

Constructivist Approach to Western Balkans' Contribution Towards Peace and Stability

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Abstract

The security environment of the Western Balkans, following the dismantling of Yugoslavia and the nations quest for sovereignty, brought to the fore a growing role of the international community as a socializing power capable of encouraging the governments in the region to adopt liberal democracy values and furthermore develop capabilities to enable them to contribute to peace and stability missions abroad. Almost two decades later, the Western Balkan countries, once consumers of security, gradually transform and reform their security architectures and develop deployable forces capable of exporting security. The participation in NATO, EU, UN-led missions represents an avenue that Western Balkans countries employ to demonstrate their willingness to export stability and concurrently develop capacities and capabilities up to par to ensure interoperability and compatibility with allies and partners. We leverage assumptions from the constructivist school of thought and argue that this interest will be sustained and will not prove elusive as the countries from the region join the Alliance. Due to NATO's long-term presence and the advanced level of internalization of shared ideas, norms and values, the countries in the region decide to maintain an increased level of troop contribution to NATO-led missions abroad. Thus, it is within the realm of constructivist school of thought that we find sufficient assumptions to explain the Western Balkans increasing interest to export stability, by participating in missions abroad, and argue that it will be sustained beyond obtaining full-fledged membership.

Key words: NATO, Western Balkans, Security Sector Reform, peace building, constructivism, troop contribution, security consumers, security producers.

The security environment of the Western Balkans, following the dismantling of Yugoslavia and the nations quest for sovereignty, brought to the fore a growing role of the international community as a disciplining power, capable of encouraging the governments in the region to stabilize, democratize and guarantee freedom and security of their people and beyond. The privilege of hindsight allows us to acknowledge the role of NATO as a catalyst for much of the positive change in the Western Balkans region. Over the fifteen years, since the Alliance deployed its first peacekeeping force, followed with the support provided to military and security sector reform initiatives, the Balkans has attained a considerable progress. The countries have worked on reforming and transforming their armies and threat perceptions, gained rich experience, and from source of security concern transformed to credible partners and some of them full-fledged allies today.

NATO's proven position, as the only credible and prominent collective security alliance, coupled with the prospects for membership additionally reinforced and further encouraged extensive change in the Balkans. NATO and the EU prospects of membership, as a major driving force, allowed a greater scope and broader range reforms to materialize within and across the governments and security sectors of the Western Balkans countries. NATO's open door policy, emphasizing that membership is open to any "European state in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area,"¹ makes the countries in region inclined to greater stability, progress, cooperation, development and security sector reform. Hence, almost two decades later, as NATO efforts materialize, they succeed in transforming a "negative peace" into a situation of "positive peace."² The countries in the region, once consumers of security, gradually transform and reform their security architectures and, with their sights on NATO membership, develop deployable forces capable of exporting security and contributing to the same values and norms that stabilized the region fifteen years ago.

Throughout the years, the Alliance has further developed and advanced cooperation with the Balkan partners. As the region stabilizes and the aspirations for membership remain a long-

¹ On-line Library, NATO Publications, 1.Enhancing Security and Extending Stability through NATO Enlargement, Updated: April 2004, http://www.nato.int/docu/enlargement/html_en/enlargement01.html (Accessed on May 19, 2011)

² Ernst M. Felberbauer, Predrag Jurekovich, and Frederic Labarre, „Advice and Advocacy: Ten Years of the Regional Stability in South East Europe Study Group,” *Connections The Quarterly Journal*, Summer 2010, pp. 93-98

term objective, this cooperation ensures achieving military interoperability and compatibility in crisis management, where substantial contribution to NATO-led operations from partner countries is equally valued as from NATO full-fledged members. Contributions to NATO-led operations have proven to be a matter of high interest and high on the agenda of the Western Balkans in terms of providing troops to crisis management missions abroad and NATO - led operations. Aside from the obvious source of the Western Balkans increased interest to participate to such missions, such as the membership prospect, financial and material incentives, few other arguments come to play as well.

The argument we assert draws from the constructivist school of thought and the dynamic of socialization enabled by the presence of NATO Alliance in the Western Balkans. Continuous interaction and dialogue with the Alliance has ensured socialization over the years, which have created conditions for the host nation countries to adopt standards, norms and values convergent with those that NATO and EU hold dear. Therefore, the incentive of membership is not the central piece of the puzzle. It is complemented with the regional governments' efforts resolute to demonstrate their progress and achievements, including their compliance with standards and values upheld by the community of liberal democracies they strive to emulate, integrate and build compatibility and interoperability.

This article outlines NATO's involvement in the western Balkans from a) Peace Building; b) Security Sector Reform; and c) Partnerships and Integration Efforts and asserts that results achieved are self-sustainable and will maintain significance as the countries in the region become full-fledged NATO members. Western Balkans contribution to peace and stability, manifested through an increased participation in missions abroad, represents not only an avenue that countries employ to qualify for membership, but also an advanced stage of internalization of standards, norms, values and shared ideas, which we deem sufficient to sustain the level of ambition and commitment to participate to missions abroad beyond obtaining their full-fledged membership.

Constructivists Conceptual Lenses

Before proceeding with elaboration of NATO's successive engagement and socialization of the Western Balkans, we aim to set the stage by clarifying the main postulates from the

constructivist school of thought. Constructivists' assumptions reinforce our argument of sustained interest for contribution towards peace and stability that countries in the Balkans region develop, throughout their different tracks of interaction with the international community and more specifically with the Alliance.

Constructivists reject one-sided material focus,³ and assert that the most important aspect of international relations is social, not material. They acknowledge the importance of the learning process and identity construction. In addition, constructivist school of thought argues that the identities can be socially constructed and shaped by different beliefs and cultures.⁴ Thus, the state behavior cannot be explained only by recourse to material interests, but by the influence of standards, norms and values. What constructivism introduces is the role that the ideas and norms have in shaping actors identities and the constructed meaning that they give to the world around. The ideational aspects of power take into account how the knowledge, fixed meaning of concepts and the construction of identities produce diverse capacities.⁵ This resembles the role that NATO and the wider international community have while socializing their ideas, norms and standards, shaping and socially constructing actors' identities, enabling them to produce diverse capacities.

Another constructivist argument that comes to play is the primacy of the idea that gives meaning to the physical elements.⁶ Namely, developed capacities and acquired assets remain secondary to the intellectual element i.e. the idea that makes them meaningful and valuable. It is the idea that further organizes plans and guides those capacities. So according to the constructivist assumptions, both the presence of NATO and their continuous dialogue have ensured socialization over the years that not only allowed the host nations to adopt standards, norms and values, but also reshape security apparatus, organize and use it in international security in support of NATO – led international missions. In summary, the Western Balkans have reformed its security apparatus and developed compatible forces, however all that is secondary to the intellectual element that gives true meaning, organizes and guides those

³ Robert Jackson and Georg Sorensen, "Chapter 6, Social Constructivism," in *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, Third Edition, 2007 p.

⁴ Michael Barnett, "Social Constructivism" *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, edited by John Baylis and Steve Smith, p. 262, 268

⁵ Michael Barnett, "Social Constructivism." *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, edited by John Baylis and Steve Smith, p. 262, 268

⁶ Robert Jackson and Georg Sørensen, "Chapter 6, Social Constructivism," in *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, Third Edition, 2007 p. 165

capacities. In the words of Jackson and Sorensen “The thought that is involved in international security is far more important, than the physical assets that are involved because those assets have no meaning without the intellectual component: they are mere things in themselves.”⁷ Therefore, with or without full-fledged membership, it is the level of socialization, adopted norms, standards and values, coupled with the notion that makes participation to missions valuable, which ensures Western Balkans’ sustained contribution towards peace and stability.

Building on these arguments, we find sufficient assumptions within the realm of constructivist school of thought well equipped to explain the pivotal change in the Western Balkans and furthermore the increasing interest to export stability, by participating in NATO and EU – led missions abroad.

NATO’s Involvement in Western Balkans

The socialization of the Western Balkans was mainly conducted through three separate but interconnected tracks: a) Peace Building; b) Security Sector Reform and c) Partnerships and Integration Efforts. The common denominator for all three remains the prevention of human suffering, regional stability and enhanced political, economic, cultural and military cooperation across the region. Starting from peace building, through security sector reform to building and developing partnerships, all countries in the region have gone through different modules of interaction with the Alliance. Alexander Wendt, a core scholar in the field of international relations and the father of constructivist school of thought, recognizes three distinct degrees of ‘cultural internalization.’⁸ Actors’ advancement to the next degree is highly dependent on their internalization of shared ideas, commitment to support such ideas and furthermore demonstrate ownership to those ideas. According to Wendt, the weak commitment reflects weak cooperation and hence weak internalization of shared ideas. As the actors move to the third degree they demonstrate strong commitment for cooperation and amplified internalization of shared ideas. Wendt’s contribution to the field is not the mere

⁷ Robert Jackson and Georg Sørensen, “Chapter 6, Social Constructivism,” in *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, Third Edition, 2007 p. 165

⁸ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 254

introduction of the role of the ideas, but employing them during social interaction to facilitate actors' advancement to the next level. Through social interaction, the ideas allow shaping of cultures by assigning new meaning to material power and state interest. Therefore, the longer the process of social interaction, the better the chances to create and recreate meanings of concepts and create conditions for ownership and strong commitment to shared ideas.

This is exactly what NATO's long presence in the Balkans continues to achieve during the three tracks of interaction. The Alliance has succeeded to encourage and develop the spirit of understanding and partnerships among former adversaries in the region and furthermore, with the prospect for membership, ensure that the common values, standards and democratic processes are adopted, embedded and practiced with true commitment and ownership. This multi level interaction, development and engagement of distinct instruments of socialization that NATO employs are the subject of the next portion of the article. The interaction depicted in the following three tracks is what ultimately ensures a greater degree of internalization of shared ideas and enables the transformation of the Western Balkans countries from security consumers to security providers.

Peace Building

NATO's involvement in the Western Balkans, since the early 1990s, was in response to the outbreak of hostilities and the bloodshed in the region among the conflicted parties. The total of nine military peace support operations combined between NATO and the EU, with different mandates have been deployed within the region.⁹ They all played significant role in pacifying the Western Balkan at different stages of the peace building process.

The Srebrenica massacre followed by further escalation of violence in Bosnia was the watershed that prompted NATO to step in with its disciplining powers and bring the players to the negotiating table. This resulted with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995. NATO maintained its role across the entire stabilization period in Bosnia. Firstly with NATO-led "Implementation Force" (IFOR) tasked to implement the military provisions of the Dayton peace agreement and secondly with the follow-up mission "Stabilization Force"

⁹ Ernst M. Felberbauer, Predrag Jurekovich, and Frederic Labarre, „Advice and Advocacy: Ten Years of the Regional Stability in South East Europe Study Group,” *Connections The Quarterly Journal*, Summer 2010, pp. 93-98

(SFOR) tasked to extend necessary support and protection to the civilian elements responsible for the peace agreement political aspects implementation.¹⁰

The Macedonian case witnessed even greater and more prompt engagement of the Alliance. As the ethnic groups continued to drift apart and adopt violent approaches for mutual communication, NATO's active engagement eventually led to signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001. General Blease¹¹, a former NATO HQs Skopje Commander depicts this engagement as highly successful, attributing the signing of the agreement to the socialization efforts undertaken by both NATO Secretary General, at the time, Lord Robertson and the EU High Representative Javier Solana.¹² On a larger scale, the peace building process was supported additionally with "Essential Harvest" NATO mission tasked to collect weapons and two other NATO mandated missions "Amber Fox" and Allied Harmony," both tailored in support of the in country peace-building process.

NATO has been leading a peace support operation in Kosovo, supporting and building peace and stability in the area since June 1999. With over 6,300 troops from the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), provided by 31 countries (23 NATO and 8 non-NATO), still deployed in Kosovo, the Alliance continues to maintain presence and provide security for all its citizens, irrespective of their ethnic origin.¹³

In retrospect, the peace building process proves to be a very challenging project. However, it has, among the other things, enabled the international community to facilitate and introduce positive transformation and re-introduce amity relations among the formerly violent adversaries. Ultimately, it came almost natural that after the military interventions NATO would remain in the region and assume responsibility for supporting the process of resuming states' functionality and state building initiatives.¹⁴ These initiatives and NATO's greater involvement in the aftermath is what allowed the advancement of the countries to the next

¹⁰ Ernst M. Felberbauer, Predrag Jurekovich, and Frederic Labarre, „Advice and Advocacy: Ten Years of the Regional Stability in South East Europe Study Group,” *Connections The Quarterly Journal*, Summer 2010, pp. 93-98

¹¹ Dennis Blease is a retired British Army flag officer who has served in the Western Balkans with NATO, the UN, and the EU. He is currently Deputy Director of the Centre for Security Sector Management at Cranfield University.

¹² Dennis Blease, “Lessons from NATO's Military Missions in the Western Balkans,” *Connections The Quarterly Journal*, Summer 2010, pp. 3-18

¹³ NATO's role in Kosovo, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_48818.htm (Accessed on May 19, 2011)

¹⁴ Dennis Blease, “Lessons from NATO's Military Missions in the Western Balkans,” *Connections The Quarterly Journal*, Summer 2010, pp. 3-18

level of internalization of shared ideas and norms. It created conditions for the learning process to commence and allowed dissemination of norms, values and standards across different functional areas, including the security and defense apparatus.

Security Sector Reform

The idea of joining the Alliance has already appeared on the radar of the regional countries' leadership in the aftermath of the violent conflicts in the Western Balkans. At the time, it seemed as an overly ambitious goal considering the complex constellation of relations among the former adversaries. Among the other tools developed, the prospect for NATO membership was the main point of entry and the carrot the Alliance dangled to the regional players encouraging positive actions, transformational efforts and above all ensuring all adopt common interests, values and democratic standards. The process was strengthened through diverse assistance and NATO engagement on multiple levels, which allowed, what we label in this article, the second degree of internalization of shared ideas and paved the way for a successful transformation of the Western Balkans security sectors.

Most dynamic and all encompassing is the mechanism that constitutes the Membership Action Plan (MAP). At the 1999 Washington Summit, the Membership Action Plan was introduced to help guide the countries and strengthen their candidacy by periodic evaluations on their progress and regular supervision by the North Atlantic Council.¹⁵ As the NATO membership is tied to meeting certain milestones and prerequisites, the Alliance has developed a set of criteria to evaluate the aspirants against five distinct areas that touch upon every aspect of a democratic governance. Their progress and related plans, the candidates present and submit to NATO on yearly basis in the format of Annual National Program (ANP) for membership. In simple terms, the MAP and the ANP indicate the readiness for admission, as well as the level of norms, values, standards internalized by each individual country.

As communication is highly regarded within NATO context, the Alliance adopted an exclusive strategy to communicate its norms, values and rules to the candidates. This strategy is based on an intensified process of socialization. The Alliance, on the one side

¹⁵ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "NATO Handbook", 2006, p.189
<http://www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2001/index.htm>

communicates its fundamental rules, values and norms to the aspirants and on the other expects advanced levels of their implementation in the domestic system of the candidate. For the purposes of supporting the above mentioned strategy, NATO has initiated an ongoing dialogue with the candidate countries. The North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), which was created in 1991 and later replaced with the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), is designed as a joint forum to facilitate the process of multilateral consultation and cooperation. Partnership for Peace (PfP), as part of the above mentioned exclusive strategy, was launched in 1994 to establish regular exchanges with aspirants through bilateral cooperation.¹⁶ PfP was designed as mechanism that would serve as a period of transition and “probationary stage,”¹⁷ wherein the candidates would grow into “producers as well as consumers of security.”¹⁸ It is a channel through which the Alliance teaches the candidates about the rules, values, norms and practices that the community members uphold.¹⁹ Although PfP is primarily intended to integrate states into joint force planning and the international military command structure,²⁰ it is also an avenue through which they acquire training that meets the requirements and makes them compatible and interoperable with NATO allies.²¹ The PfP mechanism facilitates the process of meeting the NATO requirements on the one side, while on the other ensures the partners develop a “deep and permanent relationship with NATO.”²² In the case of the Balkan countries this exchange *de facto* translates into working towards ensuring a seamless transition to the status of full Ally. The Partnership for Peace is a program that Albania joined in 1994, Macedonia in 1995 and Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia in 2006 and some still pursue with the Alliance today.²³

¹⁶ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, “NATO Handbook”, 2006, pp. 186-187, <http://www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2001/index.htm>

¹⁷ Frank Schimmelfenning, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 93

¹⁸ Robert E. Hunter, “Enlargement: Part of a Strategy for Projecting Stability into Central Europe,” *NATO Review* 43, no. 3 (1995): 3-8, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/1995/9503-1.htm>

¹⁹ Frank Schimmelfenning, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 93

²⁰ Daniel Deudney and g. John Ikenberry, “The nature and sources of liberal International order” *Review of International Studies* (1999), 25, 179–196

²¹ Robert E. Hunter, “Enlargement: Part of a Strategy for Projecting Stability into Central Europe,” *NATO Review* 43, no. 3 (1995): 3-8, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/1995/9503-1.htm>

²² Robert E. Hunter, “Enlargement: Part of a strategy for Projecting Stability into Central Europe,” *NATO Review*, Web Edition No. 3 - May 1995 Vol. 43 - pp. 3-8, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/1995/9503-1.htm>

²³ Signatures of Partnership for Peace Framework Document, <http://www.nato.int/pfp/sig-cntr.htm> (Accessed on May 19, 2011)

The Alliance also maintains an additional communication channel through the NATO Advisory teams embedded within the NATO HQs, residing within respective candidates' capitals in most of the Western Balkans countries. Besides providing direct hands-on assistance with the host nation's security sector reform process, NATO Advisory Teams ensure, what is commonly acknowledged in the socialization literature, "internalization of the values, roles, and understandings held by a group that constitutes the society of which the actor becomes a member."²⁴ This epistemic community of experts on the one side ensures that the socialization process stays on track, while on the other continues to provide a direct link between the aspirant and NATO, supporting security sector reforms in all Western Balkan capitals, including Serbian and Kosovo.

Partnerships and Integration Efforts

Considering the high importance the countries of the Euro-Atlantic area assign to maintaining stability and security, great emphasis has been placed on the military contribution to peace-keeping and collective defense missions.²⁵ Military contributions to peace-keeping are important cornerstone that fortifies the role of the Alliance in the international security.

Military contributions to missions and international operations in support of peace and stability represent *de facto* a paradigm shift in the case of the Western Balkan countries. The countries from the region, once consumers and now producers of security, maintain an upward trend in respect to their participation in NATO-led operations and missions abroad.²⁶ In support of this changing paradigm, NATO has developed another set of thematically structured mechanisms to ensure partners are brought up to par to support and strengthen NATO's role in the international security. PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP) is a mechanism that helps the Alliance and partners identify forces and niche capabilities that could be used in multinational training, exercises and operations.²⁷ Directions for force and capabilities development tailored to enable the partners meet the interoperability

²⁴ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Treating International Institutions as Social Environments," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45 (2001), p. 495,

²⁵ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "NATO Handbook", 2006, p. 185
<http://www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2001/index.htm>

²⁶ Rakkasans Team Up with Macedonian Rangers, <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/rakkasans-team-up-with-macedonian-rangers.html> (Accessed on May 19, 2011)

²⁷ Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_68277.htm (Accessed on May 19, 2011)

requirements are communicated through the PARP mechanism, including recommended steps that facilitate the process. These steps take the form of the so called Partnership Goals (PGs), which ensure the partners develop armed forces better able to operate in conjunction with the armed forces of NATO members. While on the one side, the Partnership Goals provide the partners with a specific direction for capabilities development in accordance with NATO standards and priorities, on the other side, countries' compliance with the PGs builds a foundation that prepares them for full-fledged participation within the NATO planning process.

Two other documents that are part of this NATO socialization mechanism include the PfP Interoperability Review and the PARP Assessment. The former provides a snapshot of the PGs implementation progress, while the latter helps the Alliance and the partner countries to jointly assess the capabilities development progress of the latter, while identifying areas for improvement. Western Balkans active engagement with the Alliance, throughout the above elaborated mechanisms, is what precedes and continues at the stage when the partner countries declare forces and contribute to NATO-led missions abroad.

Lessons learned from deployments speak about the challenges that the multinational operations involve due to differences in operational and tactical capabilities by nations within the force, combined with complex cultural issues, command and control procedures and other support issues. By contributing forces to NATO-led operations, the contributing country gains invaluable experience in interoperability, command and control and operational procedures, with intensive interaction with NATO forces in rather dangerous conditions. When a NATO operation or mission is initiated its military authorities draft a concept of operations, which outlines the troop and equipment requirements necessary to meet the required objectives. As the concept of operations gets approved and released, the force generation is initiated, which is the stage when the countries receive requests to provide troops and equipment for missions. This request reaches not only NATO members, but partner countries as well.²⁸

²⁸ NATO Troop Contributions, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50316.htm (Accessed on May 10, 2011)

Taking part in missions has proven to be high on the agenda of the Western Balkan countries and almost all strive to positively respond to these force generation requests and provide capacities to augment or deploy in support of NATO units.²⁹ Considering that the Alliance generates forces for missions by drawing from the full-fledged members, the partners participating to missions become *de facto* part of multinational forces composed of NATO individuals, formations and equipment,³⁰ and also part of socialization on another level. The importance of socialization at the operational level cannot be underestimated. If the above elaborated mechanisms ensure institutional socialization, personal contacts on the operational level ensure that the process permeates deeper and creates conditions for an advanced internalization of shared ideas. The socialization between participating countries develops a greater understanding of operations, communications and personal contact among countries nationals. Personal knowledge or mutual acquaintances among participating members greatly enhances the communication and establishes trust and confidence between disparate organizations and personnel. The experience derived from participation in NATO operations also develops support for the Alliance at the ground level, while increasing the level of interoperability.

Finally, while the individual national governments may support NATO, it is the operational personnel whose commitment and efforts make operations possible, integration successful and troops contributions sustainable. Building long-term institutional and operational capabilities and capacities, establishes and deepens relationships between NATO members and partner countries. This is a key enabler for the success of NATO missions and for sustaining the contributing level of ambition for each participating nation, including the countries from the Balkan region.

Conclusion

The body of evidence thus far provides data that support the rhetorical commitments to peace and stability operations voiced by the partners in the Balkans with very impressive records of troop's contributions. Some of them even supersede the records of the long standing full-fledged NATO members. The Balkan nations provide an excellent source for support of high

²⁹ Vermont Guard trains Macedonia military for peacekeeping missions, http://www.ng.mil/news/archives/2006/10/102306-VT_train_macedonia.aspx (Accessed on May 19, 2011)

³⁰ NATO Troop Contributions, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50316.htm (Accessed on May 10, 2011)

demand and low density specialties in support of special operations forces, military police and medical support, especially in the areas of foreign internal defense, foreign military training and supporting provincial reconstruction teams. These capabilities not only provide tangible direct support to NATO, but enhance and reinforce the missions that were once and, in some cases, still being conducted in their own countries. This truly demonstrates a shift from being a security consumer to a security provider.

Some pundits will be quick to suggest that as the Western Balkan countries become full-fledged members, NATO will lose the carrot that ensures greater troop contribution and the interest to participate to NATO-led missions and operations will assume a downward trend. However, due to the mechanisms the Alliance developed, an intensive interaction with the region has been ensured on multiple levels and the cooperation and socialization within the region pursued over extended periods of time. The three distinct tracks of interaction between the regional countries and the Alliance, portrayed in this article, depict their advancement through the three degrees of “cultural internalization.”³¹ The learning process enabled shift in the states’ behavior and as the countries internalize shared ideas and demonstrate ownership to those ideas, the commitment for cooperation grows and matures, ensuring its prospects for sustainment. This purports that even when the countries join NATO, these ideas will not lose relevance, but furthermore will gain new meaning that is of a greater value to the new NATO member. The participation to missions has greater propensity to be sustained, due to the meaning that the status of the full-fledged member obtains and the meaning and value it incurs when contributing to the missions of the Alliance to which the country, as a full-fledged member, belongs and whose ideas and values it shares.

In summary, the participation in NATO- led missions and increasing the nations contribution to almost 5% deployable forces, from the overall available manpower, represents an avenue that Western Balkans countries employ to demonstrate the advanced degree of internalization of standards, norms and values and the results achieved with the modernization efforts of their security sector apparatus.

³¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 254

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