Book Review:

Ryan C. Hendrickson, *Diplomacy and War at NATO. The Secretary General and Military Action after the Cold War* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006)

By Anthony Lawrence

In response to those who criticise the alliance for failing to intervene in international crises – Darfur is a recent example – its defenders will often point out that NATO is not a free agent with independent authority, but a collection of member states. As such, it can only act with the unanimous consent of those members. While this is certainly true at one level, the reality is somewhat more complex. NATO’s twenty six member states are equal, but some are more equal than others and can more readily persuade allies towards consensus over actions they favour. Furthermore, in addition to national delegations, the alliance’s decision forming apparatus includes a permanent civilian and military staff that could, in theory at least, substantially influence policy. In *Diplomacy and War at NATO*, Ryan Hendrickson, Associate Professor of Political Science at Eastern Illinois University, looks at part of this question by considering the extent to which NATO’s post-Cold war Secretary Generals have been able to shape and lead one aspect of alliance policy – decisions over the use of military force. He shows that while these individuals have been unable or unwilling to directly change alliance policy over such decisions, they have nonetheless occasionally played instrumental parts in shaping consensus, and that their willingness to seize the few leadership opportunities presented to them has ensured that the role of the Secretary General has evolved along with that of the alliance.

Hendrickson begins his study with a short review of the role of NATO’s first six Secretary Generals, Lord Ismay, Paul-Henri Spaak, Dirk Stikker, Manlio Brosio, Joseph Luns and Lord Carrington, who held office during the Cold War. Their role in the alliance seems to have been marginal and while the factors limiting their freedom of action during this period –

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strong member interests, institutional checks, powerful SACEURs - may still exist today, the key restraint on them was that NATO’s Cold War mission was simply not one that demanded dynamic leadership. While the Cold War Secretary Generals were all experienced, competent and confident diplomats, the stability of Cold War planning meant that they were rarely called upon to exercise leadership roles. A large proportion of their time was instead devoted to more mundane managerial tasks, such as bringing order to the “milling mob”, as Lord Ismay characterised a NATO meeting from the alliance’s earliest days, before the position of Secretary General was created.

But the end of the Cold War brought changes to NATO’s role, and Hendrickson sets out to explore the new leadership opportunities offered by the office of the Secretary General. These opportunities, and the Secretary Generals’ responses to them, are at the heart of his book. His approach is to build case studies around “use-of-force” decisions - occasions when the alliance, and its Secretary General, faced the question of whether and how to use military force. These, he argues, are especially worthy of study as they are particularly difficult political and moral decisions. Although this approach is unlikely to give a comprehensive picture of the Secretary General’s leadership - and, in fairness, Hendrickson does not hesitate to point out the limitations of his study - his decision to focus on these use-of-force occasions is probably a sensible one; not least because of the greater volume of source material available. One of the great strengths of Hendrickson’s work is that it includes material from a wealth of often candid interviews with key players at NATO and capitals, providing fascinating accounts of the behind-closed-doors workings of the North Atlantic Council. Nonetheless, the nature of the Secretary General’s position and the nature of the alliance itself mean that there is unlikely to be enough data to allow for a comprehensive assessment of the question at hand. It is probably no coincidence that the book’s most detailed account - that of NATO’s military support to Turkey before the Iraq war - is not only the most recent event, but also one that took place in the context of a major, and very public, crisis in the transatlantic relationship.

Hendrickson’s book, then, includes separate chapters on use-of-force decisions that concerned each of the first four post-Cold War Secretary Generals. The chapter on Manfred Worner, who held the position of
Secretary General from 1988 to 1994, deals with his role during the
development of the crisis in Bosnia that would eventually lead to
NATO’s first military action. The chapter on Willy Claes (1994-1995) is
concerned with NATO’s bombing of the Bosnian Serbs in 1995, while
the chapter on Javier Solana (1995-1999) focuses on NATO’s seventy-
eight day bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999. Finally, the
chapter on Lord George Robertson (1999-2003) deals with his
management of NATO as it considered defensive measures for Turkey
prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

In each case, Hendrickson studies the actions of the Secretary General in
three areas. At the systemic level, he looks at international conditions at
the time of the decision and the extent to which these influenced, and
could be influenced by, the Secretary General. At the organisational level,
he examines each Secretary General’s handling of the North Atlantic
Council. As NATO’s primary decision making committee, chaired by the
Secretary General, this might be expected to be the forum in which he
could most obviously lead the alliance. Finally at the level of civil-military
relations, Hendrickson considers the relationship between each Secretary
General and the respective SACEUR.

NATO’s adaptation has been studied from such a wide range of angles,
and in such great depth, that it is sometimes difficult to imagine there is
anything left to be said. It is to Hendrickson’s credit that he has managed
not only to find a new theme, but also to add much to the body of
academic understanding of post-Cold War NATO. His case studies offer
a valuable and fascinating insight into NATO’s inner workings and the
styles and personalities of its post-Cold War Secretary Generals. His
uncomplicated, but insightful accounts bring to life the practice of
multinational diplomacy and the business of the North Atlantic Council.
In the chapter on George Robertson, for example, he paints a vivid
picture of the transatlantic crisis as seen from within the transatlantic
community’s principal multinational forum and describes Robertson’s
diplomatic gambles in invoking the alliance’s silence procedure and using
the Defence Planning Committee (in which France does not participate)
as a decision making body. Perhaps his most striking account, though,
concerns Manfred Worner’s April 1994 appearance at the North Atlantic
Council, defying medical advice and leaving his sick bed to lobby
passionately for a more active alliance policy over Gozadze. The story is
all the more poignant as Worner was to die in office a few months later, without seeing NATO act. But Hendrickson is surely correct in his judgement that Worner’s keen advocacy for NATO action, and the courage he displayed in making his case in person despite his illness, were key factors in steering the alliance towards action and, furthermore, in shaping the role of the Secretary General to the benefit of his successors.

From Hendrickson’s evidence, Worner comes across in many ways as the strongest of NATO’s post-Cold War Secretary Generals. His personal determination and skills are in no doubt, but he also appears to have recognised – and seized – the opportunities the changing security situation offered his office: more than the other three, he viewed the Secretary General position as an independent force for action within the alliance. He is also notable for his willingness to challenge the US and, especially, the Powell doctrine. Hendrickson quotes him from September 1993, stating that “the purpose of intervention is not necessarily to win a war, but to influence the behaviour of the party concerned. We need to have limited military options for limited political and military objectives. It is wrong to think only in categories of all or nothing.” By contrast, the other post-Cold War Secretary Generals usually preferred to follow the US line.

What conclusions can be drawn from Hendrickson’s case studies? He demonstrates that the role of the Secretary General has certainly grown in the post-Cold War period and that the personalities and actions of successive Secretary Generals have been important in shaping that role. The Secretary General is clearly an important component in consensus building at NATO through his management of the North Atlantic Council – both in the meeting room and in the corridors of NATO headquarters and capitals – and a key interface with the alliance’s military structures. There is much he can do to lead the alliance at the organisational level and at the level of civil-military relations.

But at the systemic level, the level that counts above all, it is clear that more often than not, the Secretary General remains NATO’s servant, rather than its leader. The constraints identified by Hendrickson are simply too great to allow even the strongest of Secretary Generals to unduly influence alliance policy – as they themselves have recognised: for example, both Willy Claes and George Robertson waited until a broad,
US-led consensus existed outside the North Atlantic Council before they tried to approach the questions of what to do in Bosnia and Turkey within it. Hendrickson himself notes that it is difficult to correlate policy changes with the efforts even of NATO’s most active post-Cold War Secretary General, Manfred Worner, and concludes that “NATO’s member states, especially the United States, still largely define the parameters for NATO’s engagement in international security affairs.”

That the member states steer the alliance is as it should be, and that the larger states have heavier hands on the wheel is as it will be. On the evidence of these case studies at least, NATO’s Secretary Generals have mostly tended to favour alliance military action - who, after all, would want to manage a team that never plays? But NATO’s use-of-force decisions have not all been without controversy. When General Michael Ryan first requested permission to fire Tomahawk missiles during Operation Deliberate Force, for example, Willy Claes chose not to refer the request to the North Atlantic Council, or even to contact key allied ambassadors. The strikes, authorised in effect by Claes himself, were a controversial escalation of NATO’s military campaign. While most analysts today regard them as instrumental in ending the war, at the time they were a serious concern to many capitals and to NATO ambassadors who were only able to express their opposition after the event. No doubt there is some dented ambassadorial pride to be subtracted from this picture, but the point remains that using Tomahawks was not necessarily the “right” decision in the wider context of alliance politics. While Hendrickson’s study is strong at showing where Secretary Generals have been influential in advancing use-of-force decisions, it is less strong at assessing whether these were “good” decisions, and therefore whether the Secretary General’s leadership can be judged good or bad (as opposed to simply effective in spurring the alliance towards military action).

From the perspective of leadership studies, it is hard to draw any conclusions about the ingredients of effective Secretary Generalship. Hendrickson’s case studies illustrate very different men with very different styles, but with effective leadership behaviours ranging from Worner’s willingness to advocate his own views and to challenge the US, through Claes’s (perhaps theatrical) short temper and Solana’s occasional use of his personal and extensive diplomatic network to bypass ambassadors at NATO, to Robertson’s injection of self-deprecating
humour into tense NAC meetings. It is clear, however, that they were all confident and competent individuals who shared a determination to see the alliance succeed in difficult circumstances. None can be regarded in any sense as weak leaders, although, given the sometimes bizarre diplomatic circus that leads to their appointment – which Hendrickson documents in each case – perhaps NATO has simply been fortunate in this respect.

So is there an alliance that is in some way independent of its member states, of which the Secretary General is the most visible representative and advocate? The answer would seem to be “yes” only when it suits those member states, and in particular the United States. In the chapter on Solana, for example, Hendrickson argues that the NAC was willing to use him as its lead voice in Belgrade at least in part because the Clinton Administration wished to avoid the accusation that it was trying to divert attention away from the impeachment proceedings against the President. Fortuitously, several European states were also happy to see the focus of decision making shifted from them to NATO, thus heading off domestic criticism over the bombing of Kosovo. But the Secretary General needs to be complicit in this arrangement as well – the intense media scrutiny of Willy Claes’s entanglement in a Belgian bribery scandal seems to be one factor behind his unwillingness to advocate – in public at least – NATO action in Bosnia. In the alliance context too, it seems, that all politics is local.