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Organizational Overlap and Bureaucratic Actors: How EU–NATO Relations Empower the European Commission

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Abstract

Organizational overlap is a ubiquitous feature in regional governance. Most studies have focused on member states, demonstrating that overlap enables states differently. We still know little about whether and how overlapping organizations impact international bureaucracies and how this shapes the relationship between bureaucratic actors within organizations. We argue that overlap can empower international bureaucrats, but not equally. Those with autonomous resources from member states are the most attractive interlocuters for bureaucrats from other organizations and, hence, likely to become most empowered. Substantive expertise and formal competence are less consequential in this context. We unpack this argument by looking at a policy domain understood to be heavily guarded by member states, security and defence policy. Based on primary documents and interviews, we show that the European Union (EU)–North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) overlap has enabled the European Commission to leverage its position within the EU to its advantage and further encroach on the EU's security and defence activities.

Keywords: bureaucracy; EU; European Commission; NATO; organizational overlap

Introduction

When the European Union (EU) began figuring out its relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) at the end of the 1990s with its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP),[1] the European Commission was not part of the picture. The CSDP's security activities were considered the prerogative of EU member states, the European Council and the High Representative, which at the time was firmly located in the Council Secretariat. This contrasts with the current involvement of the Commission in EU–NATO co-operation. The European Commission President and NATO Secretary General often appear at summits together. For the European Commission's President, 'a good EU–NATO cooperation remains a top priority for the Commission' (von der Leyen, 2021). This sentiment was echoed right after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, for example, when Ursula von der Leyen spoke at NATO alongside European Council President Charles Michel and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. This is especially puzzling because the Commission does not a priori share many links to NATO in contrast to other CSDP actors with a more military profile, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) or the European Defence Agency (EDA) (Dijkstra, 2012; Vanhoonacker and Pomorska, 2013). This involvement in military matters challenges depictions of the Commission's role in security and defence as one centred upon market-making (Blauberger and Weiss, 2013; Hoeffler, 2019). In this article, we ask

[1]Until 2007, it was called the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

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how organizational overlap impacts international bureaucracies in general and individual bureaucratic actors in particular. Taking the example above, this translates into asking the following: why does the Commission have influence in EU–NATO co-operation?

Extant scholarship on regime complexity and on international bureaucracy provides only partial solutions to addressing this conundrum. The regime complexity literature mostly addresses states and how they navigate multiple organizational memberships using different strategies (Hofmann, 2019; Morse and Keohane, 2014). This scholarship has also shown how international organizations (IOs) interact in densely institutionalized spaces (Alter and Meunier, 2009; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Westerwinter, 2022), revealing that co-operation between overlapping organizations is not a given. Meanwhile, scholarship on international bureaucracy has demonstrated how bureaucrats can gain more autonomy from member states (Johnson, 2013; Nielson and Tierney, 2003). Autonomy here is understood as the ability to make decisions without the formal approval of states and to control its own resources (Haftel and Thompson, 2006). However, this scholarship has mainly focused on individual IOs in isolation from one another. As a result, we still know little about whether and how overlapping organizations impact international bureaucracies in general or about the relationship between bureaucratic actors within organizations in particular.

This article sheds light on *how* inter-organizational relations empower international bureaucrats and *why* some bureaucrats become more empowered than others. Building on Heldt and Schmidtke (2017), we define empowerment as task and issue scope expansions. As we are interested in asymmetric empowerment across bureaucrats, we examine these two dimensions separately, that is, task empowerment and issue scope empowerment. This allows us to further tap into inter- and intra-bureaucratic politics.

First, inter-organizational interaction can expand the tasks of international bureaucrats. Building on existing regime complexity scholarship, we argue that organizational overlap can create and sustain political tensions amongst member states (Alter and Meunier, 2009; Hofmann, 2019). These tensions can be a springboard for bureaucratic actors to empower themselves by co-operating inter-bureaucratically. Bureaucratic actors are likely to expand their *tasks* (such as information exchanges and the production of joint documents), at least informally and sometimes in co-operation with member states who want to assure a minimal working relationship between both organizations.

However, taking a monolithic bureaucracy-as-a-whole approach ignores power dynamics within an IO's bureaucracy. Just like their national counterparts, international bureaucracies are made up of various bureaucratic actors (e.g., units and divisions) that have different preferences, agendas and resources and that can co-operate but also compete with one another, especially over issue scope (Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Littoz-Monnet, 2017).

Second, building on scholarship on international bureaucracies, we argue that inter-organizational relations empower some bureaucratic actors more than others by extending their *issue scope*. To understand which bureaucratic actors become *more* empowered through organizational overlap than others and why, we need to pay attention to their differing resources (Biermann and Koops, 2017) and their respective autonomy from member states (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Hooghe et al., 2017). Greater autonomy – that is, delegated decision-making authority and their own material resources – makes bureaucrats 'easier to talk to and *do* things with' from the perspective of

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bureaucratic actors from other IOs. For instance, autonomy enables them to use policy instruments and budgets that do not require member state approval. In that context, it is not technical and substantive expertise but actors' autonomy that best explains issue scope expansion. The resulting issue scope expansion for some bureaucratic actors changes intra-bureaucratic relations.

By looking at the EU–NATO overlap, we show that inter-bureaucratic co-operation has empowered the European Commission the most. Whilst all bureaucratic actors have been empowered through the expansion of their tasks, the Commission's issue scope was also extended. This is an interesting outcome as the European Commission's role in CSDP is formally limited to initiatives related to relevant defence industry matters, in co-operation with the intergovernmental EDA (Art. 42–46 Treaty on European Union [TEU]), whilst the Council and the EEAS [and its EU Military Staff (EUMS)] are NATO's obvious interlocutors. However, NATO bureaucrats often seek the path of least resistance (i.e., the bureaucratic actor whose hands are least tied by member states). The European Commission has managed to expand competences in both tasks and issue scope over time by demonstrating to NATO bureaucrats how useful its autonomy and resources can be at both executive and staff levels.

To trace whether and how the EU–NATO overlap has empowered which bureaucratic actors, we pay particular attention to the European Commission and the EEAS as the most relevant actors on the EU side. Our analysis is based on official documents and speeches (e.g., High Representative and President of the Commission) and backed by a Goffmanian sensibility to immersion strategies (Adler-Nissen, 2014), such as 'hanging out' in Brussels and repeated interviewing (Nair, 2021). We have carried out extensive field research in both organizations since 2005; between us, we have conducted interviews with over 300 individuals. Serving as background knowledge for this article, this immersion helped us contextualize the EU–NATO relationship and identify 11 interviewees who drafted the joint declarations and/or voiced concerns about it.

This article contributes to the international co-operation and European (security) studies literatures in several ways. First, we address the roles international bureaucrats can play under conditions of overlapping organizations. We thereby build upon and advance the recent scholarship on communities of practice (Bueger, 2016; Græger, 2017), which has provided valuable insights into why more inter-bureaucratic co-operation has occurred than the political level suggests. Whilst this scholarship treats these communities as homogenous, we draw attention to the different resources available to bureaucrats and possible competition between them. By showing which bureaucratic actors become most empowered and why, we demonstrate that belonging to and navigating this community can be imbued with politics. Second, recent scholarship has shown how external experts can help bureaucrats expand their organization's scope (Littoz-Monnet, 2017). With this article, we hope to contribute to this literature by showing that not only external experts but also external bureaucratic actors, and overlapping organizations more broadly, can lead to issue scope expansion (Haftel and Hofmann, 2017). Third, this article complements scholarship that has already pointed to the European Commission's increased influence in EU security and defence policy (Hoeffler, 2019; Riddervold, 2016). However, whilst this literature investigated how the Commission has strategized *within* the EU, we show how it leverages an external bureaucracy. We expect our findings to travel to other policy domains. International security is presumed to be the least likely

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to host bureaucratic politics, as security policy-making leaves little room for bureaucratic discretion due to its intergovernmental design and its inherent importance of secrecy (Carnegie and Carson, 2020). If we find inter-bureaucratic dynamics in such a confidential policy domain, then we should also find them across other domains.

I. International Bureaucracies and Organizational Overlap

Scholarship on international bureaucracies has demonstrated the role of international bureaucrats in fostering international co-operation. Not much attention has been paid to how bureaucrats are impacted by organizational overlaps. In a first step, we argue that they expand their tasks when political tensions between organizations increase, but some member states still want to ensure a minimum of co-operation. In a second step, we argue that studying *inter*-organizational overlap benefits from paying closer attention to *intra*-bureaucratic differences and turf battles over issue portfolios. We develop an argument rooted in autonomy to better understand which actors within an IO can successfully leverage inter-organizational co-operation to their own intra-organizational benefit, as not all bureaucratic actors are equally autonomous from member states. More autonomous bureaucratic actors can use inter-organizational co-operation as leverage in expanding their issue scope. Conversely, less autonomous international bureaucrats will not be equally empowered, even if they are formally in charge of the issue.

Bureaucratic Task Empowerment Through Political Tensions

Scholars have turned to unravelling the consequences of densely institutionalized international spaces. Organizations overlapping in membership and mandate can improve co-operation and co-ordination (Pratt, 2018) as much as detract from them (Drezner, 2009; Panke and Stapel, 2018). To explain these different patterns, scholars have mostly turned to member states (Alter and Meunier, 2009; Hofmann, 2019; Morse and Keohane, 2014) and sometimes nonstate actors (Abbott and Snidal, 2010).

Despite many advances, we still know little about how international bureaucrats navigate these densely institutionalized spaces. This is particularly unfortunate as there is now strong evidence for bureaucratic agency and influence in the overall design and working of IOs. Different theoretical perspectives, whether rooted in rational choice or sociological foundations, share the observation that bureaucrats are actors in their own right in multilateral policy-making (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Haas, 1964; Johnson, 2013; Kentikelenis and Seabrooke, 2017; Littoz-Monnet, 2017; Nielson and Tierney, 2003). This scholarship mainly deals with the different strategies that bureaucrats use to increase and/or sustain their 'turf' against governmental actors and advance their 'scripts'. From this standpoint, bureaucrats defend the 'international' perspective against their respective national governmental stakeholders, whether for pathological reasons or for the protection of the co-operation from egoistic state behaviour (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Littoz-Monnet, 2017). Whilst not all IOs have big, established international bureaucracies (Gray, 2018), many have received some delegated authority to substantively contribute to agenda setting and policy implementation, as well as to influence the organization's institutional design (Haftel and Hofmann, 2017; Johnson, 2013).

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This literature on international bureaucracy makes a compelling case for looking at bureaucrats in inter-organizational co-operation, yet few studies exist. One notable exception is the scholarship on communities of practice.[2] It has shown that bureaucrats across IOs such as the EU and NATO co-operate despite, or even thanks to, formal political blockages. Because of intergovernmental crises, 'staff have 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, …) across organizational and professional boundaries as part of their daily work' (Græger, 2017, p. 345). This argument resonates with constructivist arguments about the role of homophily in co-operation: like-minded professionals with shared ethos, education and experience are more likely to co-operate and to get closer to one another, just as institutions with similar organizational cultures are more likely to work well together (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999). Scholars emphasize that co-operation is widespread yet hardly mention whether bureaucratic politics is occurring and how this politics plays itself out. Instead, international bureaucracies are depicted as unitary actors or communities.

Building on the scholarship on regime complexity and international bureaucracy, we expect that conflicts between member states and the resultant difficulties of inter-organizational co-operation may lead IO bureaucrats to step up and become active in shaping co-operation: international bureaucrats can become empowered in and through contentious inter-organizational relations. This is especially so if they can count on some co-operatively minded member states that cannot overcome the formal obstacles to more inter-organizational co-operation and seek informal solutions to assure a degree of information exchange. Hence, political obstacles are likely to increase tasks across the board for bureaucrats.

Whilst existing scholarship tends to obscure that international bureaucracies are not necessarily unitary, we want to understand whether there is – and, if so, what explains – asymmetric empowerment, that is, *who* amongst international bureaucrats is likely to get more empowered, *how* this empowerment happens and *why*. To tap into this, we want to understand not only whose tasks are expanding but also whose issue scope is increasing (Heldt and Schmidtke, 2017). We therefore focus on a two-dimensional approach to empowerment. The first dimension addresses how bureaucrats' tasks vis-à-vis member states increase, which we call 'task empowerment'. The second dimension captures an increase in competences, or 'issue scope empowerment'. In both cases of empowerment, we need to observe that – compared with an earlier period in time – the same actor's involvement in a certain task or issue area has increased beyond its (formal) responsibilities. We now turn to which bureaucratic actors are most likely to be empowered in the context of overlapping organizations.

Bureaucratic Issue Scope Empowerment Through Autonomy and External Recognition

When conceptualizing the autonomy of international bureaucrats in relation to their respective member states (Haftel and Thompson, 2006, pp. 255–256), existing scholarship on international bureaucracies draws our attention to their degree of autonomy, that is, the degree to which bureaucrats can translate their budgetary and decision-making resources,

[2]In addition to the communities of practice scholarship, other authors have also started addressing this issue; see Haftel and Hofmann (2017), Schuette (2022) and Kranke (2022).

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institutional know-how or technical expertise into strategies to expand their issue scope and authority (Littoz-Monnet, 2017). Taking this as a starting point, we turn to public policy scholarship, which has demonstrated the importance of (intra-)bureaucratic politics: bureaucrats compete with one another for more issue scope in policy-making (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). This dynamic is likely to have similar effects in international bureaucracies. Not only across but also within organizations, bureaucratic actors are not similarly endowed with autonomy; they vary in staff size and budgets (Johnson, 2013; Nielson and Tierney, 2003) and in their understanding of the world (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke, 2017; Mérand, 2010; Pouliot and Thérien, 2018).

Actors with enough resources that can speak without many institutional constraints can navigate contentious organizational relations with greater ease. Translated to the inter- and intra-bureaucratic levels, this means that the bureaucrats best placed to pursue inter-organizational politics are those that are most autonomous from member states and have autonomous discretion over available resources.

Bureaucratic autonomy from states is attractive to bureaucrats from other IOs. Actors enjoying such autonomy are valued as interlocutors that do not need to run back to member states at every stage of inter-organizational relations (e.g., information exchange, negotiations and budgetary commitments). Their resources – especially if not restrained to only one issue area – make them additionally attractive because they are seen as capable of investing in common activities. As a result, a relatively autonomous bureaucratic actor can be empowered by the recognition and authority conferred to it by its interlocutor. Analysing bureaucratic actors' issue scope empowerment in the context of overlapping organizations requires observing whether the bureaucrats from other IOs acknowledge and appreciate their autonomy. This external recognition consequently enables such actors to strategically expand their influence within and across organizations.

Inter-organizational co-operation can be a competence enhancer for bureaucratic actors intra-organizationally. Via external recognition and co-operation, bureaucrats can introduce their resources and, consequently, their competency to a new issue area. In this instance, substantive knowledge and expertise, which much scholarship has focused on, are secondary to bureaucratic mission creep; instead, autonomy and resources are the primary explanatory factor. In short, organizational overlap can empower those bureaucrats in an organization that have autonomy and resources as this makes them an attractive partner in inter-bureaucratic relations – they can increase their competences by occupying even an issue area where they were previously inactive. In the following sections, we present our argument by discussing EU–NATO relations.

II. EU–NATO Overlap and the Dual Empowerment of International Bureaucrats

Ever since the EU moved into the realm of multilateral security policy, it has functionally overlapped with NATO – not to speak of the fact that the main seat of both organizations is in the same city, Brussels. Furthermore, to date, both organizations share 22 member states out of 27 (EU) and 31 (NATO). They are both active in a broad range of security and defence activities such as crisis management, cybersecurity or resilience, which entails the co-ordination and sharing of material resources, personnel and expertise. Despite

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this overlap in mandate and membership, their inter-organizational relations are characterized by both competitive and co-operative dynamics (Hofmann, 2019).

In what follows, we show that whilst EU–NATO co-operation has been visibly shaped by member state conflicts, these have also created momentum for enhanced co-operation between both organizations' bureaucracies. International staff from the EU and NATO have managed to carve some space for themselves to interact. Not only this but also the European Commission – whilst initially not at the forefront of EU–NATO co-operation – has managed to gain power over time, expanding its competences through its ability to position itself as an interlocutor to NATO. It has managed to play the game and reap the benefits of inter-organizational relations because it has been able to translate its autonomy in non-military issues and tasks (i.e., a large budget that it can use autonomously from member states) into military co-operation.

Business-as-Usual: Support in Negotiating Package Deals

With the EU encroaching on NATO's mandate at the end of the 1990s, new political opportunities and obstacles arose for various member states, most of which preferred inter-organizational co-operation. During the first years of CSDP (then called ESDP), the institution was building up structures to formulate crisis management strategies and policies, as well as to conduct both civilian and military operations. It was during this time that EU member states and the Head of the General Secretariat of the Council, former Spanish foreign minister and former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, negotiated how to access and use NATO's military assets. Negotiating a co-operative inter-organizational relationship was cumbersome; both the American and Turkish governments did not appreciate NATO's EU member states venturing into creating an autonomous security institution next to the Atlantic Alliance. It took 3 years for both organizations to sign the Berlin Plus Agreements in 2003.

Political tensions between both organizations only increased when Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, as Türkiye does not recognize Cyprus' sovereignty and thereby its EU membership. Because Türkiye is opposed to meetings that involve all EU member states, since then, no formal meetings between NATO's North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) outside of the Berlin Plus framework have been held – and even these meetings on Berlin Plus are hard to orchestrate (Hofmann, 2019, pp. 893–894).

In the beginning of the EU–NATO overlap, the international staff in both organizations were left with helping member states that wanted more inter-organizational co-operation. They crafted informal ways for the EU and NATO to discuss issues of strategic importance, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, Darfur, Libya or Ukraine. On the politico-strategic level, bureaucrats helped ambassadors from Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States establish and implement package deals that Türkiye could agree to. Since then, these package deals have enabled NATO's NAC and the EU's PSC to meet informally, in exchange for holding one formal meeting between both organizations on Berlin Plus – which, on Turkish insistence, Cyprus does not attend. Following this procedure, EU and NATO ambassadors were, for example, able to informally discuss the 2014 Russian invasion of the Crimea. However, Türkiye has not always agreed to these package deals and sometimes blocked informal meetings such as

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in 2012, when Cyprus held the EU presidency, in 2016 and in 2022.[3] The possibility of at least informally exchanging strategic information therefore remains at the whim of the Turkish and, to a lesser degree, Cypriot governments. This resistance to EU–NATO co-operation occurs in spite of the preferences of other member states (e.g., Germany, Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States) to improve co-operation (*Official Journal of the EU*, 2010, E/69).[4]

Whilst bureaucrats are crucial in enabling EU and NATO member states to discuss issues of mutual interest, a NATO official says that the arrangements on the politico-strategic level are 'sub-optimal, to put it mildly'.[5] Even organizing informal meetings can be an arduous task requiring high-level pressure in order to obtain the consent of the Turkish and Cypriot governments. When it comes to the politico-strategic level and NAC–PSC interaction, EU and NATO bureaucrats have been kept on a short leash by headquarters because member states do not want to infringe upon Cypriot and Turkish national prerogatives.[6]

Political Obstacles and Inter-bureaucratic Task Empowerment

Political tensions between Türkiye and Cyprus persist and impact the inter-organizational relationship between the EU and NATO. Nonetheless, international bureaucrats from the EU and NATO have carved out more space for themselves to manoeuvre and co-operate with one another on the inter-bureaucratic level by increasing their tasks. Starting from 2014 with Russia's invasion of Crimea in Ukraine, the close inter-bureaucratic relationship began to take form. At the time, both the EU and NATO separately developed conceptual definitions and doctrine on hybrid threats and warfare. Implementing the doctrine became challenging as both organizations scrambled to find adequate resources (in terms of expertise, money and capabilities). member states realized that at least a minimum level of inter-organizational co-ordination was needed, turning to their bureaucrats to navigate this process to circumvent political skirmishes between Türkiye and Cyprus.[7]

This time around, member states' impetus for inter-bureaucratic co-ordination created momentum that spiralled into more sustained bureaucratic (inter)action. In 2016, when Europe reinforced its borders in a response to a humanitarian crisis in the Middle East and the EU's coastguards (FRONTEX) were deployed in the Mediterranean Sea, NATO also decided to be present in the Aegean Sea. Whilst the overlap in force deployment was nothing new – it had happened in Kosovo or the Gulf of Aden, for example – this time around, NATO did not rely on one of its member states (usually the United Kingdom) to co-ordinate between both organizations. Instead, it directly approached the EU's bureaucracy. It worked with the European Commission's Directorate-General (DG) for Migration and Home Affairs, which has authority over FRONTEX, and its then Commissioner, Dimitris Avramopoulos (Mogherini and Avramopoulos, 2016). Until 2016, NATO had no dealings to speak of with the Commission on file. An exchange of letters needed to

[3]Interview with NATO Official #3, Brussels, 30 March 2017.
[4]Interview with NATO Official #4, Brussels, 13 July 2017.
[5]Interview with NATO Official #1, Brussels, 6 February 2007.
[6]In the field, away from political oversight, things are at times different. EU and NATO staff were able to forge some means of co-ordination that avoided formal channels (Græger, 2017, p. 348; Smith and Gebhard, 2017).
[7]Interview with NATO Official #2, Brussels, 30 March 2017.

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be set up to discuss how NATO could relate to FRONTEX.[8] This episode would invite the Commission to the inter-bureaucratic negotiation table.

These two episodes (2014 and 2016) created momentum that laid the groundwork for the July 2016 Warsaw meeting where the first-ever joint declaration between the EU and NATO was signed. The joint declaration was signed by the highest ranking officials of both organizations, namely, NATO's Secretary General and the European Council President, *as well as* the President of the European Commission. When EU and NATO staff initially got together to discuss a joint declaration, the idea was to focus only on hybrid threats. However, soon international staff on both sides realized that their interactions could be further extended, thereby increasing their inter-organizational tasks based on issues that they have already been responsible for within their respective organizations. In the end, they included seven issues in the joint declaration. First, hybrid threats and operational co-operation, in particular regarding maritime security, were included as they had sparked the bureaucratic interaction in the first place. As both organizations had just signed a technical arrangement on cybersecurity, this issue was also included. Bureaucrats then added additional issues from their portfolios: exercises, defence capabilities, military capacity-building and the defence industry. The latter was included on the European Commission's insistence, as neither NATO nor the EEAS has an industrial policy.

During these inter-bureaucratic meetings, and thanks to each bureaucracy's knowledge of its own organization's political sensitivities and red lines, these actors were able to instil in the agreement some room to manoeuvre for themselves. They agreed that it would not be member states but rather their top officials that would sign the joint declaration. If member states co-signed it, the argument went, Türkiye and Cyprus would never agree to any proposed language. Instead, bureaucrats from both organizations decided to work towards a short text, signalling that they would circumvent 'diplomatic language' or technical details, which would give them space to work on those later.[9]

The negotiations between EU and NATO staff unrolled as follows. What started as an email exchange soon turned into meetings, sometimes more than once a week. Initial negotiations between the EU and NATO staff to establish a first draft were conceived as an isolated process keeping everyone at bay. NATO Political Affairs (DPA) staff and the Secretary General's Private Office met with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's staff, as well as with Council President Donald Tusk's cabinet, from early May until 8 July 2016. Working on the same draft, EU and NATO bureaucrats went back to their member states to include them in the process and ask for comments. This way, member states stayed involved in the process whilst not being required to formally endorse it. Nonetheless, the Cypriot and Turkish governments delayed the process and threatened to make public statements condemning the declaration. On the last day, for example, Türkiye vetoed language that read 'with all EU member states'. A compromise was found by amending the phrase to 'the EU member states', which was considered vague enough for the bureaucrats to avoid too much member state attention.[10] The final declaration continued to be negotiated until just 1 h before it was signed.

[8]Interview with NATO Official #2, Brussels, 30 March 2017.
[9]Interview with NATO Official #2, Brussels, 30 March 2017.
[10]Interview with NATO Official #2, Brussels, 30 March 2017.

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Whilst international staff had been instrumental in signing the declaration, they also played a key role in its implementation. By making the declaration short, EU and NATO bureaucrats gave themselves the most leeway to identify common projects. Once the declaration was signed, the Council Secretariat and the Commission asked the EEAS and the EDA to identify concrete proposals. In late October 2016, proposals from the EU and NATO were merged to a single common document. It was only at this stage that member states needed to officially get on board – or, as one NATO bureaucrat put it, that bureaucrats 'needed to sell' it to them.[11] Unsurprisingly, gaining their approval was a challenge. To the dismay of the US and Greek governments, NATO bureaucrats made their way to Ankara and readjusted their proposals accordingly. At this stage, EU and NATO staff passed the message that they should not open discussion of the proposal again; the proposal was already as good as it would get. The NAC and the Council then produced separate political statements and related documents where Council members could stress their pet projects. Some national ministers used this opportunity to vent their frustration, as they felt that the bureaucratic staff had forced them to agree to a common project.[12]

This first declaration was followed by two more (2018 and 2023); each time, staff-to-staff meetings were the driving force behind the declarations, whilst some member states tried to slow down the process.[13] These declarations set a path for EU and NATO staff to implement co-ordinated and joint initiatives. Whilst member states insist on receiving implementation reports as a way of controlling bureaucratic activities, the pursuit and drafting of joint declarations has strengthened EU–NATO co-operation through the commitment at the top level and staff-to-staff level of both bureaucracies. As political tensions between the EU and NATO continue and politics shapes the timing and some of the content of inter-organizational co-operation,[14] international staff have learned to navigate political obstacles.

Autonomy, Inter-bureaucratic Recognition and the European Commission's Issue Scope Empowerment

Whilst political tensions between member states gave international bureaucrats from NATO and the EU an opportunity to gain influence in inter-organizational co-operation by increasing their tasks, this co-operation was also shaping their own relationships, that is, between EU and NATO staff, as well as within each organization. NATO and EU bureaucrats alike gained more say in inter-organizational co-operation, yet not all

[11]Interview with NATO Official #3.
[12]Interview with EEAS Official #2, Brussels, 18 March 2022.
[13]Türkiye insists on not sharing classified NATO documents with countries that do not have a security agreement with NATO. Cyprus has no such agreement. Given that approximately 90% of NATO documents are classified, this impacts how NATO can inform the EU about its projects, slowing down EU–NATO co-operation. In addition, the adoption of the 2023 joint declaration was delayed many times due to disagreements between coalitions involving various member-states and bureaucratic actors on each side: around December 2021, NATO and the European Commission, along with a few member-states, wanted to publish it whilst the European Council, France and Germany wanted to wait. Later on, a conflict between the offices of the Head of the European Council and of the President of the European Commission delayed its publication.
[14]Some NATO officials observed that the first joint declaration had the 'potential for a sea change' (interview with NATO Official #2), but by all accounts, 'not much progress' has happened (interview with NATO Official #4). EEAS officials have also observed that 'at least half of this is paper exercise' (interview with EEAS Official #1, Brussels, 17 August 2018).

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bureaucrats were equally empowered in terms of new issues that they treat. For the purpose of this article, we unpack the EU bureaucracy, where the prime actors are the PSC, the EUMS, the Politico-Military Group, the EDA and the EEAS. We do so for an analytical and pragmatic reason. Analytically speaking, the EU's bureaucrats vary more in their issue scope. Whilst some NATO bureaucratic actors, in particular the Operations Division and the Defence Policy and Planning Division, are more autonomous than others from member states, most NATO bureaucratic actors work on similar and overlapping issue areas, given that NATO is a task-specific military organization. Furthermore, the available space constrains us. We invite future research to examine NATO's side in more detail. We show that the European Commission has not been involved in security and defence matters at first as the EU treaties give these competences primarily to the Council Secretariat and, after its establishment, also to the EEAS. Over time, the Commission has touched on security matters through civilian aspects of security, including market-related ones (Blauberger and Weiss, 2013; Hoeffler, 2019). The EU–NATO overlap eventually led to the Commission's issue scope expansion into domains such as military mobility, whilst the EEAS and the Council Secretariat kept their competences. The Commission has been able to do so because it enjoys much autonomy, which NATO acknowledged, which in turn enabled the Commission to extend its role beyond its formal mandate. To better understand this development, we first analyze the role of EU bureaucratic politics in shaping inter-organizations bureaucratic cooperation before turning to the empowerment of the Commission through the implementation of the military mobility project.

Formally speaking, the CSDP has been intergovernmental since its inception. In terms of bureaucracy, this has translated into bureaucratic units with little autonomy compared with EU policies that are supranationally organized. For instance, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President (HR/VP) remains bound by her intergovernmental role. The EEAS works under close supervision of the Council and is partly composed of seconded diplomats sent to Brussels from member states. The EDA depends on member states' agreement.

The European Commission does not have a direct mandate in CSDP (Art. 42–46 TEU); the treaty only mentions its potential co-operation with the EDA. It is, however, associated in different ways: first, because of its task of implementing the EU budget; second, because of the obligation of consistency across all EU external policies, many of which fall under the Commission's issue scope competence; and third, through its market-related competences, grounded in the Lisbon Treaty, which encompass defence industrial policy. The Commission has therefore become increasingly involved in defence industrial issues, mostly by tying them to its economic competences, much to the dissatisfaction of the EDA and the EEAS (Fiott, 2017). Whenever the Commission got involved in crisis management operations, it was with regard to non-military operational dimensions (Riddervold, 2016, p. 362).

Bureaucratic politics in CSDP also played out in EU–NATO co-operation. If one looks behind the EU label, the EEAS, the EDA and the Commission were each trying to negotiate a leadership position within that co-operation. Whilst the EEAS is NATO's 'natural partner', which speaks the same language as NATO staff and is outside oriented,[15] the

[15]Interview with NATO Official #5, Brussels, 31 March 2023.

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Commission started leading the EU on all practical matters: 'the role of the Commission matters. There has definitely been a steep learning curve for non-EU NATO members, who had to realize how important the European Commission is. Lots of interest, I would say, accompanied as well by suspicion'.[16]

The European Commission gained influence in EU–NATO co-operation and, in doing so, increased its scope in CSDP. We argue that part of the story lies in the fact that the Commission was increasingly considered by NATO to be a valuable partner. This is linked to two interrelated dynamics. First, the Commission has promoted itself as such and pushed its items on the EU–NATO agenda, such as 'industry and research' and later 'defence capacities', which rank amongst the seven core areas of EU–NATO co-operation. Second, NATO increasingly values the Commission's role because, thanks to its autonomy from member states over its budget, the Commission is seen as a reliable partner.

So how did the Commission position itself in the EU–NATO relationship? As already mentioned, the 2016 joint declaration was signed by the President of the European Council, the NATO Secretary General and the President of the Commission. The presence of the Head of the European Commission was surprising, as he has no formal competence in the security and defence domain whilst the Council does. However, the European Commission has shown commitment to co-operation with NATO at the highest level. During his time in office, President Juncker is said to have enjoyed a friendly relationship with Secretary General Stoltenberg in an informal capacity, advising then-Commissioner Michel Barnier to regularly exchange and co-ordinate views with the NATO Secretary General.[17] On a more official level, Presidents Juncker and, later, von der Leyen reiterated their commitment to working with NATO on several occasions. During the 2018 signing of the second joint declaration, Juncker (2018) affirmed that improving security and defence co-operation with NATO was the reason why the Commission had suggested a 22-fold increase in defence spending: 'as part of our new budgetary proposals we, the Commission, have proposed to increase defence spending by 22 times, bringing total defense spending to EUR 27.5 billion from 2021 to 2027'. On 15 December 2020, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg attended the meeting of the European Commissioners – the first time in history for a NATO Secretary General. After having thanked von der Leyen 'for (her) strong personal commitment to the cooperation between NATO and the European Union', Stoltenberg (2020) insisted on the strong links between both organizations: 'In uncertain times we need a strong international institutions like the European Union – like the Commission – and NATO, and when we work together we are stronger and more capable of managing the difficulties we face together'. Finally, on 26 February 2021, on the margins of the European Council meeting attended by Stoltenberg, Commission President von der Leyen once again stated that 'A good cooperation between the EU and NATO remains an absolute priority for the Commission. We have been having excellent exchanges with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg' (Gros-Verheyde, 2021; own translation).

Not only do these relations exist at the highest bureaucratic levels, but working relations have also been developed at the level of Commissioners. For example,

[16]Interview with Swedish Diplomat #2, video conference, 15 July 2021.
[17]Interview with a former senior advisor, European Commission, video conference, 21 July 2021.

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Commissioner Elżbieta Bieńkowska (Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Enterprises) addressed the NAC on 5 July 2017, and Commissioner Violeta Bulc (Transport) did the same on 11 June 2018. This was considered a sign 'which in itself attests to a cultural shift taking place' (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2019, p. 7). Those invitations were considered to be very effective by participants: 'On the NATO side, they have invited Commissioners to talk at the NAC. It is a good informal way to have more understanding, more trust. Because after the NAC meetings, you have smaller informal sessions with non-EU NATO allies, with Q&A. This is important'.[18]

NATO bureaucrats came to consider the Commission as a valuable co-operative partner. The preparation and implementation of the joint declaration display such a dynamic. Whilst the EEAS should be the most significant and obvious partner for NATO, NATO's staff have heavily relied on the Commission instead. The latter represents an easy partner to talk to for NATO, given its relative autonomy from member states.[19] The EEAS, on the other hand, needs to navigate individual member state prerogatives much more carefully than the Commission and does not have meaningful resources of its own. NATO has therefore turned to the Commission even for discussion points that are not part of the Commission's formal competence. In sum, whilst both the EEAS and the Commission experienced task empowerment through EU–NATO relations, it was the Commission whose issue scope was also extended.

To illustrate the ways the European Commission has been empowered in this scope at the staff level, we turn to the joint declaration's implementation, with particular emphasis on one of the major projects: military mobility, which (unlike cybersecurity, hybrid threats or critical infrastructure) is far removed from the Commission's original mandate and therefore represents an unlikely case for the Commission's involvement and empowerment.

Military mobility, to ensure swift and effective transport of allied troops and military equipment across Europe, is on the EU and NATO agendas since Russia's aggression against Ukraine that started in 2014 with the invasion of Crimea. Military mobility entails many logistical and legal difficulties, as the transfer of foreign military equipment can be illegal or impossible because of the lack of sizeable and robust roads. Within the EU, the Netherlands promoted such a project as part of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Military mobility became a flagship project of EU–NATO co-operation in December 2017, when members agreed on a series of common actions to follow up on the June 2016 joint declaration. In most committees on that issue, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) represents NATO, although a few committees also involve NATO member states, whilst the EU is represented by no less than the EDA, the Commission, the EEAS (including its EUMS) and the European Council (Drent et al., 2019, p. 2).

Although it touches upon the most military dimension of EU–NATO co-operation, the Commission has managed to become a key player. The Commission started working on these issues in the context of mounting political pressure surrounding the launch of

[18]Interview with Swedish Diplomat #1, video conference, 22 June 2021.
[19]Interview with EEAS Official #1.

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PESCO projects in December 2017 (Drent et al., 2019, p. 4). The Commission aimed to supranationalize military mobility by embedding it in the community framework and budget. Because so much of the work to be done concerned logistics, military mobility could be framed as depending on other EU policies. In the words of a national official, it 'is a good example of how the military preparedness requires a lot of work also in civilian areas, in issues that are far remote from the ministry of defense'.[20] With the High Representative Federica Mogherini, the Commission adopted a joint communication on 11 November 2017 that underlined the necessity and benefits to be gained from using EU instruments to achieve military mobility and linked it with other actions of the Commission in defence. In the press briefing, Commissioner Bulc emphasized that:

> The European Union has a modern transport network that serves the needs of Europeans. These needs can also be of a military nature. The swift movement of military personnel and equipment is hindered by physical, legal and regulatory barriers. This creates inefficiencies in public spending, delays, disruptions, and above all a greater vulnerability. It is high time we maximise civil and military synergies also through our transport network in an efficient and sustainable manner. (European Commission, 2017)

The European Commission managed to expand its issue scope in matters unrelated to its core business by using its financial autonomous instruments. After the initial work between NATO and the EUMS to agree on military requirements in line with their bureaucratic mandate, questions of financing persisted. That is when the European Commission's Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE) moved in.[21] It worked towards making military requirements compatible with its own Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). Dating back to the 1990s, this Commission policy instrument seeks to develop and strengthen a network of land (roads and railways), air and water infrastructure across the continent. The EU–NATO discussions on military mobility enabled the Commission to not only frame the TEN-T in terms of economic development but also emphasize its dual-use nature, that is, fulfilling both civilian and military goals.

By introducing itself as a key player in questions of military mobility, the European Commission also alleviated tensions between reluctant EU and NATO member states, giving it an even more prominent role in that issue area. The TEN-T facilitated EU–NATO co-operation as both Türkiye and Cyprus want to benefit, or are benefitting, from the Commission's 'purse' and being better connected to European infrastructure (Drent et al., 2019, pp. 9–10).

The European Commission also linked military mobility to two other financing instruments, namely, the Connecting Europe Facility and the European Defence Fund (Hoeffler, 2023). For some, these Commission financial instruments are precisely what can make EU–NATO co-operation relevant and effective:

> On military mobility, it's a good example of EU–NATO cooperation. The EU had the infrastructure funds, owned by the Commission. And NATO has its old plans, from the Cold War. Now, it's doing the work, to look at military routes, to get everything up to

[20]Interview with Swedish Diplomat #1.
[21]Exchange on October 9, 2022 with US military officer, personal correspondence.

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> international standards, or even more, to US standards – since it would be US troops going East – but NATO has no money. It's a good example where EU and NATO have a healthy dialogue, and get things done.[22]

The European Commission has therefore successfully encroached into the issue area of military mobility through the negotiations involved in EU–NATO co-operation.[23]

Conclusion

Organizational overlap can empower international bureaucratic actors. It creates institutional configurations in which international bureaucrats can carve out more tasks and additional issue scope for themselves. Whilst many states are members of more than one organization and can address and advance their preferences in multiple venues in parallel, bureaucrats are bound to one organization. Nonetheless, overlap can impact them via inter-bureaucratic relations. Political tensions in inter-organizational co-operation can be used by bureaucrats as a springboard for task expansion. In the case of EU–NATO co-operation, political obstacles led bureaucratic actors from both organizations to pursue inter-bureaucratic channels of communication.

Bureaucratic relations across IOs do not equally impact all bureaucratic actors, however. Politics permeates not only the level of states but also that of bureaucracies. Resourceful and relatively autonomous bureaucratic actors can use inter-organizational tensions and political crises more easily as opportunities to present themselves as an appropriate bureaucratic counterpart. The Commission has done so vis-à-vis NATO's staff. And NATO bureaucrats willingly agreed to work with this resourceful and autonomous actor rather than only with the official thematic expert in the field, as the EEAS was much more closely bound to member states and has less resources at its disposal. As a result, the European Commission was able to expand its issue scope, and EU bureaucrats that traditionally work in the security and defence field now increasingly interact with the Commission.

Our article calls for further research. First, we show that the unexpected empowerment of some EU actors within policy domains cannot be understood only through an intra-EU lens but that relationships with external actors are also leveraged for influence within EU policy domains. Future research could investigate how this impacts the accountability and legitimacy of EU policies. Second, research could investigate other inter-organizational relations that the EU has with IOs, such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to see whether similar processes take place. Third, political obstacles are likely to stay in a geopolitical environment such as today's. Focusing more on what bureaucrats can do in such an environment can demonstrate possible ways of cooperation.

This article has emphasized that bureaucratic politics needs to be factored into accounts of regime complexity, political tensions and organizational expansion, considering that bureaucrats develop their own co-operative and competitive strategies and pursue

[22] Interview with Swedish Diplomat #2.
[23] However, information exchange between NATO and DG MOVE has been slowed down by the lack of NATO security clearance for the Commission. This led to the EUMS being in charge of sharing relevant unclassified NATO documents with member-states (Drent et al., 2019, p. 11).

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inter-organizational relations. Bureaucrats can empower themselves through inter-bureaucratic co-operation, but not equally so. In instances of organizational overlap, autonomous capacities are more important than substantive expertise and formal competence when presenting oneself as a reliable inter-bureaucratic interlocutor. Our article offers a step towards thinking about international bureaucrats' opportunities, strategies and capacities when pursuing co-operation in a densely institutionalized environment.

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