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Inevitable Decline versus Predestined  
Stability: The Structure of Disciplinary  
Explanations of the Evolving  
Transatlantic Order

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# Inevitable Decline versus Predestined Stability: The Structure of Disciplinary Explanations of the Evolving Transatlantic Order

## **Abstract**

The future of NATO has been a hotly debated topic at the center of IR debates ever since the end of the Cold War. It has also been a very complicated one given the discipline's conceptual and theoretical difficulties in studying change. Most analysts now agree that NATO (and the transatlantic order more broadly) are going through some major changes. Yet while there is consensus that the depth as well as the pace of these changes is more far-reaching than in past decades it is unclear exactly how deep and how far these changes reach. In order to come to grips with these changes most of the chapters in this book are exploring the character as well as the sources of these changes. This chapter approaches the topic by examining how the discipline has dealt with the question of the evolution of the transatlantic order in the past. It argues that IR has not been very well equipped conceptually to deal with the phenomenon in question, ie. large-scale processes of change. In applying a typological framework developed by Paul Pierson the chapter discusses what types of causal accounts have dominated in the IR literature – and what this may tell us about particular strengths, biases and potential blind spots in coming to grips with the evolution of this order. In essence it argues that the structure of the most prominent explanations is often quite similar irrespective of paradigmatic descent. In spite of major differences – in spite, even, of mutually exclusive predictions – as to the expected path of the order's evolution realist, liberal and constructivist accounts heavily rely in equal fashion on causal arguments which emphasize large-scale causal processes which are almost always framed in rather statist structural terms even though they essentially entail slow moving causal processes. This temporal dimension of the causal processes presumably shaping the future of the transatlantic order is seldom spelled out in detail, however.

Thus, if one examines the debate as a whole one sees a picture of IR scholarship which essentially oscillates between two extremes: the position that NATO (as the core institution of the transatlantic order) was (and is) certain to survive and the position that it was (and is) certain to collapse. What is more, these extremes on a spectrum of possible positions on the transatlantic order's evolution between breakdown on the one hand and successful adaptation on the other are not hypothetical but mostly real. Thus, the debate does not gravitate towards the center (ie. a position which, for instance, envisages a loser but still cooperative relationship) after the usual give and take of exchanging scholarly arguments. Rather it mostly sticks with either of the two extreme positions. The chapter illustrates the problems associated with this point in some details and discusses potential remedies.

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**Inevitable Decline versus Predestined Stability:  
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The future of NATO has been a hotly debated topic at the center of IR debates ever since the end of the Cold War. It has also been a very complicated one given the discipline’s conceptual and theoretical difficulties in studying change. Most analysts now agree that NATO (and the transatlantic order more broadly) are going through some major changes. Yet while there is consensus that the depth as well as the pace of these changes is more far-reaching than in past decades it is unclear exactly how deep and how far these changes reach. In order to come to grips with these changes most of the chapters in this book are exploring the character as well as the sources of these changes. This chapter approaches the topic by examining how the discipline has dealt with the question of the evolution of the transatlantic order in the past. It argues that IR has not been very well equipped conceptually to deal with the phenomenon in question, ie. large-scale processes of change. In applying a typological framework developed by Paul Pierson the chapter discusses what types of causal accounts have dominated in the IR literature – and what this may tell us about particular strengths, biases and potential blind spots in coming to grips with the evolution of this order. In essence it argues that the *structure* of the most prominent explanations is often quite similar *irrespective* of paradigmatic descent. In spite of major differences – in spite, even, of mutually exclusive predictions – as to the expected path of the order’s evolution realist, liberal and constructivist accounts heavily rely in equal fashion on causal arguments which emphasize large-scale causal processes which are almost always framed in rather statist structural terms even though they essentially entail slow moving causal processes. This temporal dimension of the causal processes presumably shaping the future of the transatlantic order is seldom spelled out in detail, however. Thus, if one examines the debate as a whole one sees a picture of IR scholarship which essentially oscillates between two extremes: the position that NATO (as the core institution of the transatlantic order) was (and is) certain to survive and the position that it was (and is) certain to collapse. What is more, these extremes on a spectrum of possible positions on the transatlantic order’s evolution between breakdown on the one hand and successful adaptation on the other are not hypothetical but mostly real. Thus, the debate does not gravitate towards the center (ie. a position which, for instance, envisages a loser but still cooperative relationship) after the usual give and take of exchanging scholarly arguments. Rather it mostly sticks with either of the two extreme positions. The chapter illustrates the problems associated with this point in some details and discusses potential remedies.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is also scheduled to be included in: Jeffrey Anderson, G. John Ikenberry, Thomas Risse (Eds.), *Temporary Irritation or Enduring Crisis? Exploring the Deep Structure of the Transatlantic Relationship* post-9/11.

*" I don't think of transformation as something that starts un-transformed and goes to something that is transformed. I think of it as a process where we are forced by the nature of our world in this 21st century to continue, and it's more a matter of culture and attitude than it is technologies or platforms. It's more a question of recognizing that in the world today we are faced with things that come at you very fast (...)"<sup>2</sup>*

## 1. Introduction

The evolution of NATO (and the transatlantic order more broadly)<sup>3</sup> has been a hotly debated topic at the center of IR debates ever since the end of the Cold War. To some extent this interest was an expression of two motives which indeed should drive academic research: (1) genuine curiosity as to what we know and what we don't know about the major causal factors driving the alliance's development and (2) a widespread consensus that *whatever* happened to the alliance would have *major* effects well beyond the immediate confines of the transatlantic area. However, given the nature of the discipline of IR there was an additional third motive behind the burgeoning interest in NATO (in particular) in the 1990s: Given the significance as well as the nature of the issue for disciplinary debates, the past, the present and the future of NATO and the transatlantic order almost inevitably became an obvious research target for practically any established "paradigm". Unsurprisingly it also moved into the center of some of the usual paradigmatic battles (cf. Hellmann 2005).

The evolution of the transatlantic order has not only been an important topic for the discipline. It also has been a difficult one. In part this is due to the fact that the theme underlying "evolution" or "transformation" is as dazzling a concept as it is a necessary one. As Donald Rumsfeld put it, the concept of "transformation" should not be looked at as something that "starts un-transformed and goes to something that is transformed". Rather, it ought to be conceived of as "a process where we are forced by the nature of our world (...) to continue" from where we find ourselves. Although Rumsfeld had something different in mind when he referred to "process" and "transformation" in the context of institutional change at NATO (basically applying a technical term from NATO's vocabulary on weapons modernization), the underlying notion of change is very much the same one with which IR scholarship had to come to grips during the past decade or so. Ever since the end of the Cold War the discipline

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<sup>2</sup> Remarks by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld at the 41st Munich Conference on European Security Policy Munich, Germany, February 12, 2005, [http://www.usembassy.it/file2005\\_02/alia/a5021102.htm](http://www.usembassy.it/file2005_02/alia/a5021102.htm) [13 April 2005].

<sup>3</sup> In the following I mostly use the term "transatlantic order" in order to refer to the overarching cooperative framework linking European and North America states and societies. "NATO" more narrowly refers to the military alliance between European states and the United States.

has examined the question how NATO will be affected by the demise of its former adversary, the Soviet Union. In a simplified version, most of the answers to this question fell into one of two rubrics: scholars close to the realist tradition basically argued that NATO was bound to dissolve eventually as any military alliance has done in history which had lost its former enemy. In contrast scholars closer to the liberal tradition (broadly conceived) argued that the transatlantic order was more likely to adapt successfully to the new environment since it was more than just a military alliance. These two strands also survived the aftermaths of 911 and even the clash between the Bush administration and some Western European NATO members over Iraq in 2002/2003.

One of the starting points of this book project has been that this is not a very satisfactory state of affairs. Contributors mostly agreed that the transatlantic order is currently going through some major changes. Yet while there is consensus that the depth as well as the pace of these changes is more far-reaching than in past decades it is unclear *exactly how deep* and *how far* these changes reach. In order to come to grips with these changes most of the chapters in this book are exploring the character as well as the sources of these changes. This chapter approaches the topic from a meta-perspective by examining how the discipline has dealt with the question of change in the transatlantic order in the past. It argues that the discipline has not been very well equipped conceptually to deal with the kind of transformational processes under examination here: ie. large-scale processes of change. In applying a typological framework developed by Paul Pierson the chapter discusses what types of causal accounts have dominated in the IR literature – and what this may tell us about particular strengths, biases and potential blind spots in coming to grips with the evolution of the transatlantic order in the past and, possibly, in the future. In essence I will argue that the *structure* of the most prominent explanations is often quite similar *irrespective* of paradigmatic descent. In spite of major differences – in spite, even, of mutually exclusive predictions – as to the expected path of change realist, liberal and constructivist accounts heavily rely in equal fashion on causal arguments which emphasize large-scale causal processes which are almost always framed in rather statist *structural* terms even though they essentially entail slow moving causal processes. This temporal dimension of the causal processes presumably shaping the course of developments is seldom spelled out in detail, however. For instance, threats play a crucial role both in realist accounts of bringing NATO into existence and in causing its collapse. Yet neither the pace nor the duration of the temporal categories "appearance of threat" or "disappearance of threat" which figure as the key independent variable in realist accounts

NATO's origins as well as demise are usually specified. This applies in similar fashion to comparable liberal or constructivist accounts. Thus, if one examines the debate as a whole one sees a picture of IR scholarship which essentially oscillates between two extremes: the position that NATO / the transatlantic order was (and is) *certain* to survive and the position that NATO / the transatlantic order was (and is) *certain* to collapse. What is more, these extremes on a *spectrum* of possible positions between *breakdown* on the one hand and *successful adaptation* on the other are not hypothetical but actually propagated by some of the most reputable scholars in the discipline. In other words: the debate does not gravitate towards the center (ie. a position which, for instance, envisages a loser but still cordial relationship) after the usual give and take of exchanging scholarly arguments. Rather it mostly sticks to the extremes. This chapter illustrates this point in some details and discusses potential remedies.

## 2. Explaining the Evolving Transatlantic Order ....

Irrespective of whether we conceive of the future of the transatlantic order in terms of institutional breakdown, transformation or adaptation (cf. introductory chapter by Ikenberry) we are always observing a *process*, ie. a *moving outcome*. The vocabulary which usually figures prominently in our conceptual and/or theoretical schemes in analyzing processes of change (and/or continuity) also implies that we are dealing with phenomena where time plays a significant role. However, this *temporal* dimension is seldom specified. Kenneth Waltz's prominent statement from the fall of 1990 is a good example: "NATO is a *disappearing thing*. It is a question of how long it is going to remain as a *significant* institution even though its name may linger on" (Waltz 1990: 210, emphasis added). As of early 2005 NATO has been "disappearing" for more than a decade – and even Waltz himself seemed to have grown somewhat uncertain over time whether it has already fully disappeared. In an article in *International Security* in 2000 Waltz at first seemed to grant that NATO's "outliving its purpose" looks like a "strange case" (Waltz 2000: 18). Yet this initial judgement was quickly reversed. As Waltz put it: "I expected NATO to *dwindle* at the Cold War's end and *ultimately to disappear*. In a basic sense, the expectation has been borne out. NATO is no longer even a *treaty of guarantee* because one cannot answer the question, guarantee against whom?" (p. 19). What remains of it serves for what alliances have always been useful: as a tool at the disposal of their most important member(s) – which of course is in NATO's case the US. To the extent that one may still say that NATO exists, Waltz writes in 2000, it is "a means of

maintaining and lengthening America's grip on the foreign and military policies of European states" and thus "the ability of the United States to extend the life of a moribund institution nicely illustrates how international institutions are created and maintained by stronger states to serve their perceived or misperceived interests" (Waltz 2000: 19, 20, all emphases added).

Quoting Waltz at length is not meant to score an easy point against realism. The same can be done for other (realist and non-realist) scholars as well. In the mid 1990s, for instance, Robert Keohane and Celeste Wallander predicted that NATO would rather easily adjust to the new international environment and not disappear at all. To the contrary, NATO was expected to have a good chance to continue as an effective security management institution "to a ripe old age" (Keohane/Wallander 1996: 37).<sup>4</sup> The main point in quoting these prominent examples is that the phenomenon to be tackled is as important as it is complex. More importantly, as the following analysis will show the disciplinary study of the evolution of the transatlantic order has been characterized by an overdose of highly aggregated variables at the macro level which often left underspecified how the postulated (or implied) causal processes of change actually worked. In other words: in most accounts – irrespective of whether they were of realist, liberal or constructivist descent – *structure* almost always trumped *action* or *process*.

In a major conceptual article Pierson examined how we can come to grips with a particular type of causal process: macrosocial processes, ie. processes which are "big, slow-moving, and ... invisible", as he put it in the title. In an analogy with the natural sciences he distinguished four basic types of causal accounts: (a) tornado-like occurrences which involve quickly unfolding causal processes, ie. a rapidly developing storm, leading to equally rapid outcomes; (b) earthquakes (long-term causal process, quick outcome); (c) a meteorite hitting the earth

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<sup>4</sup> More recently Keohane (2004) was asked whether he was "surprised by the way the Bush administration has tipped the balance against international organizations and toward a unilateral response" when it invaded Iraq. Keohane was "not surprised, because they came into office talking against international organizations, although in a different form." However, he granted that it was "very disappointing from a professional point of view, because when those of us who emphasize and value the role of institutions in world politics think we won the debate (which I think we did, intellectually, in the academy), it's disappointing to see these throwbacks -- people (some of them old, like Rumsfeld; some of them not so old, like Rice) who still just don't get it. An academic teaching people over a period of twenty years hopes, at least, they will learn some of these newer truths. So that's disappointing." These throwbacks notwithstanding, Keohane still believed that "the overall story, although it has more bumps in the road than I expected, is a story which shows the importance of international institutions, because the test of that doesn't come when a regime of people who are in favor of international institutions is in power. The test comes when people are in power who are opposed to them, instinctively. When they have to go back to them, then that tells you something." Since the US did "go back" to the UN in the latter half of 2003, Keohane thought that "the overall lesson of Iraq (...) sustains the view that international institutions are terribly important, even in this high politics security area". For an early effort at predicting NATO's future in which I participated myself see Hellmann/Wolf 1993, especially (as to the specificity of competing realist and institutionalist predictions) p. 21-26.



(quick/slow) or (d) global warming (slow/slow) (Pierson 2003: 178-179, reproduced in table 1).

*Table 1: Time Horizons of Different Causal Accounts*  
(Pierson 2003: 179)

		Time Horizon of Outcome	
		<i>Short</i>	<i>Long</i>
Time Horizon of Cause	<i>Short</i>	I Tornado	II Meteorite Hit
	<i>Long</i>	III Earthquake	IV Global Warming

If we take this typology as a foil, the scholarship on the evolution of the transatlantic order reveals some interesting patterns in several respects. This relates to both the conceptualization of the outcome (or the "dependent variable", ie. the " evolution of the transatlantic order ") and the preferred causal accounts.

## 2.1 .... as a Slow Moving Outcome akin to Global Warming ...

First, as far as the outcome is concerned the landscape of IR research is quite diverse. In comparison to other problems on the agenda of IR research the community as whole appears to face not only the standard challenge of identifying the proper causes of *established facts*. It seems to face, in addition, also higher than usual uncertainty as to *what is to be explained* in the first place. If we examine the *evolution of NATO* – is the focus essentially on a military alliance (eg. Walt 1997, 1998, 2004; Waltz 1990, 2000)? Are we dealing with a "security management institution" which is much more than a narrowly defined "treaty of guarantee" in the realist sense (Haftendorn et.al. 1999)? Is it even a "security community" which is primarily based on neither threat nor rational interest calculation but on a common set of shared values instead (Risse 1995, 1996; Schimmelfennig 1998)? Or is it best conceived of inclusively as a broad "political order" encompassing political dimensions (democracy), economic dimensions (capitalism), and a common civilizational heritage (Ikenberry 2004)?

It is obvious for anybody familiar with the established language games of the discipline that these concepts are highly connotative as far as particular theoretical assumptions are concerned. Thus, one of the first (and least surprising) observations about IR research on the evolution of the transatlantic order (as a short hand for all of these conceptualizations of the dependent variable) is that some fifteen years after the end of the Cold War and an initial surge in theoretical work it is as contested as ever what the nature of the beast really is.

A second, less obvious observation relates to the predominant nature of causal accounts. Irrespective of diverging conceptual preferences and theoretical assumptions most scholars implicitly agree that it is necessary to approach the analysis with a longer time horizon both as far as the outcome and the causal side are concerned. In other words, there is a convergence even among the most conflicting approaches around the IV<sup>th</sup> quadrant (global warming). A few illustrations across the paradigmatic dividing lines will illustrate the point.

Realists, for instance, have long argued that the end of the Cold War would bring an end to NATO eventually even if the precise time frame could not be specified given the nature of the (structural) causes and how they would translate at the cognitive level. Even before the upheaval of 1989 Stephen Walt argued that alliance cohesion was bound to decline given the vanishing perception of threat (Walt 1989: 8-9). Moreover, “without a clear and present threat”, Walt added in June 1990, “neither European politicians nor U.S. taxpayers are likely to support a large U.S. military presence in Europe. Although NATO’s elaborate institutional structure will slow the pace of devolution, only a resurgence of the Soviet threat is likely to preserve NATO *in anything like its present form*” (Walt 1990: vii, emphasis added). In subsequent articles Walt granted that NATO “has proven to be more resilient than many pessimists predicted” (Walt 1997: 171, see also Walt 2004). He now argued that alliances may persist even if the conditions under which they were originally formed had changed substantially. Referring mainly to NATO he listed four factors in particular: a large asymmetry of power within the alliance, shared values, a highly institutionalized relationship and a strong sense of common identity (Walt 1997: 164-170) – factors which usually do not figure very prominently in realist analyses and which certainly are difficult to pin down precisely in terms of causal time horizon. Still, on balance, Walt continued to question whether this would provide strong enough evidence to believe that NATO would persist.

Given the absence of a major threat strains among its members were bound to increase, “eventually” leading to its demise (Walt 1997: 173; see also Walt 1998/1999).

Other realists with a stronger bias towards the "defensive" version of realism, such as Barry Posen, have stretched this time horizon ("eventually") further as more time has passed. In their view new factors have to be added which tend to further lengthen the time horizon. For example, since the US is not perceived as a direct security threat to its European allies, an argument which even realists widely share, bandwagoning rather than balancing is seen to be a viable as well as a cost-effective option after all. In this perspective ESDP "is not quite a balancing project, but certainly an effort by Europeans, including many who bandwagon in their NATO guise, to develop an alternative security supplier" just in case the US might not turn out to be as reliable and trustworthy a partner as the staunch Atlanticists within NATO believe (Posen 2004: 12). Yet the very fact that US hegemony in Europe might be challenged if ESDP would prove to be successful may be a reason for the US "to be more interested in Europe's special security concerns than would otherwise be the case" (Posen 2004: 16). In other words, US hegemony (and, therefore, NATO cohesion) can be preserved as long as this hegemony appears to be rather benign. Yet to the extent that US hegemony is benign this might increasingly imply to tolerate more European security independence which in itself would imply a more far-reaching change in the nature of the alliance with Europe less willing to play the role of a "docile ally of the US in a decade or two" (Posen 2004: 17). Again, as in Walt's case, the causal processes which presumably drive NATO's transformation are stretching far back (and forth) in terms of the time horizon.

From an "offensive realist" point of view this time horizon may not be as long, yet even here the causal processes will take some time to lead to NATO's demise. John Mearsheimer, for instance, sees NATO's future largely in terms of its utility to the US' role as an effective offshore balancer. Given that NATO has lost this function he foresees an increasing distancing of America's European allies as well as a dwindling interest on the American side to maintain a significant US troop presence. Without a major reversal of the distribution of power on the continent (prevailing around the millennium) Mearsheimer thought that the US "is likely to pull its forces out of Europe" "in the immediate years ahead" (Mearsheimer 2001: 394, 395). Against this background "the most likely scenario" would be an increase in German defense spending (possibly including an attempt to acquire nuclear weapons) in order to compensate for the removal of the nuclear umbrella by the US but also in order "to

dominate central Europe". Since other big powers (such as Russia and France) would not sit by idly, "serious security competition" would result. Obviously, so at least the implicit argument, it would be hard to imagine NATO to persist under these circumstances.

In contrast to Walt's and Posen's arguments Mearsheimer's causal story is less complex focusing mainly on US policy as the driving force. Moreover, the "speed" of the causal process also seems to be faster since it is driven by one actor above all. Still, the common denominator of all realist accounts is the fact that the major security equation has changed since the end of the Cold War. In this sense they are belonging in either quadrant III or IV of Pierson's matrix. On the outcome side the time horizon may be somewhat shorter (Mearsheimer) or somewhat longer (Walt, Posen), yet there can be little doubt that the time horizon at the causal level is always long rather than occurring suddenly. Power shifts don't happen overnight and threats do not "vanish" (nor do new ones arise) in a matter of weeks or even months. Yet the political *effects* of both will show over time. In this reading the crisis over Iraq served as a trigger to unleash the forces for what has been accumulating (in Pierson's sense of an "earthquake") for some time. But it was not the first one to shake the alliance and even some realists (such as Walt 2004) at least implicitly still grant that it has not (yet) been the ultimate one finally putting an end to an extended process of "disappearing". Rather, in this interpretation of NATO's transformation pressure has been building ever since the end of the Cold War releasing its energy repeatedly as in the Balkans in the early 1990s, in Kosovo towards the end of the 90s, in Afghanistan after 911 and now in Iraq. There is also broad agreement in this camp that the likelihood is quite high that the underlying seismic shifts are almost inevitably driving Europe and America apart. However long the "long term" may be, the collapse of NATO is seen to be as certain as is the heating up of the atmosphere in Pierson's quadrant IV scenario of global warming.

The same kind of story can also be told with regard to the work of liberals of both rationalist and constructivist descent. They too best fit in quadrant IV, although for different reasons. As is to be expected from an institutionalist, for instance, Robert Keohane has long been emphasizing an extended time horizon in accounting for the persistence and/or adaptation of international institutions in general (cf. Keohane 1984; 1989; Keohane/Nye 1993). While there were some early hints in his writings that rather short-term calculations of "interests"

might actually drive NATO's transformation (explicitly including a breakdown-scenario<sup>5</sup>), subsequent more detailed analyses almost always emphasized slow-moving causal factors (such as institutional "inertia" and more dynamic and adaptive institutional processes of more flexible and "hybrid" security management institutions<sup>6</sup>). The factors driving institutional processes all seemed to assure that NATO would persist "to a ripe old age" (Wallander/Keohane 1996: 37).

A similar argument was put forth by constructivists building on the work of Karl Deutsch on NATO as a pluralistic security community which had been around longer than any of the ("rational") institutionalist challengers of realism. As in the case of Deutsch, scholars working in this line of tradition emphasized slow-moving identity-building processes which tended to foster a sense of community. As Thomas Risse or Frank Schimmelfennig argued, the transatlantic order was best conceived of as "an institutionalized pluralistic security community of liberal democracies", an alliance representing the "military branch" of a broader "Euro-Atlantic or 'Western' community".<sup>7</sup> From this perspective the end of the Cold War did not only "not terminate the Western community of values", it even "extend[ed] that community into Eastern Europe and, potentially, into even the successor states of the Soviet Union, creating a 'pacific federation' of liberal democracies from Vladivostok to Berlin, San Francisco, and Tokyo." The important point here was, however, that the institutional form of NATO was considered less critical than the underlying community of values: "liberal theory does not necessarily expect NATO to last into the next century. It only assumes that the security partnership among liberal democracies will persist in one institutional form or another" (Risse 1996: 396). In other words the key processes driving the Atlantic security community were moving even slower than expected among institutionalists. In this reading the Soviet threat may have helped in fostering a sense of common purpose within the transatlantic order, but "it did not create the community in the first place." Rather, "the collective identity led to the threat perception, not the other way around" (Risse-Kappen 1995:

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<sup>5</sup> In the early 1990s Keohane explicitly stated that he was unwilling to predict that NATO would still be around in the year 2000, "because it is not clear that both the US and Europe will regard NATO as continuing to be in their interest" (Keohane 1992: 31, note 16).

<sup>6</sup>Keohane/Nye 1993: 19; Keohane 1992: 25; see also Wallander/Keohane 1996 and 1999 and Wallander 2000. For a discussion of the relationship between organizational theory (emphasizing bureaucratic inertia) and institutional theory more broadly see McCalla 1996: 456-469 and Haftendorn 1997: 27-28; for a more skeptical analysis as to NATO's adaptability especially with regard to NATO's capacity for peace operations drawing on collective action theory see Lepgold 1998; see also Chernoff 1995 who draws on institutionalist as well as cybernetic theory arguing that NATO's outlook is not as pessimistic as realists suppose but more pessimistic than institutionalists allow.

<sup>7</sup>Risse 1996: 397, Schimmelfennig 1998: 213-214.

32). Thus, democracies were seen to form alliances with each other not because of a unifying external threat but because they perceive each other as peaceful.<sup>8</sup> As a result the key causal process driving the transatlantic order's evolutionary development were very slow moving indeed. Moreover, they were clearly pointing in one direction: communitarian stability. More recent events, however, have challenged constructivists to specify what had always been granted in very general terms without really spelling out the details – ie. those mechanism which might lead to the *disintegration* of a security community.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Risse has emphasized that "norms of democratic decision-making among equals emphasizing persuasion, compromise, and the non-use of force or coercive power" are crucial in accounting for the persistence of a security community.<sup>10</sup> As long as these norms are not violated, there is little reason to question its solidity. In this regard, recent events in the context of the Iraq war have certainly raised some new questions since "unilateral and even imperial tendencies" in the US' approach have "violate(d) constitutive norms on which the transatlantic community has been built over the years, namely multilateralism and close consultation with allies" (Risse 2003a: 3). If these tendencies were to persist or even worsen, the foundation of the alliance could indeed be endangered. However, these developments should not be dramatized since other trends continue to nourish the vitality of the alliance.

In short, the overall story from a constructivist point of view easily fits in Pierson's quadrant IV as well: A complex set of slow-moving causes tends to solidify a highly integrated security community. A shorter time horizon has only been introduced more recently in the context of the Iraq war. In Pierson's conceptual vocabulary the crisis over Iraq can be compared with a "tornado": it arose rather quickly and it has certainly caused some (short-term) damage. Yet from a constructivist point of view "Iraq" is unlikely to turn out eventually as a "meteorite" – ie. a highly destructive hit out of the blue with effects reaching very far into the future.

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<sup>8</sup> Risse 1996: 371; on the underlying theoretical rationale see also Adler/Barnett 1998a, 1998b.

<sup>9</sup> Constructivists have spent most of their time outlining how and why security communities come about and how and why they persist. In the abstract there was always room for the *collapse* (or "disintegration") of a security community. Yet in contrast to the vast theoretical literature on the origins and persistence of security communities there has been rather little (and quite underspecified) theoretical work on the disintegration of security communities. In comparison to almost twenty pages which Adler/Barnett (1998b) invest in outlining a theoretical framework to examine how security communities may come into existence they discuss "disintegration" in only half a page, basically arguing that "the same forces that 'build up' security communities can 'tear them down'. Therefore, *many* of the same social processes that encourage and serve to reproduce the security community are also associated with its decline" (Adler/Barnett 1998b: 58, emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup>Risse 1996: 369, see also Risse-Kappen 1995: 33.

From a still broader liberal perspective which was based on material as well as ideational factors John Ikenberry had also argued that the links across the Atlantic were more than just a classical alliance. In his reading the post-war order was actually made up of two kinds of settlements: the "containment order" based on countering the Soviet threat via NATO and a more diffuse though equally profound "liberal democratic order" made up of "a wide range of new institutions and relations among the Western industrial democracies, built around economic openness, political reciprocity, and multilateral management of an America-led liberal political system" (Ikenberry 1996: 81). What is more, this order did not come about as the unintended result of a random mix of policies and events. Rather, it was deliberately brought about by a "distinctively American liberal grand strategy" (Ikenberry 2000: 104). In this view the end of the Cold War did not mark a significant break but rather an accentuation of a major trend: at the least it amounted to a "mild hegemonial authority" in the form of a loose informal concert of the strongest powers with the US standing at the top.<sup>11</sup> In a more far-reaching interpretation it was even characterized as a benign imperial system, a "world democratic-capitalist empire" which could actually be called "the American system" due to the preponderance of the US (Ikenberry 2001: 192). This system was thought to be "expansive and highly durable" because of a bundle of powerful causes: American military as well as economic power; the benefits of geography rendering the US into an "offshore" power; the "liberal character of American hegemony" with its inbuilt "mechanisms to make itself less threatening to the rest of world"; and America's "deep alignment with global developmental processes – (...) the 'project of modernity'" (Ikenberry 2001: 193-194).

In comparison with liberal constructivists this argument emphasized two additional factors driving transformation processes: (a) slow moving material causes at the level of the international system and (b) material as well as ideational causes at the level of the most important state of this system, the US. In this sense it mirrored Mearsheimer's argument on the liberal side: Whereas Walt and Waltz on the one hand and Risse and Schimmelfennig on the other focus mostly on the state-transcending *international* level – the latter primarily on the ideational side, the former mostly on the material side – Mearsheimer and Ikenberry added, so to say, "causal speed" by granting a major role in driving the transformation process to one key player in the system: the US. In Mearsheimer's argument the US was driving NATO

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<sup>11</sup>This argument is advanced by Watson 1997: 132, 126. While Watson places developments in a still larger historical context than Ikenberry there are similarities in the arguments advanced although the conceptual language differs. In Watson's description (Watson 1997: 127) the hegemonial authority pursued three aims in particular: the promotion of peace, economic prosperity and Western standards of civilization.

apart as a consequence of new policies resulting from global power shifts and accompanying changes in the incentive structure of the potential hegemon. In Ikenberry's account the US was both well positioned strategically and also predisposed by its own historical experience and identity to guarantee the stability of the liberal order. As a result the American empire appeared to be rather "robust and durable" (Ikenberry 2001: 193). In both cases assumptions about the forces driving US foreign policy turned out to be a crucial factor in the transformation of the transatlantic order.

To sum up, from a bird's eye perspective the scholarly debate about the evolution of the transatlantic order reveals some interesting parallels and fault lines. Two preliminary conclusions stand out: First, there is overwhelming evidence that the most prominent accounts place a heavy emphasis on a long time horizon at the causal level, ie. structural variables carry the main explanatory burden. Most of these accounts easily fit into Pierson's quadrant IV ("global warming"), with a few potential outliers in quadrant III ("earthquake"; realists) and II ("meteorite"; constructivists; see summary in table 2). Moreover, with a few exceptions on both sides (Mearsheimer among realists, Ikenberry among liberals) agency does not figure very prominently in accounting for change – and even if it does, it refers mainly on the biggest player, the US. So the key consensual point up to here is that the analysis of the evolution of the the transatlantic order has to come to grips with rather complex causal processes mostly covering long time horizons. Judgements diverge, however, as to *which* slow-moving causal processes are most important and, even more so, what effects they will yield. This interim result may look quite familiar in terms of the usual kind of "scientific progress" achieved in scholarly debate. However, it is certainly not very satisfactory in terms of a desirable synthesis of knowledge.



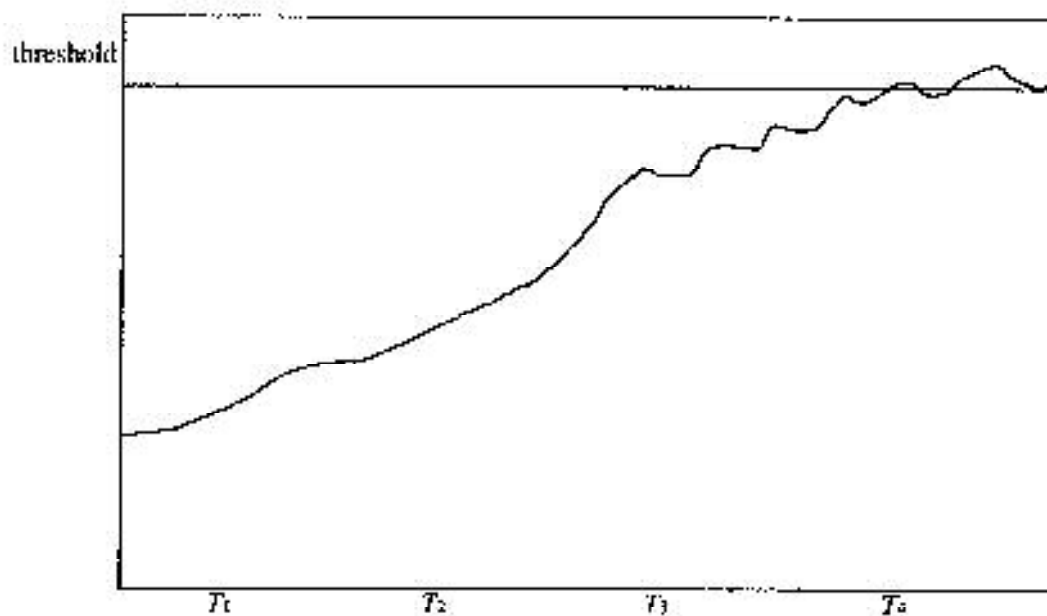
Table 2: Dominant Time Horizons of Typical IR Accounts of the Transatlantic Relationship

		Time Horizon of Outcome	
		<i>Short</i> <i>eg. intra-alliance conflict over Iraq 2002/03</i>	<i>Long</i> <i>(eg. "stable peace"/ "inevitable decline")</i>
Time Horizon of Cause	<i>Short</i> <i>(eg. neoconservative administration/ bad diplomacy)</i>	I (Tornado) ???	II. (Meteorite) Constructivists (?)
	<i>Long</i> <i>(eg. threats/values)</i>	III (Earthquake) Realists (?)	IV (Global Warming) <i>Realists and Constructivists</i>

2.2. .... Driven mainly by Cumulative Causes.

This unsatisfactory state of affairs is not getting better when we examine the study the evolution of the transatlantic order from yet another angle. A third observation thus relates to the *form* of causal accounts which are usually offered. Pierson (2003: 181pp) distinguishes three types of "slow moving causes": cumulative causes, threshold effects and extended causal chains. Cumulative causes point to changes in an independent variable which are continuous but extremely gradual. The potential effects of demographic changes for a country's social welfare system is a case in point. "Globalization" or the spread of democracy as potential causes of changing state policies are other examples. As Pierson points out (2003: 182) cumulative causes of this kind are often treated as fixed in analyses which focus on outcomes with a short time horizon. If the crisis over Iraq, for instance, figures prominently in an attempt to examine the evolution of the transatlantic order, the *potential* effects of globalization or global changes in the spread of democracy will most likely be downgraded or even ignored, thus essentially treating them as fixed. However, it would be more difficult to do so, if we were to conceive of this process of change as a process which covers a longer time frame from the late 1980s until the present. Threshold effects focus on a particular stage in a longer causal process. Cumulative causes or causal chains may play a role here as well, but they don't lead to visible effects unless they reach some critical level triggering major changes. Pierson points to the earthquake example or an avalanche to illustrate the point how

a slow build-up of pressure unleashes rapidly once a critical level has been reached (see figure 1). Iraq and Kosovo may once again help to illustrate the point. In the literature it is well established by now that the war in Kosovo had a catalytic function in pushing ahead with ESDP. Plans had been made for quite some time before but it took the experience of America's European allies (the British in particular) of being sidelined in the conduct of the war by the US to trigger a major new advance with more independent European military capabilities. For some observers Iraq has had the same effect with regard to NATO – basically marking a threshold being crossed which underlined that NATO is "dead".<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 1** A basic threshold model.

The third type of slow-moving causes, causal chains, focuses on a long-term causal process where a sequence of distinct and crucial developments is linked into a tightly coupled chain. Establishing the tightness of the links is the difficult thing here, so it is not surprising that in causal chain arguments agency-related causes usually play a bigger role than structural causes since they appear to be more easily identifiable. A (fictitious) causal chains account of NATO's decline from a realist perspective, for instance, would have to connect vanishing perceptions of a Soviet/Russian threat with increasing internal divisiveness and declining cohesion (e.g. from the Balkans in the early 1990s over Kosovo 1999, Afghanistan 2001 up until Iraq 2002/3). To my knowledge there is little work along such lines (from either realist

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Meyer 2003/2004, Donnelly 2004, and Hulsman 2003.

or non-realist scholarship) which also reflects on the intuitions of the scientific community more broadly that the analysis of the evolution of the transatlantic order is a complex matter indeed.

Once again, there are some interesting parallels here. Irrespective of paradigmatic preference in most causal accounts complexity trumps parsimony. Causal chain arguments are rare. John Mearsheimer's scenario of US troop withdrawal from Europe propelling German rearmament which in turn leads to intense security competition perhaps comes closest to it. In most other accounts, however, cumulative causes and, particularly, threshold effects dominate. Stephen Walt's and Kenneth Waltz's arguments about NATO's decline have already been referred to above. Here the end of the Cold War and the waning of a common threat figure as the key development which pushes the transformation process below the threshold of the causal dynamic originally necessitating an alliance. Yet there are differences. For Walt things still seem to hang in the balance although the pressure is clearly downward. For Waltz the threshold has already been crossed with NATO no longer being an alliance (see above).

Rationalist institutionalist and constructivist accounts have become more guarded in the past two years in comparison with earlier accounts. Yet they too focus (implicitly or explicitly) on some kind of threshold. As Keohane already stated in his work on international institutions in the 1980s, changes in the distribution of power will "create *pressures* on (...) regimes and *weaken* their rules" (Keohane 1989: 168). It remained unclear, however, at what point it could be said that an institution had ceased to exist. At a very general level NATO's collapse was certainly possible, but the theoretical arguments developed basically explained why it was unlikely that some abstract threshold might be crossed (cf. Wallander/Keohane 1999). Only recently did Keohane hint at a complex set of "divergences of interests, values and social structures" between Europe and the US which amounted to a "widening Euro-American breach" and which was now said to be so significant that Europe and America might in the medium term even "favour a parting of ways" (Keohane 2002b: 760, 761). Yet it remained unclear once again when this implicit threshold would actually have been crossed. The same applies to arguments put forth by Risse and Ikenberry. The continuous violation of constitutive norms such as multilateralism and consultation would represent such a threshold from a constructivist security community perspective (Risse 2003a). In Ikenberry's interpretation (Ikenberry 2002: 49-55) America's unexpected turn to an aggressive strategy in

pursuit of a unipolar world could have had similar effects if it had turned out to be a lasting change.

Irrespective of the fact that not all of these statements imply a *specific* future path (ie. that a rather broad range of outcomes is possible for perspectives such as Risse's or Ikenberry's) these examples illustrate the key challenge in explanations focusing on threshold effects: the difficulty to identify observables which enable us to argue that something *qualitatively different* separates two distinct phases – a phase in which NATO can still be said to be working as an alliance from a phase when it has ceased to do so; or a phase in which a security community is said to be stable compared to a phase where it has disintegrated. This is the same problem of identifying thresholds which Karl Deutsch faced when he invented the "security communities" concept. In discussing the issue of how he and his collaborators distinguished between "integration" and "non-integration" Deutsch wrote that the achievement of a security community would have to involve "something like the crossing of a threshold" (Deutsch 1957: 32). The problem was that "(s)omewhat contrary to our expectation (...) some of our cases taught us that integration may involve a fairly broad zone of transition rather than a narrow threshold; that states may cross and recross this threshold or zone of transition several times in their relations with each other; and that they might spend decades or generations wavering uncertainly within it" (Deutsch 1957: 33).

If we are focusing our attention on a *process outcome* – such as the evolution of the transatlantic order, Deutsch's formation of a "security community", Waltz's "disappearance" of an alliance or Keohane's "parting of ways" of actors thus far heavily linked in a tight institutional network – we are necessarily hard pressed to identify thresholds even if we may not be able to put these in precise terms similar to point predictions. Yet identifying thresholds is precisely *not* what IR research on NATO / the transatlantic order has been good at in the past. The preferred self-location of realists, institutionalists, and constructivists in Pierson's quadrant IV implied that they had a theoretical predisposition in favour of cumulative or incremental causes where change in a causal variable is continuous but extremely gradual (see table 3).

Table 3: Time Horizons of Different Causal Accounts  
(cf. Pierson 2003: 192)

		TIME HORIZON OF OUTCOME	
		<i>Short</i>	<i>Long</i>
TIME HORIZON OF CAUSE	<i>Short</i>	I	II Cumulative Effects
	<i>Long</i>	III Thresholds; Causal Chains	IV Cumulative Causes

This is another way of saying that scholars from all paradigmatic traditions are focusing mostly on a process outcome which unfolds somewhere at time  $t_4$  in figure 1 (see above). The problem is that our theoretical predispositions would direct us at causes which are mostly located at times  $t_1 - t_4$  or at times  $t_1 - t_3$  in figure 2.<sup>13</sup>

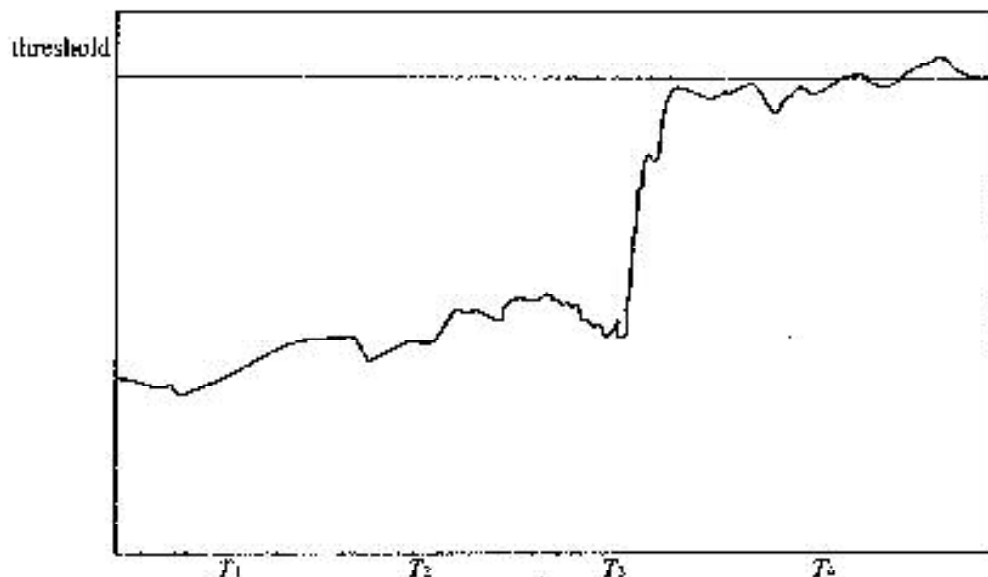


Figure 2 A threshold model with a structural cause.

<sup>13</sup> The former tends to be a model which could be shared by both realists and liberals; the latter is a model which depicts a realist story emphasizing the structural cause "disappearance of Soviet threat" at time  $t_3$ .

Yet irrespective of what type of cause we were to prefer, it would be very difficult to arrive at a consensual conclusion since it is quite likely that the most fitting description of the evolution of the transatlantic order would be one resembling Karl Deutsch's point about a "fairly broad zone of transition" in which "states may cross and recross this threshold or zone of transition several times in their relations with each other; and that they might spend decades or generations wavering uncertainly within it." Unless the threshold is crossed *decisively* in either direction, this indeterminacy will enable both realists and liberals/constructivists to stick with their basic narrative.

### **3. Conclusions: Linking Micro and Macro in the Study of the Evolving Transatlantic Order**

Two concepts figure prominently in the conceptual framework of this volume: (political) conflict and crisis. The project as a whole tries to come to grips with the question whether the transatlantic order finds itself on a trajectory that is more aptly described in terms of conflict or in terms of crisis (see introductory chapter by Ikenberry). The conflict trajectory would yield one of two outcomes: resolution within the existing rules and institutions or escalation to a crisis stage defined by one or more of three characteristics: (a) fundamental disagreement over what at least one side believes to be a core interest; (b) institutional breakdown as far rules and norms is concerned; (c) a breakdown in a sense of community. A crisis is conceptualized as leading to three possible outcomes: breakdown, transformation (in the sense of an intentional renegotiation of the institutional framework leading to a new set of mutually satisfactory arrangements), and adaptation (as an intended or unintended outcome between breakdown and transformation).

In contrast to most of the other contributions to this volume the main purpose of this chapter has not been to address the question whether or not the transatlantic order is on a conflict trajectory or a crisis trajectory (and if the latter: which outcome is more likely) in a *substantive* fashion. The main purpose has been to reflect on how International Relations has addressed this question in the past – and what we may conclude from those practices in addressing the current situation in which the transatlantic order finds itself. From a bird's eye perspective the disciplinary discourse since the early 1990s appears to be rather disillusioning.

A very simplified summary would go something like this: As a discipline we have "known" since the mid-1990s (at the latest) that the transatlantic order was *both* doomed to collapse *and* destined to persist. Some of the most highly respected scholars from the discipline have come out with rather strong statements as to what we know. Yet the way in which our theoretical heritage has been put to fruition seemed to leave only two mutually exclusive and equally teleological futures for the transatlantic order. At the same time the divisiveness was hardly justified given the inconclusiveness which resulted when theoretical arguments were related to empirical observations (and vice versa). Irrespective of paradigmatic preference (and arguments to the converse notwithstanding), the *structure* of the causal accounts generally advanced by all sides was always quite complex with regard to both a slow moving outcome (such as a *disappearing* "alliance"; a *persisting* "security management institution"; or a *stable* "security community") and slow moving (mostly cumulative) causes (such as "declining threat", "common values" etc.). In other words, the determination attached to some of the bold predictions about inevitable decline or everlasting stability was seldom accompanied by a sufficiently precise delineation of thresholds, causal mechanisms or potentially falsifying indicators.

One of the possible explanations for this situation has to do with the disciplinary preference for structural explanations presumably more suited to theory building and an accompanying neglect of the implications of incorporating time and agency in accounting for the evolution of the transatlantic order. As Ronald Aminzade (1992: 457) put it with regard to macro-sociological studies more broadly, the focus on "large-scale structures and long-term processes has often discouraged close attention to temporally connected events. (...) The concern is often with identifying key structural variables to incorporate into causal models of outcomes, not with the temporal characteristics of events or the way in which actors in a particular event or process understand and experience the temporal flow of events. By aggregating the attributes of individuals or organizations at given points in time into seemingly enduring variables that are correlated with outcomes, sociologists divorce actors from actions and fail to acknowledge the causal power of connections among events." Timeless (structural) concepts such as threat, value, identity or institution dominate at the causal level often reducing processes to mere conditions. And even if a dynamic component is introduced with qualifications such as "*diminishing*" threats we are often left guessing as to the duration and pace associated with these qualifications.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the concepts "duration" and "pace" see Aminzade 1992: 459-462.

One of the possible solutions to this structural bias in IR theorizing is to move from the rather abstract level of structural analysis to theoretically structured stories explicating trajectories such as the two ones broadly sketched at the outset of this project. In trying to account for evolutionary processes along the trajectories of either conflict or crisis one has to specify how seemingly timeless "deep structure" variables such as threats, common values or institutional inertia relate to sequences of actions and events which produce the stipulated outcomes (ie. "breakdown", "transformation" or "adaptation" in a "crisis" situation). For instance, a realist account of a crisis trajectory potentially leading to breakdown would have to specify how shifts in power and perceptions of threat leave traces in the beliefs and actions of relevant actors. It would, in other words, have to link slow-moving causal process variables at the structural level to concrete actions and events in the flow of time in terms of a theoretically informed narrative. The difficulty, of course, is that in these types of accounts time and historical processes would have to be taken seriously in a theoretical sense. Analysts would have to construct causal arguments which identify "beginnings" (or "key choices" in path dependency arguments) if a certain path is presumably being followed; they would have to specify duration and pace of a certain sequence of actions and/or events; they would also have to incorporate contingency in a systematic manner, including the possibility for reversible trajectories (cf. Aminzade 1992: 462-467).

Taking this systematic link between the micro level and the macro level of theoretically informed accounts of the transatlantic order's transformation more seriously would have several benefits. First, it would put academic debate about a key process in international politics on a more empirically informed basis thereby taking out some of the heat of a paradigmatically charged debate. Secondly, to the extent that empirical data would be incorporated systematically into our accounts it would increase the falsifiability of theoretical arguments which in turn would most likely increase the pressure to gravitate towards the center along the spectrum of potential explanations ranging from *inevitable decline* to *predestined stability*. Third, this gravitational pull would also increase the likelihood of conceptual innovation. For instance, in contrast to a rough "balancing"-versus-"bandwaggoning" dichotomy which dominated the (intra-) realist debate in the 1980s new concepts such as "soft balancing" or "barking" have been suggested recently to account for (potentially) new dynamics driving the evolution of the transatlantic order – concepts which



may be compatible with theorizing in a liberal/constructivist line of thought as well.<sup>15</sup> Conceptual innovation such as these examples would thus help to better understand as to *what kind* of evolutionary (or revolutionary) change the transatlantic order may be going through beyond a dichotomous "inevitable decline"-versus-"predestined stability" projection. It may thus also help us to fill the conceptual vacuum of an adaptation scenario between the extremes of breakdown and transformation (here defined in terms of cooperative institutional change). Finally, the systematic theoretical linkage between the micro level and the macro level would also be useful from a policy point of view. In specifying competing causal arguments about potential paths to breakdown or (successful) transformation scholars would offer a point of entrance for informed political deliberation, including the identification of potential intervention points.

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<sup>15</sup> On "soft balancing" see Pape 2003 and Schimmelfennig 2003; on "barking" see Brown 2004.

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