU are slowly emerging. Examples include how diplomats, militaries, and officials and staff in working groups in the EU interact, develop common goals and standards and are subject to processes of socialisation etc., such as Cross’ (2011) analysis of EU security integration and epistemic communities in the EU Military Committee, the EU Military Staff, and in COREPER, Juncos and Pomorska’s (2011) analysis of the EU Council working groups and officials involved in the CFSP, and Bicchi’s (2011) study of the European Correspondents network (COREUs) as a community of practice within foreign policy communication (see also Smith et al. in this volume). Despite this growing interest in the everyday workings of the union, EU studies often favour discourse, intentionality,

norm transformation and socialisation, rather than practice (but see Lequesne 2015). Adler-Nissen's (2015, p. 89) critique of this 'tendency to focus on (...) the authoritative dimension of the EU decision-making machinery and its effects outside of Brussels', which means that the implicit, tacit, unintentional and accidental practices often are discarded and downplayed as 'banal' and 'apolitical', is therefore spot-on.

EU-NATO relations have also been examined as part of an 'inter-organizational relations' turn in International Relations (IR) (Biermann and Koops 2017; Koops in this volume). This turn largely originated in research on the EU's performance with and within international organisations (e.g. Jørgensen 2009; Jørgensen et al. 2011; Jørgensen and Laatikainen 2012; Oberthür et al. 2013; Drieskens and van Schaik 2014), inspired by organisation theory and evaluative analyses of performance (e.g. Lusthaus et al. 2002). Research also includes attempts to theorise the EU-NATO relationship as a case of IO-IO relations more generally (e.g. Biermann 2008; Hoffmann 2013) or as a formalization of informal cooperation (e.g. Lachmann 2010). This literature approaches generally departs from an EU perspective (but see Costa and Jørgensen 2012), where NATO is analysed in relation to the EU's strategy of 'effective multilateralism' (Varwick and Koops 2009), or 'selective multilateralism' (Drent 2014), or multi-level governance perspectives (Stephenson 2013).

Finally, a bulk of literature of relevance to EU-NATO relations studies 'in-mission politics' and 'on the ground' challenges of coordinating responses to complex emergencies, security sector reform, state building etc. when the EU, NATO, the UN and other IOs are present in the same mission area (e.g. Dursun-Ozkanca and Crossley-Frolick 2012; de Coning and Friis 2013). However, to the degree that these contributions discuss the role of practitioners, they are usually seen as interlocutors of their IOs, or protectors of specific member-state interests, not as agents of social interactions.

Summing up, with a few exceptions much research on the EU-NATO relationship has zoomed in on strategic level concerns, the role of decision-makers in the two organisations, and member state interests, implying a bias where dominance of agents over structure, and of strategy over practice prevails. Addressing these lacunas, the current article argues that practice approaches offer a way for scholars to make use of the empirically rich literature on EU-NATO relations to ask new and thought-provoking questions about the production and provision of European security, as part of everyday social interaction or of handling extraordinary situations.

## **A practice approach to EU-NATO relations**

Practice theories offer a framework that enables the researcher to examine ongoing processes of carrying out everyday practices understood as sets of doings and sayings that have meaning for the interaction itself, as well as how these practices have an effect on the wider issues at stake. The purpose of analysing practices is to study ‘how understanding those practices may help us to understand the wider discourses of which they are a part’, which refers to an analytical goal external to the practices themselves (Andersen et al. 2016, p. 3). Analysing EU-NATO relations through the lens of practice theory brings questions regarding how and where practice is enacted and produced into focus, also adding practical (social and political) knowledge about the effects on European security.

The ‘practice turn’ in IR theory means a turn away from ‘a study focusing on language and words, to study social action as enacted in and on the world’ (Neumann 2002, p. 628). Brought into IR studies by Schatzki et al. (2001) and Neumann (2002) it was later adopted by a number of IR scholars.<sup>2</sup> Adler and Pouliot’s edited volume from 2011, which proposed a new research agenda or programme became an important scholarly reference point.

Just like there is not one practice theory, definitions of practice vary. Most accounts of practice emphasise patterned, routinized or standardized forms of (inter)action or behaviour; practices that reflect regularities across time and space and which are repeated in a similar fashion with a similar meaning (Schatzki 2008, p. 88-110). In Adler’s (2008, p. 198) ‘rich’ definition, practice is ‘knowledge-constituted, meaningful patterns of socially recognized activity embedded in communities, routines and organizations that structure experience’, or just socially meaningful patterns. The implicit authority claim in any enactment of practice – ‘this is how things are done’ and ‘the right thing to do’ – is a competence that is ‘fought for by competing authority claims’ (Adler-Nissen 2015, p. 94; see also Pouliot 2016). In this view, practice is ‘competent performance’ and one that can be learned from others (Adler 2008, p. 198; Adler and Pouliot 2011b, p. 4-5; Neumann 2002). However, as noted by Onuf (2012, p. 51): ‘what

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<sup>2</sup>Early contributions include, for instance, Adler (2008); Adler-Nissen (2008); Bueger (2013a, b); Katzenstein (2010); Pouliot (2008, 2010).

people take to be possible and what society makes permissible depend on the vantage point, one's relation to practice, and not practice itself".

Practice is different from habit, action, and behaviour. A practice approach pays distinct attention to how things are done in a bounded domain of activity and how practices are maintained overtime: 'Action is specific and located in time; practices are general classes of action, which although situated in social context, are not limited to any specific enacting' (Adler and Pouliot (2011, p. 5). Habit, on the other hand, is fundamentally repetitive (Hopf 2010, p. 541). Furthermore, practicality is 'partly improvisatory because it results from the intersection of a particular set of dispositions and social configurations' (Pouliot 2010, p. 21) but improvisation that leads to non-repetitive action is simply behaviour, not practice (ibid.).

Agents are seen to develop specific dispositions for acting and thinking in a particular way, not as individuals with intentions and motives but as social relations based on a logic practicality (Pouliot 2010).<sup>3</sup> By focusing on those who engage in coordination and cooperation of a formal and, especially, informal type as part of a normal workday, a practice approach also steers scholars away from systemic frameworks, strategic accounts and 'high politics' venues and towards the practical and inarticulate, and the social relations, which embody the organisation in question. Studying practice performed by diplomats, politicians and civilian and military staff at various levels of responsibility and different sites (e.g. offices, headquarters, field missions), brings the everyday agents in EU-NATO relations and European security cooperation upfront.

The growing interest in practice-based studies the past years has nourished scholarly debates within IR, including about the framework offered by Adler and Pouliot. While engaging with all critical accounts of practice goes beyond the ambition of this article, some of them help shed light on how practice approaches add value to the research on EU-NATO relations.

### **Scholarly debates about practice**

One critique of practice theory has been concerned with its lack of explanatory power and specificity, and 'conceptual overstretch' (e.g. Ringmar 2014; Kustermans 2015). Kusterman's

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<sup>3</sup> For studies of practice and the everyday for 'ordinary people', see e.g. Guillaume (2010), and for people in/as war, see e.g. Dufort (2014), and Sylvester (2013).

(2015) proposed solution to what he presents as the main problems with the practice concept, to introduce a distinction between ‘practice’, ‘practices’ and ‘practice knowledge’, is rather useful. Practice in the singular means the myriad of human behaviours that go on all the time or, simply put, ‘what people do’. But to study practice is also to interpret ‘its content, its attributes, and its characteristics’ (ibid., p. 15). Hence, practices in the plural mean that they ‘assume a degree of coherency or organisation. They admit a form and converge on an end’, according to Kustermans (ibid.). Applied to the study of the EU-NATO relationship, a set of sayings, doings and understandings and patterns of interaction and artefacts clearly are observable. Kustermans’ third specification, ‘practice knowledge’, which refers to the skill at doing what one does is also key when staff in the EU and NATO engage with each other and the way in which shared ‘background conditions’ play into this (I return to this below).

Another concern in the scholarly critique of practice approaches is whether their purpose and interest lie with the practices themselves or whether identifying practices is a means to study the social. The question whether practices could and should be theorized at all is also part of this critique. According to Andersen and Neumann (2012, p. 467-68), practice cannot be studied separately from the theories and research questions which identify practice (see also Ringmar 2014: 6). Clearly, the social cannot be reduced to practices (Schatzki 2001, p. 10) and, as stressed above, the effects that practice brings about are equally important to identify and analyse. But this does not imply that practices should be reduced to their effects and outcome; practices are also important as ‘meaningful sets of doings and sayings’ in themselves (Kustermans 2015, p. 17; see also Bueger and Gadinger 2014). The latter is definitely the case in the EU-NATO relationship, where staff has found informal ways of engaging each other, seeking practical solutions as well as developing shared repertoires of practice (e.g. informal information exchanges, meetings, and briefings, be it in offices or between military vessels at sea) across organisational and professional boundaries as part of their daily work (Græger 2014, 2016).

A third aspect of practice that has triggered a lot of scholarly debates concerns the continuity-change dimension, or the dynamic interplay between order and change (Neumann 2002). Critics argue that practices cannot be both transformative and produce stability at the same time (e.g. Ringmar 2015, p 18), and that the concept of practice ‘betrays a conservative bias’ (Kustermans 2015, p. 19, 3). Truly, a practice approach is centred on everyday routine behaviour and an inherent feature of practice is that it remains the same: The power of practices lies in ‘their

reproduction in structures that are to some extent self-sustaining' (Powell and Dimaggio 1991, p. 9), continuously producing and re-producing the order (Bueger and Gadinger 2014, p. 61). What is to be done and how appear as 'self-evident and commonsensical' (Pouliot 2010, p. 12), reflecting a shared implicit understanding of how things should be done, of the 'rules of the game', or doxa (Schatzki et al. 2001, p. 3). In that sense, all 'human activity is laden with the past' (Schatzki 2010, p. 214). Although reason, human creativity, experimentation, social meaning and standards of competence and conduct may guide agency, these action conditions are furnished by structure and woven into inarticulate practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011, p. 15-16). Applied to the EU-NATO case, the 'standard' ways of handling specific (and also returning) security concerns and situations in field missions, or established informal communication channels for information sharing among diplomats in the EU and NATO headquarters are furnished by professional training and/or shared work experience (see below). These practices are accepted as 'the right or appropriate thing to do' by those engaged in it (Græger 2016).

But studying the social world through the lens of practice theory does not exclude change as a possibility.. According to Bueger and Gadinger (2014, p. 61), 'Practices are repetitive patterns. But they are also permanently displacing and shifting'.. Critics also agree that skilled persons can bring about meaningful change (Ringmar 2015, p. 18), and that practical knowledge may organise or foster change (Kustermans 2015, p. 12).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, practical configurations could be fluid and practices are not confined to studies of order but also of situations where routines and repertoires of interaction are neglected, opposed or collapse.

The EU-NATO relationship is in in fact an illustrative case of both continuity and change. Clearly, EU-NATO practices are not 'permanently' changing, which would render them un-identifiable and, consequently, un-researchable. But to overcome the effects of the deadlock on Berlin Plus, informal cooperation has to a considerable degree become practice among EU and NATO staff both in field missions and headquarters. The fact that up until 2014, political signals have been absent or weak regarding EU-NATO cooperation have facilitated the development of shared repertoires of practices as well as their maintenance overtime. Hence, as the examples above illustrate, EU-NATO relations lend themselves particularly well to a practice-based study, due to the institutional innovation where new practices are formalised in response to

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external pressures. These innovations could be everything from new communication lines to the change of Head of Mission, new appointment to a position of direct relevance to EU-NATO relations, or the deployment of a new military contingent to a field mission. In all of these situations, a change of practice is possible: Would routines and standard ways of doing things ‘on the ground’ be passed on, revised, or dismissed? Change could be incremental or sudden, inflicting a rupture of practices.

Finally, by paying attention to routines, patterns of action and continuity, practice theory and especially research on communities of practice have been criticised for being too focused on what brings the joint enterprise forward, ignoring processes or spoilers that might constrain practices and the effect on social relations or policy outcomes. However, there is nothing imminent in the study of practice that favours cooperation over conflict, or amity over enmity; this is an empirical question that needs to be explored for each case. Cases of rupture could be the result of spoilers actively seeking to stop certain practices, or competition, miscalculation, unintentionality, misconduct, or simply incompetent performance by those engaging in a certain practice. In the EU-NATO case, political or organisational agendas, resource allocation or incentive structures may lead to overlapping activity and competition, as well as coordination and cooperation (see Græger and Haugevik 2011; Hoffman 2013; Smith 2011; Varvick and Koops 2009). Furthermore, even if professionals tend to give their professional skills and ‘ethos’ priority over organisational agendas and concerns, when militaries and police forces are expected to or need to operate together informally like in Afghanistan (ISAF-EUPOL) and Kosovo (KFOR-EULEX), frictions do occur (Græger 2016).<sup>5</sup> While spoilers on the EU and NATO side are hard to detect in the Kosovo missions (but local political forces have sometimes acted as spoilers), inadequate resources and unmanageable mandates, especially on the EU-side, and asymmetrical power relations have sometimes led to incompetent performance.<sup>6</sup> The asymmetrical relationship between the two organisations, especially in Kosovo and to some extent Afghanistan, is less present in the anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. Here, Operation Atalanta, a flagship for the union as a global security provider, has at times been better equipped and resourced than NATO’s Ocean Shield operation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Because formal cooperation is blocked by Turkey and Cyprus, four technical agreements allowing KFOR to assist EULEX when needed have been signed.

<sup>6</sup> In Kosovo, the asymmetry between EULEX, with its 700 police forces and NATO’s 5000 men KFOR force is particularly striking.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with NATO military staff, January 2015.

As this section has showed, there is no unified theory of practice (Schatzki 2001, p. 2; Nicolini 2013, p. 1), which also renders practice approaches vulnerable to scholarly critique. The growing interest within IR and also in EU studies in empirical analyses of practice and practical and ‘bookish’ knowledge-based communities of practice within the fields of foreign policy and security (e.g. Adler 2008; Adler-Nissen 2015; Bicchi 2011, 2016; Bueger 2013a, b, 2016; Bremberg 2015; Græger 2016) nevertheless reflect that practice approaches are gaining ground. Having discussed practice and some scholarly debates about practice, the next three sections turn to some dimensions of practice, which are particularly relevant when studying EU-NATO relations.

### **Everyday versus extraordinary practices**

Practices are both everyday and developed in response to extraordinary situations or crises. Security studies generally are interested in studying how states and other actors are formulating policies and strategies and taking operational measures to protect and secure their citizens and members respectively and, ultimately, to prepare for the worst. As Bigo (2002) notes, ‘traditional securitization theory often studies the unexpected or extraordinary’. International crises represent extraordinary situations, with expectations of making means available for dealing efficiently with them. In these situations, extraordinary means often apply, sometimes putting aside the very rules and principles that are threatened and endangered to protect the community or state in question through a process of securitization (Buzan et al. 1998). But crises could also be local, for instance if violence erupts in a mission area, demanding an immediate response on the ground. However, analysing crises and crisis-management generally convey little knowledge about the everyday production of security and the actors and dynamics it involves. As Bremberg (2015) argues in his study of the European Union as a security community-building institution, ‘focusing exclusively on urgent and exceptional measures as the prime indicator of ongoing security dynamics runs the risk of losing sight of more low-key and routine-based security practices’.

Studying the EU-NATO relationship as practice enables the researcher to transcend the extraordinary-everyday dichotomy but also to overcome the arguably ‘hyped-up’ focus on the extraordinary in security and strategic studies. While designed to provide a (rapid) response to an extraordinary situation or event, security production involves practices that are ordinary, day-to-day experiences and where social artefacts constitute an essential part. In the EU-NATO

relationship, such artefacts include everything from meeting agendas, reports, and informal memos exchanged between EU and NATO staff and diplomats, informal briefings by EU commanders in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) or by NATO commanders in the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC) as well as mutual visits to EU and NATO vessels at sea in the anti-piracy or refugee operations (Græger 2016).<sup>8</sup>

However, crises may also strengthen and expand the repertoire of everyday security practice. The Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014 put the relevance of EU-NATO cooperation, also for territorial security, back on the political agenda.<sup>9</sup> Both the EU High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the European Commission and the NATO Secretary General have emphasised that a more uncertain and hostile European security environment is a challenge that their respective organisations should handle together (Mogherini 2014; NATO 2016a,b). Since 2014, EU and NATO representatives have met informally on several occasions to exchange views, discuss common or coordinated responses, and convey joint messages to the external world.<sup>10</sup>

This is not an entirely new phenomenon, however. Crises, especially when Europe is expected to take a stand or a specific role, have facilitated EU-NATO communication and opened up meeting arenas that the ‘Cyprus issue’ has otherwise rendered inaccessible. For instance, reciprocal informal cross-briefings and meetings between the ambassadors in the NAC and the PSC happened during ‘the Arab Spring’ and the Libya operations during 2011, as well as when violence broke out on the ground in Kosovo in 2007 and in 2012 (Græger 2016). Although the frameworks for the coordination of defence, capability development, training of personnel etc. established as part of the Berlin Plus Agreement and Agreed Framework have been blocked since 2005, the member-states of both organisations generally have turned a blind eye to practical cooperation as long as it generates results and is conducted discretely, sensitively and

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<sup>8</sup> A growing number of IR scholars pursue the ‘security as practice’ agenda (e.g. Bueger 2013a, b, 2015, 2016; Græger 2016; Pouliot 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Ensuring the member-states’ security and survival is primarily taken care of by NATO or – for the non-aligned and neutral EU-members – the EU, sometimes supported by bilateral cooperative frameworks or agreements.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, PSC and NATO ambassadors met informally to discuss the acute crisis and how to respond to it on 5 March and on 10 June in 2014 and also for a third time that year, as well as in 2015. See e.g. [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-858D6FDD-D2A716F7/natolive/news\\_107742.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-858D6FDD-D2A716F7/natolive/news_107742.htm), and [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49217.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49217.htm).

without serious incidents (Smith 2011, p. 255).<sup>11</sup> At the operational level, EU and NATO staff have found ways of working alongside each other or together both in crisis management operations, support missions (e.g. handling refugees), and anti-piracy operations.

Practice approaches are able to capture the essence of these informal encounters, which constitute the intersubjective understandings of security and how to handle them, whether as part of the everyday production of security or a response to major crises.

The perceived strategic uncertainty in Europe the past years surely has securitized EU-NATO cooperation, rendering an expansion of cooperation outside of Berlin Plus politically desirable and possible. New threats, such as ‘hybrid warfare’ and cyberattacks, but also energy-security, capacity building in third countries, and illegal migration and refugee flows opened up new areas of practical cooperation. In responding to the refugee crisis from 2015, NATO and the EU signed an agreement in March 2016, emphasizing that they had reached a ‘common understanding’ on the modalities of the cooperation. In practical terms, it implied ensuring consistency and complementarity of the Frontex operation and NATO’s support activities (European Commission 2016). New initiatives regarding information sharing and incident response coordination between NATO and the EU have also been made within the cyber security domain (EEAS 2016). These agreements and coordination of activity are examples of everyday practice that originates in the extraordinary.

## **Practice, knowledge and skills**

Arguably, a practice approach contributes to a better understanding not only of empirics (practice or practices) as ‘raw data’ but of the conditions that trigger and maintain or, alternatively, obstruct interaction. Both in everyday and extraordinary situations (e.g. crises) is practice socially recognized as the ‘right’ or appropriate way of getting something done or to behave or as ‘competent performances’ By implication, practice involves competence, knowledge and skills. With regard to how these three relate to each other, Neumann (2002, p. 627) underlines the importance of practice as a ‘hands-on’ knowledge (‘knowing-how’), rather than a bookish knowledge (‘knowing that’). A ‘hands-on’ knowledge is usually action-oriented and practical, rather than ideational, normative or representational, and based on professional competence and experience, human skills and judgement (Neumann 2005; Pouliot 2010). Even

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with NATO diplomat, January 2015.

critics accept, with reference to studies of statecraft, that diplomats and statesmen and women ‘typically feel their way through’, without considering rationally all possible options or outcomes in a situation (Ringmar 2014) and that practice knowledge is ‘a skill acquired through experience’ (Kustermans 2015, p. 11).

What informs this particular type of skills varies but scholars generally emphasise ‘background knowledge’. Adler (2008, p. 202) defines this as ‘the context within which rational action takes place’, both for those shaping and engaging in a practice and for future practitioners. The diffusion of ‘background knowledge’ across agents ‘enables practitioners to share similar beliefs related to their practices, to entertain similar reasons and to act with common sense’ (ibid., p. 201). Shared values, interests and habits among practitioners that are intrinsic to (and part of) their profession and, hence, often unintentional or implicit are important in this regard. As Pouliot (2010) emphasises, what practitioners bring to a particular setting is crucial; what they think *from*, rather than what they think about. However, background knowledge should not be reduced to practical knowledge, and could also be ‘a skill born of experience and *study*’ (Schatzki 1996, p. 133ff). A growing number of IR scholars pursuing practice approaches have studied how these skills are played out in various international contexts inhabited by diplomats, militaries, bureaucrats, and other professionals (e.g. Adler-Nissen 2015; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014; Bueger 2013a, b; Græger 2016; Lequesne 2015; Neumann 2007; Pouliot and Cornut 2015; Sending et al. 2016).

With regard to EU-NATO relations, practitioners bring practical knowledge and experience (e.g. from former postings) as well as education into their daily encounters with each other, which facilitate the creation and participation in shared repertoires of practices. Hofmann’s (2009, p. 48) analysis of EU-NATO-UN cooperation found that ‘the organizations have had to muddle through by relying on the member states themselves, as well as on cooperation based on the social skills and entrepreneurship of their respective personnel on the ground in these operations.’ A practice approach would explain this ‘stretch’ as a reflection of ‘hands-on’, inarticulate or tacit knowledge that especially militaries, police and diplomats hold as part of their professional education, training and career patterns. For militaries, assisting and protecting your comrades reflects a culture where the ‘band of brothers’ is strong both in times of peace and war; this is the essence (or meaning) of being a soldier (Mackenzie 2015). Research on inter-action between EU and NATO staff in the two separate missions in Kosovo shows that these bonds also transcend national and organisational boundaries. KFOR soldiers have assisted

EULEX police in handling violent episodes and situations, also beyond the formal chain of responsibility in the technical agreements designed to circumvent the political stalemate on Berlin Plus, potentially also putting themselves and their careers at risk (Græger 2016, p. 489-490). Informal inter-action patterns are also common among staff in the EU- and NATO anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden (Smith 2011; Gebhart and Smith 2014).

## **Learning through communities of practice**

The idea of learning, which is strong in most practice accounts, generally imposes continuity or order through the maintenance of certain practices – hence their taken-for-granted quality. But learning also involves transformation. Collective learning ‘occurs in and through practice, within communities of doers’ (Pouliot 2010, p. 45), and is particularly central to communities of practice. A community of practice is ‘articulated into specific types of action and socially developed through learning and training’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011, p. 3), held together by shared beliefs in particular forms of knowledge based on shared expertise and norms (Wenger 1998b). The creation, sharing, organisation, revision and passing on of knowledge take place within and among these communities, which embody ‘the knowledge the community develops, shares, and maintains’ (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 29). Although often working for large organisations, people ‘learn through their participation in more specific communities made up of people with whom they interact on a regular basis’, and ‘[I]n a deep sense, it is by these communities that knowledge is “owned” in practice’ (Wenger 1998b).

With regard to EU-NATO relations, a central question related to learning is how education, training and the rotational career patterns typical of military and civilian staff deployed to field operations and staff and diplomats in headquarters in Brussels inform EU-NATO practices. Learning could be from ‘bookish’ or ‘hands on’ knowledge, or a combination of the two. The former would typically be based on national military education, and where NATO standards often apply, or diplomatic training. For many EU and NATO military and civilian staff, a career would also include education or training courses at institutions like the NATO Defence College, the NATO Obergammerau School in Germany, the European Security and Defence College, or U.S. defence academies or colleges (Cross 2011; Græger 2016, p. 492).

The ‘hands-on’ type of learning would be knowledge learnt from or experience from, typically, working together in former postings. While such transfer of learning and knowledge usually is tacit and informal and, hence, seldom documented (see Wenger et al. 2000, p. 149), one way of

studying the relationship between practice, learning and community-building is to investigate whether or not EU-NATO relevant practices are passed on from one ‘generation’ of staff and leaders to another, or whether rupture or rivalling practices emerge. In our case, former postings could be in the NATO headquarters, the EEAS, the EUMS etc. or field missions (but not necessarily representing the same IO). The classical example is Xavier Solana, who came directly from the job as NATO Secretary General to take up the position as the first EU High Representative. Another example is Xavier Bout de Marnhac, a EULEX Head of Mission, who was formerly KFOR Commander, and there are ample examples at lower levels of responsibility, too (e.g. EUMS or EEAS staff who come from NATO postings).

In the context of EU-NATO cooperation, professional education and training are important for shaping shared background conditions and also as ‘anchoring practices’ or infrastructures enabling informal cooperation (Græger 2016, p. 491-92). How and under which conditions professional cultures and socialisation may affect – facilitate or hamper – inter-action and learning vary. Socialisation refers to a process where interaction in a group leads novices to endorse group norms, potentially leading to the creation of a ‘we-feeling among the people involved, and in time also potentially to a common role identity’ (Johnston 2001, p. 493). While, a community of practice presupposes the existence of a *joint enterprise*, relationships of *mutual engagement*, and a *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) developed over time, it does not presuppose a fusion of identities (Wenger 1998a, p. 76).

Furthermore, the socialisation literature is preoccupied with identifying and explaining how various groups motivated by shared values and professional norms work to push certain political ideas and agendas. In their study of Council working groups and officials involved in CFSP, for instance, Juncos and Pomorska (2011) found that neutrality, consensus-building and co-ordination reflexes are important behavioural norms that form part of an informal ‘code of conduct’. Similarly, studies of professions focus on how professionals (especially certain groups in society, such as militaries, doctors and lawyers) seek to monopolise their competence to protect it from external intrusion, which might undermine their status and influence (Abbot 1988). The literature on epistemic communities also stresses how a network ‘of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain or issue area’ makes an ‘authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge’ (Haas 1992, p. 198) as well as to what constitutes ‘proper’ science in their respective fields, what it takes to qualify as a discipline and

academic standards and behavior, and so on (e.g. Knorr 1999). It generally pays little attention to practical, implicit knowledge, which may be both unintentional and accidental. Applied to the EU-NATO case, the practical, implicit knowledge that underpins informal interaction is more a result of similar professional education, training, and experience, and ‘getting things done’ in politically difficult circumstances than about protecting the standards of what is ‘proper’ behaviour (Græger 2016).

The informal interaction and fluid nature associated with communities of practice imply that they are not necessarily ‘congruent with the reified structures of institutional affiliations, divisions, and boundaries’ of many networks (Wenger 1998, p. 118-119). As Wenger et al. (2011) emphasize: ‘All communities of practice are networks in the sense that they involve connections among members. But not all networks are communities of practice’. But epistemic communities should be considered as sub-sets of communities of practice as long as the analytical focus is on the practice that underpins the community in question (Adler 2008, p. 199).

Communities of practice ‘develop around things that matter to people. As a result, their practices reflect the members’ own understanding of what is important’ (Wenger 1998b). Though Wenger does not dismiss the influence of outside constraints or directives on this understanding, he claims that ‘members develop practices that are their own response to these external influences. Even when a community’s actions conform to an external mandate, it is the community – not the mandate – that produces the practice.’ (ibid.). This view fits well with how EU and NATO staff in offices and missions engages each other informally beyond Berlin Plus and, sometimes, mission mandates. Hence, EU-NATO practices clearly expand across organisational as well as professional boundaries (e.g. civilian-military, police-military). First, because the practices they share often involve a smaller number of people who they trust and work with regularly. Few diplomats in the EEAS and NATO engage in EU-NATO relations on a daily basis. Staffs at the military level interact more regularly, because they attend to operational concerns, especially when both organisations are running missions in the same mission area.

Second, staff needs to work informally, because of the lack of formal mandates for moving beyond Berlin Plus. This is all the more important, because of the sensitivity of Berlin Plus,

where Cyprus and Turkey are blocking further cooperation, but also because of the generally sensitive character of security and defence policy.

### **Conclusion: What practice theory does for EU-NATO studies**

This article has argued that a practice approach is well suited to capture the practical dynamics, dysfunctions and informal encounters that constitute the present nature and essence of the EU-NATO relationship. A study of EU–NATO relations and European security cooperation as practice, performed by everyday agents (diplomats, politicians and civilian and military staff) at various levels of responsibility and sites (operational and tactical levels, offices and headquarters) fulfils two of the goals of this special issue: to speak to top-down versus bottom up processes of EU-NATO cooperation, and to explore the broader effects of such interaction on European security. Using a practice analytical framework is a means to look beyond the state-driven politics of Berlin Plus, the resource-material focus in the debates about the CSDP/EU, the strategic-level bias and the hyped-up focus on the extraordinary that have dominated security studies as a discipline.

Practice approaches generally focus on action that is ordinary and everyday, patterned, and iterated over time. Its appearance as ‘self-evident’ and taken for granted nature facilitates the maintenance of practices, but practices may however also reflect and provoke change, and dissolve. A gradual shift from formal to informal cooperation in the EU-NATO relationship in response to the deadlock on cooperation under Berlin Plus is an illustrative example of how practice may invoke change and innovation, involving coordination and cooperation as well as rivalry and competition between professional values and organisational agendas.

But despite the everyday focus in studies of practice, there is also room for the extraordinary, which may both strengthen and change established repertoires of practices. For instance, the Ukraine crisis in 2014 set off bold political statements about the need to deepen ties, leading to the Joint Declaration signed by both organisations in July 2016, and the agreement in December 2016 to follow up the declaration with some 40 concrete, joint measures to advance cooperation within hybrid threats, cyber defence and a more secure neighbourhood (NATO 2016a, 2016b). While neither a more insecure Europe nor ‘new threats’ have broken the Berlin Plus deadlock, they have given new impetus into the EU-NATO relationship and triggered new practices.

Furthermore, studying practice draws the attention to practices facilitated by shared 'background conditions' among those involved. Background conditions are practical, 'hands-on' skills based on shared experience from, for instance, former postings to headquarters or field missions, or a shared 'bookish' knowledge from similar education and training, as diplomats, police or militaries. Practitioners may also hold both types of skills at the same time. Learning and shared background conditions have also over time created looser community structures among EU and NATO staff in headquarters and in mission areas that constitute the contours of communities of practice in the making (Græger 2016). In the EU-NATO relationship, staff who engage with each other routinely and regularly as part of their job has been key to keeping interaction going under the political stalemate on Berlin Plus. Putting a different type of materiality, that of practice, up front, helps rediscovering the power of informal interaction and 'the strength of weak ties' (Granovetter (1973) at the micro-level, where everyday security is produced.

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