

Why NATO Endures. By Wallace J. Thies. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 321 pages \$90.00.
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Today NATO is supposed to be in crisis due to its divisions over the contending perception of Russia and the organization's inability to do anything for Georgia in 2008. The Transatlantic Alliance is regularly described as being torn by internal disagreements, by a refusal to provide sufficient support to the United States in Afghanistan, etc. To be certain, these are all accurate signs of challenges within the alliance and should not be minimized. But, in fact, as Wallace Thies points out, such predictions of crisis have a long and inaccurate pedigree going back 40 or 60 years. Despite these constant warnings of crisis or NATO's demise, as Galileo might have commented, "It still moves."

NATO's continued existence and presumed utility to its members, who have the right to leave at any time, seem to be a mystery, something that, according to supposedly the iron laws of the international relations, should not occur. In this masterful and excellently written account, Thies provides an answer to the mystery. He points out that NATO differs from every other alliance before 1939 and many since by being not just a military-political alliance as the others were, but also a community of values, even when members have contrary points-of-views. Even in the 1950s, there were significant differences regarding the issue we today call burden-sharing or assessments related to the power of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the alliance kept moving forward, and its power of attraction grew markedly following the events of 1989 despite 30 years of predictions of imminent demise.

None of this is to say that NATO is immune to the challenges that caused pre-World War II alliances or the Grand Alliance to fail. Rather, it is the nature of NATO and the bargaining that lies at its heart and forces the alliance to confront these challenges more or less openly with whatever degree of effectiveness the varying positions bring to the process, and ultimately overcome them. Indeed, it is this process of openly dealing with difficult challenges that has led pundits to regularly intone obituaries for NATO. Specifically, Thies cites three phenomena: the distribution of capabilities within the alliance and the international system as a whole; the changing nature of contemporary war; and the presence or absence of divisive ideologies as factors that can explain why NATO's cohesion, though challenged, has persisted.

This analysis is persuasive even if the current condition of the alliance appears to be one of worsening cohesion, something the author believes is more likely to occur in a multipolar international system, which is where we are apparently headed. But beyond this there are important lessons. It is arguable that since NATO's founding, its enemies have doubted the alliance's ability to endure as a cohesive unit, precisely because they saw it and still view it as nothing more than an old-fashioned military-political alliance. What Thies highlights and what NATO argues quite regularly is that NATO's enemies are chronically unable to understand the alliance in any terms other than the realpolitik of the past that NATO has both implicitly and explicitly surmounted. Russia and the Soviet Union before it, as well as many critics who believe now or in the past that NATO's doom is imminent, cannot conceive of the alliance in terms of interests other than those defined in terms of power. They deride the notion of a genuine community representing mutual values and cannot conceive that such a group has inner strength or sticking power.

This train of thought, of course, is part of why to the eyes of these critics NATO can be at the same time threatening and moribund, or moribund if not threatening. NATO certainly has repeated challenges, but they are problems that would have torn asunder any pre-1939 alliances. Thies admittedly points out that no member has exercised the option of leaving NATO despite all its problems. To be certain, NATO may yet fall apart or there may be other explanations to supplant Thies's analysis. But until such time, this excellent book is a superb and required guide for anyone interested in European security and the mysterious persistence of NATO. After reading this book the reader will realize that, in fact, there is no mystery, only our inability to make sense of what is actually happening before our eyes.