

NATO and the collective securitisation of COVID-19: discourse analysis of the construction of a threat.

This article seeks to analyse NATO's role as a security actor during the COVID-19 pandemic by studying how the organisation paved the securitising discourse constructing the COVID-19 pandemic as an existential threat between March and May 2020. We correspondingly apply collective securitisation theory in conjunction with discourse analysis of a selection of NATO statements. This enabled observations of an attempt to enlarge NATO's role in the International System, comprising matters beyond *high politics* and culminating in actions including the coordination of rescue missions for civilians and the usage of scientific means to aid in responding to the pandemic.

KEYWORDS: NATO, COVID-19; collective securitisation; discourse analysis.

A NATO e a securitização coletiva da Covid-19: análise do discurso da construção de uma ameaça.

O presente artigo procura analisar o papel da NATO como ator de segurança durante a pandemia de Covid-19, ao estudar a forma como a organização desenvolveu o seu discurso securitizador, construindo a pandemia como uma ameaça existencial entre os meses de março e maio de 2020. Por conseguinte, aplicámos a abordagem teórica da securitização coletiva, em conjunto com a análise do discurso, a uma seleção de declarações da NATO. Tal permitiu observar uma tentativa de alargamento do papel da organização no sistema internacional, abrangendo temas que vão para além das *high politics*, culminando em ações como a coordenação de missões de resgate de civis e a utilização de meios científicos para auxiliar na resposta à pandemia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: NATO; Covid-19; securitização coletiva; análise do discurso.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the world faced a wave of instability caused by the worst public health crisis of the last hundred years, ever since the Spanish flu of 1918. Its consequences – which spanned the sanitary, social, economic and political levels – could not have been predicted, especially in its early stages when the seriousness of COVID-19 infection had not yet been fully understood. Due to their highly interdependent nature, global markets, especially those involved in medical equipment production, were rapidly impacted by COVID-19's consequences. The expected wave of international cooperation was quickly submerged beneath a nationalist approach, which reflected in the neglect of international partnerships within International Organisations (IO), such as the European Union (EU), the World Health Organisation (WHO), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Papageorgiou and Melo, 2020).

The NATO case is specifically noteworthy as threats against health do not represent a priority on the organisation's agenda. Even though this matter had featured in the 2010 Strategic Concept, it did not gain any priority in comparison with other *high politics* related matters. Although the recent literature recognises the resilient role of the organisation, as well as its development through adapting its mechanisms (Baciu, 2021; Iliev and Taneski, 2021; Jovic-Lazic, 2021; Milani, 2020; Tardy, 2020; Woods et al., 2020), we still denote a lack of understanding as regards NATO's discourse as a health security actor in times of pandemics.

This article aims to delve into NATO's initial discourse to understand the "different elements of the IO's discourse and how they help to maintain a good

equilibrium between mandate limitations and genuine need on the ground” (Baciu, 2021, p. 279). Such a challenge stems from a literature review in which Baciu sets out this future research avenue through pointing out how research on the way security IO legitimise their discourse during health crises is under-developed when compared to other studies focused on understanding the institutional developments resulting from organisational responses. The literature, thus, lacks attention to how a security IO performs its role as part of the multilateral response to health threats.

To understand the circumstances that led NATO into this securitising actor role during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article focuses on *how NATO paved the way for the securitising discourse constructing the COVID-19 pandemic as an existential threat between March and May 2020*. We draw on collective securitisation theory to understand how NATO built its pandemic discourse strategy and how it adapted and improved its resilience to threats outside of its traditional scope. In this vein, the collective securitisation model helps in identifying, understanding, and justifying changes in the inner purposes of security IO when facing non-traditional threats while exploring the process through which the organisation is empowered and legitimised by its member states.

Recourse to discourse analysis thus becomes imperative for studying the official statements released by NATO between March and May 2020 as these primary discourses identify and structure the discourse patterns applied by NATO to characterise and define disruptive events as threats or risks. Terms such as *unprecedented crisis*, *global pandemic*, and *international crisis* contributed to devising a framework through which the coronavirus could be seen as an *invisible enemy* threatening *all of us*. Developing a referent object’s identity, under threat and therefore having to adapt and stand up for its survival, is a constant in NATO’s discourse, highlighting its own value as well as seeking legitimisation and empowerment from its member states to act by appealing to the values of cooperation, coordination, and resilience.

Notwithstanding, it may be argued that COVID-19 was securitised by association (Leonard and Kaunert, 2022) with and through disinformation which, according to Stoltenberg (2020f), can “divide us” and “weaken our unity”. Hence, the threat was not merely perceived as a matter external to the organisation but also as an internal weakness.

This article is divided into four sections in addition to its introduction and conclusion: the first presents collective securitisation theory that guides this study; the second develops our discourse analysis approach before the third contextualises the international response against COVID-19; and the last consists of discourse analysis of NATO’s outputs between March and May 2020, through which we attempt to comprehend how the organisation’s discourse

shaped the securitising move constructing the COVID-19 pandemic as an existential threat.

COLLECTIVE SECURITISATION THEORY

Collective securitisation theory, despite its proximity to the securitisation theory influenced by the Copenhagen School (cs), emerged as an explanation for the gaps in the traditional streams of Security Theory: state-centrism, a lack of consideration for discourse in the process of threat construction, and underestimating the audience's role (Sperling and Webber, 2017). Although, traditionally, security governance represents the typical approach to studying phenomena such as that analysed in this article, which involves a security IO, security governance does not provide answers for how actors define threats or, once determined, translate them into political answers, such as reinforcing the development of a given policy, particularly in times of crisis (Sperling and Webber, 2019).

Collective securitisation approaches security as a practice and way of structuring a problem in which a threat emerges due to its discursive formulation by an authority that thereby describes and defines it while drawing attention to the actions that should therefore be taken. Thus, the social construction of a threat does not just derive from its nature, but also from political choices: its selection and presentation to a target-audience, which designates a securitising move (Balzacq, 2011, 2015). According to the traditional approach to securitisation, the securitising actor identifies the threat, attributes it a special status of urgency through a discursive act, and receives from its audience the legitimacy to execute urgent and exceptional measures. In collective securitisation, the securitising actor is required to be embedded in an environment in which it acts alongside other empowered actors with their own security imperatives.

Collective securitisation varies in terms of its dimensions: on the one hand, a state or a small group of states can advocate for attention towards a given security issue within an IO. In doing so, it/they may obtain the support of other member states and, as a result, empower the organisation to adopt policies and exceptional or routine practices to respond to the constructed threat. Notwithstanding this, there is also the scope for a state's actorness being anchored in the aggregate function, meaning the IO experiences enough autonomy to act independently of its member states (Sperling and Webber, 2019).

For securitising actors to determine their selection of threats, Sperling and Webber (2019) point to the politics of exception and the politics of routine. The former resembles cs, the classical approach to securitisation theory, which

TABLE 1
Roles in securitisation processes

Elements	Role
Securitising actor	Actors are empirically, rather than theoretically, determined. There is no exploration of structure and agency. Actorness is the deductible property of a discursive act in which collective securitisation encounters the need for delegation, thereby differentiated from the concepts of field and assemblage.
Referent Object	Objects are discursively framed as having their survival threatened. Such objects may be portrayed as individuals, groups, objects, institutions or values. Referent objects result from developing an institutional or individual discourse, emerging from a political forum with the capacity to wield influence.
Audience	Collective securitisation understands audiences as public opinion, IOs, the international public, transnational intellectuals, political elites and/or state representatives. To carry out a successful securitisation process, the audience's acceptance through recursive interaction is necessary to legitimising the extraordinary measures then to be taken by the organisation.
Politics	A situation defined by the implementation and mobilisation of practices characterised by their emergency or routine status.

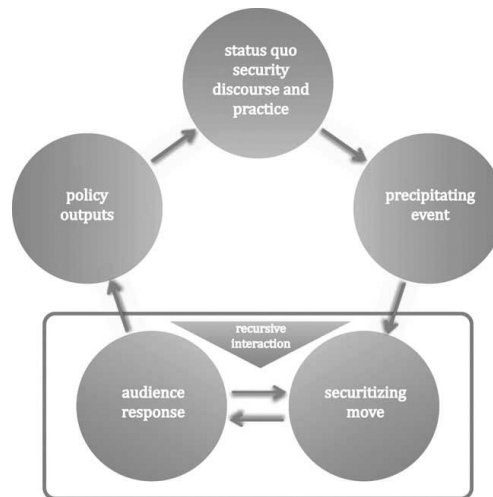
Source: own elaboration.

focuses on first-order threats (stemming from direct causes), such as terrorist attacks. In turn, the latter is more concerned about managing second-order risks (the requirements for their occurrence), such as transnational threats, in which security is observed as a cumulative quality rather than an emergency. These authors furthermore argue that security emerges not from the consequences of circumstances; instead, an actor with political power creates such circumstances through a discursive act, which describes, defines, and calls for an audience's legitimisation of the proposed measures.

Floyd (2019) adds to the notion of constructing threats at the normative level according to which one must question whether securitisation can be morally justified. Any answer must focus on managing proportionality: the securitising actor must show sincere intentions and look for reasonableness when characterising the cause. Based on the just war theory, Floyd (2019, p. 393) entitles this process as just securitisation, which adheres to three key points: just initiation securitisation, just conduct during securitisation, and just termination securitisation.

Furthermore, Floyd (2019) establishes a distinction around the causes of a threat, understood as either agent-caused or agent-lacking. Agent-caused threats differ from agent-lacking causes due to the existence of a perpetrator. They can be subcategorised into two distinct groups: threats caused by the agent due to forgetfulness, when there is no knowledge of the phenomena, but the

FIGURE 1
Collective securitisation model



Source: Sperling and Webber (2017)

agent nevertheless still contributes to the threat growing; and threats caused by the agent due to negligence, when there is knowledge of the phenomenon, yet the agent continues adopting practices that contribute to the threat growing. Threats can also be existential when their nature directly threatens the referent object's existence, making its construction through discourse unnecessary (Balzacq, 2011).

This distinction holds relevance to this study as the differences between types of threats produce consequences for the securitisation process. Constructing discourses and their acceptance depend on the audience's understanding of the threat, making it more efficient to characterise objective threats – which exist within a community and are constantly affecting its members – than constructing abstract threats to people. Examples of both types are, respectively, terrorism, which directly and immediately affects its targets, causing reactions of urgency; and climate change, with its effects not immediate and susceptible to discursive construction as caused by other phenomena (Bengtsson and Rhinard, 2019; Balzacq, 2011).

Based on this contextualisation, we may correspondingly depict the collective securitisation model (Figure 1) with the following propositions: reinforcement of exception and routine logic, overlap of the securitising actor and referent object (Table 1), and emphasising the recursive interaction and demonstration of securitisation in addition to the discursive act (Lucarelli, 2019). This model abides by six stages (Sperling and Webber, 2017, 2019): first,

we witness a *status quo* regarding perceptions of the threat and the respective security discourse, which is followed by a second stage in which an event, or cascade of events, threatens the *status quo*.

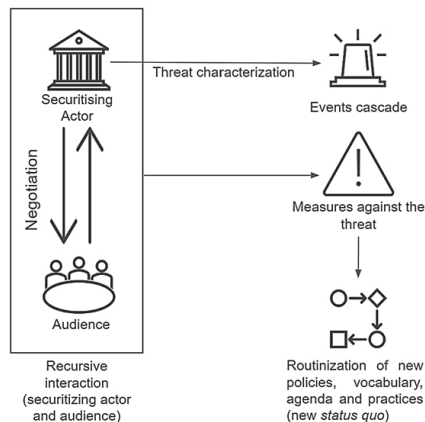
Third, the audience enacts the securitising movement; and fourth, the audience either accepts or denies it. These two stages represent the recursive interaction dynamic during which there is repeated negotiation and substantial exchanges of procedures between the securitising actor and its audience – both with the same level of legitimacy inside of the IO – about the content and the answer required for the threat as well as about the policies that would comprise a proportional response for its mitigation (Figure 2). This process produces critical implications for the collective securitisation model: through this, we can explain why issues do or do not get securitised, how the IO interacts through and amongst its members, and what legitimacy (expertise or authority) is attributed to the organisation by its member states (Lucarelli, 2019).

The fifth stage incorporates the formulation and execution of policies against the threat, culminating in the sixth and final phase in which new policies, strategies, vocabulary, agendas and practices may be routinised into the organisation's structure (Sperling and Webber, 2017, 2019). This concept of routinisation was put forward by Buzan, Weaver and Wilde (1998), who state that:

Securitization can be either *ad hoc* or institutionalised. If a given type of threat is persistent or recurrent, it is no surprise to find that the response and sense of urgency become institutionalised (Buzan et al, 1998, p. 27).

FIGURE 2

Operationalization of the collective securitisation model



Source: own elaboration

Therefore, this serves as a basis for future securitisation processes in which threats can be understood as single events but with their consequences extending over time and potentially resulting in similar events. Simultaneously, the threat discourse should occur hand in hand with the ongoing event, which can be exemplified by terrorist attacks developing from surprise threats to scale threats.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN SECURITISATION THEORY

Although discourse analysis is generally perceived as a method, it nevertheless implies a methodology that integrates a set of assumptions about language as a practice with a constructive effect. Müller's (2011) work, developed through Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (Table 2) of discourse analysis, divides it into a three-dimensional approach: the context of analysis – proximate context and distal context –, analytic form of analysis – interpretative-explanatory and post-/structuralist –, and political stance of analysis – involved or detached. Such dimensions may furthermore be aggregated into a set of approaches to discourse analysis, specifically Critical Discourse Analysis, meso-level analysis, parallels with narrative analysis as well as discursive hegemonic strategies, conceptual metaphor theory, and representational strategies (Osisanwo, 2022; Olimat, 2020; Santos, 2018; Müller, 2011).

Our research subscribes to the conceptualisation of discourse analysis as a significant methodological approach for applying to securitisation rooted in Buzan et al. (1998), not only embedded in the speech act but also as a practice or policy (Ganz, 2024). Authors such as Ganz (2024) have added other dimensions to studying speech acts in securitisation, including emotions. Through the author's work on Azerbaijan, securitisation has prompted militarisation, consolidated patronage, suppressed the rights of energy workers, and shrank land management and ownership, all through the emotion of pride becoming ingrained in energy infrastructures.

Furthermore, according to Olimat (2020, p. 17), discourse as language should account for a form of social practice with the capacity for "influencing, persuading, and shaping people's views and attitudes". In this context, language can shape reality, which is highlighted by the construction of discourse as capable of including and arranging decisions (Galasiński, 2011). Such decisions result from the hegemonic social representations developed by individuals with political power (Santos, 2018; Amer and Howarth, 2018) and the capability to influence reality.

Through applying discourse analysis to securitisation studies, we become able to identify the structures and practices that produce perceptions of threat and thenceforth extract its sources, mechanisms and effects (Vezovnik, 2018;

Balzacq, 2011) within the securitising movement. Discourse analysis of threat construction is usually outlined by discursive acts as these support representative patterns, which compose the perception of a threat, and deploys discourse to describe, define and draw attention to practices and measures (Molnar et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the discursive act is a mechanism that political elites instrumentalise to create, manipulate or adapt reality in order to influence the course of action over an issue of interest. This instrumentalisation is observed as social representation susceptible to generation through communicative processes, such as anchoring and objectification, resulting in a hegemonic, emancipated and polemic representation of a socially constructed reality (Amer and Howarth, 2018). In this context, the securitising actor is capable of leading its audience into accepting and taking more significant measures against a discursively constructed threat.

However, this may result in both realistic and symbolic threats, as coined by intergroup threat theory – “the former referring to threats to the power, safety, and security of the ingroup, and the latter describing threats to the norms, values, culture, and identity of the ingroup” (Amer and Howarth, 2018, p. 615). Hence, the matter of interest for the political elite “becomes recognizable as, for example, a threat, a danger, or as something nice and pleasurable” (Hojjer in Amer and Howarth 2018, p. 616).

Identity undeniably plays a significant role in securitisation discourses, particularly given that “it is also through discourse that language users constitute social realities: their knowledge of social situations, the interpersonal roles they play, their identities and relations with other interacting social groups” (Galasinski, 2011, p. 254). Within this scope, political elites become able to construct an idea of *us* and *them*, in which *us* represents what should be protected and the security agent capable of solving the threat, and *them* is the villainised concept, whether a person, a group, an idea or a thing (Gaynor, 2014). In so doing, the analysis process becomes paved by the search for discursive mechanisms (for a wider view, see Table 1), such as inter- and intratextuality, metaphors, nodal points, predictions, as well as prepositions (Carbó et al., 2016; Dunn and Neumann, 2016; Müller, 2011).

The analysis portion of this article seeks to identify the categorisation patterns for a threat, thus basing this on the collection and interpretation of metaphors, grouping them into the 27 categories of ideological discourse structures put forward by van Dijk¹ as well as within discourse strategies –

1 Actor description, authority, burden (Topos), categorisation, comparison, consensus, counterfactuals, disclaimer, euphemism, evidentiality, example/illustration, generalisation, →

TABLE 2

Glossary of terminology in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory

Apparatus	Term	Concept
Discourse A relation ensemble of signifying practices and creating meaning, which extends to the whole social space, both linguistic and extra-linguistic.	Elements	Signifiers whose meanings are multiple and not yet fixed in any discourse.
	Articulation	A practice through which a partial fixation of the meanings of elements is achieved.
	Moments	Elements whose meaning has been partially fixed through articulation.
	Closure	The fixation of the meaning of a signifier within a discourse.
	Field of Security	The surplus of meaning which is outside discourse. A discourse is always constituted in relation to a field of discursivity. This field of discursivity harbours the potential for the contestation of any discourse.
	Nodal Points	Privileged signifiers within discourses around which other moments are ordered in chains of equivalence.
	Floating Signifiers	Elements which are particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning and may form nodal points in different discourses.
Identity Articulation of a subject position in a discourse which is always incomplete	Subject position	Different possibilities for the construction of meaning around a subject in different discourses.
	Contingency	A given identity is possible but not necessary. There can never be one single discourse which exclusively structures the social.
	Split subject	The split subject is perpetually incomplete and constantly strives to become a whole.
Politics The organisation of society in a particular way that excludes other possible arrangements	Antagonism	Discursive exteriority which presents a threatening force to any hegemonic discourse.
	Hegemony	The fixation of meaning in an antagonistic terrain naturalising a particular articulation.
	Objectivation	Discourses become seemingly natural and uncontested through hegemonic intervention.
	Dislocation	A contingent event that cannot be symbolised or represented within a discourse and thus disrupts and destabilises orders of meaning.

Source: Müller (2011, p. 11)

such as demonising the disease, criminalising the disease, calling the state to action, emotional and informational appeals to the masses, condemnation of the state, and historical reference –, some of which have also served to portray COVID-19 as a threat in other studies, such as the construction of the threat in newspaper editorials (Olimat, 2020).

We collected official texts from NATO's website, uploaded between March and May 2021, drawing on content analysis methods with the discourses prior to this timeframe barely referencing COVID-19, and, post-May 2020, the references to COVID-19 portrayed the lowering number of contaminations and deaths, and the consecutive lowering in the priority attributed to pandemic management. On this point, mentions applied in previous studies, such as *COVID-19, health, crisis, threat, and risk*, were gathered from the NATO newsroom, resulting in the collection of seven speeches by former NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, and former Chairman of the Military Committee in Chiefs of Defence, Sir Stuart Peach.

Reading and analysing the documents made it possible to highlight the patterns of hegemonisation in NATO discourse as a historical crisis management actor with the capacity to deal with threats but that fall outside its traditional scope of action, namely health threats. We also found several metaphors that construct COVID-19 not just as a real and objective threat but also as a political and symbolic threat, with the capacity to disrupt the organisation's structure, values and actions. In this regard, the application of discourse analysis enabled an understanding of mechanisms and answers developed by NATO to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the construction of the discursive act that underpins the securitising move and sequentially portraying NATO as a security IO capable of turning events into threats towards specific referent objects, such as civilians, military structures, member states, and NATO itself.

THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been labelled as one of the most disruptive moments in the 21st century. Both state and non-state actors were weakened by the pandemic through successive events such as the border blocks, deemed the EU's "first properly coordinated major response" (Brzozowski and Foote, 2020); the retention of medical aid equipment, resulting in a critical scarcity of goods (Ranney, Griffeth and Jha, 2020); the exacerbation of cynophobic

→ hyperbole, implication, irony, lexicalisation, metaphor, self-glorification, norm expression, number game, polarisation, Us-Them, populism, presupposition, vagueness, victimisation, dramatization and polarisation (Osisanwo, 2021).

movements, including attempts at attributing blame, racist discourses, hate crimes, and disinformation propagation targeting the Asian community (Kuhn, Bicakci and Shaikh, 2021; Macguire, 2020); as well as a myriad of episodes at the economic and social levels (see Pereira et al. 2023; Berger and Salloum, 2020; Pandey, 2020). All of these simultaneous events culminated in a phenomenon of nationalist sanitary approaches to the pandemic (Bieber, 2022; Anisin, 2021).

The concept of epidemiological nationalism (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2020) marked the beginnings of the pandemic, and border controls became a routinised solution applied across the world. This scenario occurred despite how, since the turn of the century, Global Health Security (GHS) proponents have argued that such short-term solutions turn out to be fragile in the long-term campaigns against health threats due to the lack of sustainability in withholding the means of transmission, thus generating scarcity, and consequently allowing for the implementation of nationalist mechanisms in global health systems. Nationalist political decisions ended up producing economic, social and political consequences in managing the pandemic, reflected in the lack of cooperation and coordination between states and IO (Milani, 2020; Pandey, 2020; Tardy, 2020; Woods et al., 2020).

At the international level, IO faced challenges related to their resilience as well as to the continuation of cooperation and multilateralism, as exemplified by the EU, the WHO, and NATO. The cooperation gap amongst NATO member states emerged as a consequence of the aforementioned practices based on health nationalism, which hindered the dynamics of the initial response by IO to the COVID-19 problem. This situation mainly arose because states believed the pandemic response should rely on a national approach to the health threat (Jovic-Lazic, 2021; Maio, 2020; Tardy, 2020). The enduring consequences confirmed the GHS assumption that a threat to health can result in direct and indirect effects for the economic, environmental, societal, and political arenas (Ozawa, 2020).

Furthermore, we would note that NATO's position had been weakened prior to early 2020. Debates about its effectiveness and existence (Ricketts, 2020) were emphasised in the discourses of both US President Donald Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron, which put further pressure on the organisation due to issues around burden-sharing (Baciu, 2021). NATO simultaneously faced an institutional challenge over addressing the COVID-19 pandemic as an issue of interest as NATO then held no responsibility or (perceived) competence for responding to health threats (Jovic-Lazic, 2021; Enache and Andrei, 2020). Notwithstanding, NATO emerged as a "crisis manager" and led "the largest military deployment in history during a period of peace" (Jovic-Lazic, 2021, p. 153).

As COVID-19 became recognised as an existential threat, NATO directed the scope of its action towards the following domains: implementing supply chains between member states through strategic airlifts overseen by the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA);² launching mechanisms such as the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), the Strategic Airlift International Solution (SALIS), and the Rapid Air Mobility (RAM) in support of efficiently transporting medical equipment; research assistance on COVID-19 in NATO laboratories, deploying a team containing over six thousand scientists within the NATO Science and Technology Organization; setting up over 40 international projects to handle the COVID-19 pandemic (Quinn *et al.*, 2022; Baciú, 2021; Iliev and Taneski, 2021; Rittimann, 2020); and implementing changes to the dynamics of international missions to minimise the pandemic's effects on the participant armed forces.

Regarding the latter domain, NATO's presence in the Baltic was not reduced in scale given the need to deliver protective medical equipment and transport patients. Similarly, the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission was not suspended nor was the support mission led in Afghanistan, which managed to train and support the security forces and implement field hospitals in Bagram and Kandahar. On the other hand, exercises like Defender-Europe 20 were cancelled, and prevention measures were applied in NATO headquarters, such as restrictions on access to the media and other personnel (Jovic-Lazic, 2021; Iliev and Taneski, 2021; Maio, 2020).

NATO's response to the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a window of opportunity to justify its existence and demonstrate its ability to engage with new sectors by proving its resilience and adaptability in fields reaching beyond defence or those otherwise catalogued as *high politics* (Bjola and Manor, 2020; Minzarari, 2020; Rittimann, 2020). The measures listed above were fundamental to engaging with different categories of threats, including to the public health domain, which had already been mentioned in the 2010 Strategic Concept but only ever treated as a minor risk over the years (Gibson-Fall, 2021). COVID-19 stands out as a lesson to IO, in this case to NATO, by calling for the proactiveness of the organisation, the stepping-up of its activities, efficiency, adaptability, and solidarity among member states as well as civil-military cooperation (Baciú, 2021; Bjola and Manor, 2020).

2 NSPA also created the COVID-19 Management Office to deal with the unprecedented demand for medical supplies.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF COVID-19 AS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO NATO

Although the previous contextualisation puts forward a broad collection of studies regarding the diplomatic and institutional actions of NATO in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, less academic attention has been bestowed on understanding how the organisation discursively constructed it as a threat. Moreover, despite the production of literature about the issue, which resulted in the commonly accepted argument that COVID-19 was a lesson that improved the resilience and adaptability of IO, the academic community has paid less attention to how security IO adapted and transformed their discourse to become active actors in a field in which they held a brief or almost non-existing mandate (as was the case of NATO in the public health domain) as well as how recursive interaction provided NATO with the necessary legitimacy to act.

The COVID-19 pandemic was considered an existential threat to health according to its characteristics as a securitisation threat (Balzacq, 2011): COVID-19 emerged as a danger to the integrity of the referent object, built at the individual, national, and international levels. Such argumentation is deemed sufficient to begin securitisation processes and for the securitising actor to call for exceptional measures. However, what this study also seeks to understand is how a collective defence intergovernmental organisation such as NATO was able to construct a matter, hitherto uncovered by its sphere of action, into something requiring urgently addressing by the organisation and its members alongside the mechanisms NATO deployed to achieve such legitimisation.

Content analysis of statements by NATO representatives divided the process of constructing COVID-19 as a threat into three categories: the identification of COVID-19 as a threat; its priority and the risk of the health crisis becoming a security crisis; and NATO's legitimisation discourse.

IDENTIFICATION OF COVID-19 AS A THREAT

The identification of COVID-19 as a threat was voiced on several occasion in official NATO speeches: the term *crisis* (or *crises*) was mentioned 180 times in the seven documents under analysis. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic had been discussed since February 2020, NATO only began to point out the disruption of the *status quo* at the press conference held for *the release of the Secretary General's 2019 Annual Report*.

NATO's characterisation of the COVID-19 pandemic as a threat can then be continually traced up until May 2020 through patterns and mechanisms of intertextuality, nodal points, and metaphors, which were used to construct COVID-19 not just as a threat against human lives but also against NATO's own

survival. References to nodal points, such as *unprecedented crisis* (Stoltenberg 2020a), *corona crisis* (ibid), and “COVID-19 is a threat to all of us” (Stoltenberg 2020f) served not only to describe the disruptive phenomenon faced by NATO but were also widely disseminated by other IOs, such as the EU, by governments, and the media (Fernández, 2024; Pereira, 2022; Olimat, 2020). In fact, this vocabulary became routinely used to construct COVID-19 as a political enemy on a global scale.

In the words of Jens Stoltenberg: “[...] they [NATO personnel] have implemented measures, they have taken preventive measures to deal with the threat of corona- the spread of the coronavirus” (Stoltenberg 2020f). Despite the quick correction of the term *threat* to *spread*, the former Secretary General’s speech demonstrated that the word *threat* was already present in NATO’s perception – and vocabulary – of COVID-19 at such an early stage.

In the same speech of April 15, 2020, the term *threat* was connected to COVID-19 in a more transparent and undeniable way as Stoltenberg mentioned that “we [NATO] don’t have the luxury of saying that we can only focus on one type of threat” (ibid). Thus, the evolution of the threat inside the organisation was devised to reiterate NATO’s operational readiness to respond to threats, including COVID-19. Additionally, the pandemic crisis was inserted, through establishing parallelisms, in a list of the various threats with which the organisation simultaneously deals with in addition to usage of the first person plural as a syntactic strategy (van Dijk, 1997) to allude to the position of the securitising actor as an apologist for the alliance’s union.

In this regard, COVID-19 was constructed as an urgent threat that required solving immediately. This construction was characterised by temporal connections of urgency, using terms such as *unprecedented* and *speed*. The referent object was constructed as a collective, as presented by referencing how *COVID-19 is a threat to all of us* – involving member states and the NATO environment (infrastructure, values, and people). This strategy stands out as an ideological discourse structure embedded in victimisation, in constructing the body, and the identity under threat. This is intentionally developed to underline discourse strategies calling for member state support and demonising the pandemic.

PRIORITY, DIMENSION, AND THE RISK OF THE HEALTH CRISIS BECOMING A SECURITY CRISIS

Besides identifying COVID-19 as a threat, a dimensional character was also added as the means of reiterating the amplitude of the virus. Throughout the speeches analysed, Jens Stoltenberg fell back on hyperboles, metaphors and dramatization tactics to emphasise the threatening character of COVID-19 by referring to COVID-19 as a *global pandemic* (Stoltenberg 2020a), too great a

challenge “for any one nation or organisation to face alone” (ibid), an *international crisis* (Stoltenberg 2020c), and a *health crisis* (ibid). In his opening speech to the 183rd Chiefs of Defence Military Committee on May 14, 2020, Stuart Peach also added to the notion of the scale, referring to it as a shock to the system and “a global health crisis” (Peach 2020). Consequently, the rhetoric used by both representatives of NATO resulted in the formulation of a sense of urgency and priority of the crisis, as well as characterising the cross-border nature of the virus.

As a consequence of the broad and cross-border dimension of COVID-19, NATO’s former Secretary General underlined its impact and called for the organisation’s action, for example, by stressing that *immediate attention* (Stoltenberg 2020b) needed to be directed at the pandemic. At the pre-ministerial press conference on April 1, 2020, Jens Stoltenberg stated that the COVID-19 response was at the top of the NATO Foreign Ministers’ agenda (Stoltenberg 2020c), demonstrating the evolution of NATO’s attitude towards a more active stance and, consequently, claiming the authority to answer this threat for NATO.

This position was reiterated the following day at the press conference held after the Foreign Ministers’ meeting (Stoltenberg 2020d), which demonstrated the alignment of the member states’ representatives with the position taken by the organisation. Such an event confirmed the occurrence of recursive interaction between the securitising actor and its audience through the agreement on a collective answer based on a bargain reached among multiple individual security interests. Later, on April 15, 2020, the Secretary General stated the immediate concern of Defence Ministers was the pandemic crisis (Stoltenberg 2020f). Thus, the priority nature and consensus around the pandemic threat became clear at this point, both in the eyes of the securitising actor and in those of its audience.

NATO’s discourse contributed to the narrative that COVID-19 was not merely another disease or a pandemic that any single, individual state could handle. NATO followed a similar path to other IO, constructing COVID-19 as a threat for addressing through collective action. Moreover, NATO applied military vocabulary (Olimat, 2020) to describe the pandemic as a threat to the international community. Hence, the organisation stood up as an actor of interest, that not only was threatened but also had the legitimacy to participate in the global response by calling for immediate attention and action in several different speeches (Stoltenberg 2020b, 2020c, 2020d).

The sense of urgency demonstrated by NATO and its member states emerged due to the risk of the health crisis becoming a security crisis. This idea was showcased through the intertextuality of speeches of Jens Stoltenberg on April 1, 2 and 14, 2020 and in Stuart Peach’s speech on May 14, 2020. This

risk stemmed from references to the consequences of COVID-19, specifically its level of mortality, the vulnerability caused, and the repercussions felt in several areas, such as the financial, security and geopolitical domains. This discursive act constitutes the dual purpose of reiterating NATO's role as a security organisation in the fight against COVID-19 and a mitigator of the scepticism regarding NATO's existence.

Discourse semantics were also applied to reinforce COVID-19's construction as an international crisis and to call for a global and collective response. Stoltenberg's metaphor of the *invisible enemy* (Stoltenberg 2020c) personified the pandemic as an opponent, inserting it into vocabulary commonly used in the context of traditional threats. As Christian Olsson (2019) puts it in his analysis of NATO's narrative regarding Afghanistan, "NATO itself cannot be seen to have 'enemies'", as the "invocation of an 'enemy' can transform the economy of relations between the actors involved" into conflict. Hence, when applying such reasoning to the pandemic context of 2020, it becomes evident that COVID-19 had reached a dramatic threatening status, surpassing traditional threats faced by NATO, thus allowing the organisation to confidently label the pandemic as an *enemy*.

Such reasoning was accomplished through the collective agreement prevailing between the audience and the securitising actor over portraying the disease as an enemy through political discourse. In so doing, this becomes a successful representation of recursive interaction; otherwise, without the agreement of the audience, the legitimisation by member states to empower NATO as an actor capable of acting in such a scenario would not occur.

Furthermore, the existential threat of the pandemic crisis enabled the emergence of a new issue: disinformation, which, according to Jens Stoltenberg, "has one aim, [...] to divide us and to weaken our unity" (Stoltenberg 2020f). Simply through a war theory lens, we can conclude this constituted an agent-caused threat due to negligence as disinformation had been widely diffused by individuals who were unaware of the inaccurate and fallacious nature of the information they had encountered. Simultaneously, this characterisation of disinformation as a disruptive event influencing managing the pandemic may also be observed as part of a cascade of events occurring under the cover of COVID-19 through portraying the pandemic as a multi-dimensional threat.

Leonard and Kaunert (2022) argue that this may be perceived as securitisation by association. Some issues may be more challenging to securitise because of their intrinsic characteristics, and although disinformation is not a new issue for political elites, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced its characteristics by associating its damage capability with a global scale threat. As a direct

consequence of the pandemic threat, disinformation also required a specific response: “sharing facts, being transparent, telling the truth, [...] defending the right of free and open societies to have a free and open press” (Stoltenberg 2020c) embodies the posture adopted by the Alliance.

NATO: LICENCE TO ACT IN TIMES OF PANDEMICS

On March 19, 2020, Jens Stoltenberg ensured its audience that NATO “will continue to consult, monitor the situation and take all necessary measures” (Stoltenberg 2020a), thus reinforcing its role as a securitising actor by allying discourse to the expectation of concrete policies. Nearly a month later, at the Press Conference following the virtual meeting of NATO’s Defence Ministers on April 14, 2020, the former Secretary-General confirmed that such intentions had been accomplished, informing the audience that NATO had already carried out over “100 missions to transport medical personnel, supplies, and treatment capabilities” (Stoltenberg 2020e). Following ideological discourse structures, these values represent a numbers game as well as illustrating NATO’s capacity to act in fields that might be considered as beyond its scope.

Besides these measures, others were repeatedly mentioned throughout the discourses analysed, such as constructing field hospitals, disinfecting public areas, and contributing technological knowledge as a means of supporting vaccine developments. This is no mere case of boasting as they also contributed to constructing NATO’s identity as a quick adapter to threats while highlighting its role as a crisis manager. Moreover, its response capability to a non-traditional threat beyond its scope of action reinforced the argument for its vitality and existence. As a matter of context, this phenomenon occurred before the Ukrainian war, in a period of generalised scepticism regarding NATO’s survival, expressed by many actors, including powerful member states, such as France and the US.

As previously mentioned, the stages in the securitisation movement may overlap: the transition into a phase of formulation and implementation of policies still does not prevent recursive interaction from occurring. Indeed, the success of collective securitisation depends on the acceptance and consequent adoption of common policies by the audience (Sperling and Webber, 2017). This phenomenon is attested to by the various mentions of interactions between the military and civil society, which consolidated the picture of the Alliance as a securitising actor responsible for coordinating the collective response against COVID-19 among NATO’s audience, that is, NATO’s member states. Following recognition of this threat, NATO’s response formulation constituted a crucial step in the stage of policy formulation and implementation in response to the pandemic, thereby enhancing NATO’s stance as a legitimate securitising actor.

The affirmation of this role was reiterated through discursive acts, aiming to involve the audience by virtue of recursive interaction.

NATO's usefulness during the pandemic was ratified through references to its history and its characterisation as an essential actor in matters of crisis management as well as its capacity to adapt and amplify its scope across different scenarios. On March 30, 2020, Jens Stoltenberg declared that "the security that NATO membership provides is unequalled" (Stoltenberg 2020b), and, on April 2, he further stated that "NATO was created to manage crises. So, we have experience. We have done similar things before" (Stoltenberg 2020d). These discourses also justify NATO's vitality, validating its importance to the international community.

Additionally, the renewal of proclaimed key functions, such as cooperation and coordination, and values related to resilience and adaptability justified the execution of policies addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. There are numerous references to the need for cooperation: "[...] together, we will overcome the coronavirus crisis" (Stoltenberg 2020a) and "[...] in uncertain times, we must further strengthen our multilateral institutions" (Stoltenberg 2020d). The narrative portraying cooperation as an inseparable particularity of the organisation and a factor essential to guaranteeing international cooperation in the pandemic context further enriched those references. On March 19, 2020, Jens Stoltenberg declared "it is more important than ever that we stand together and support each other. That is what NATO is all about." (Stoltenberg 2020a). This strategy portrays NATO as an aggregating actor through constant references to *we*, *our*, and *together*, alluding to collectivity as the cornerstone of NATO. As the latter excerpt exemplifies, those are mechanisms capable of creating an identity of an *us* that is witnessing its survival being threatened and urgently needs to adapt and take a stand against a brutal threat.

In addition to cooperation, there is an increased need for coordination within the context of the pandemic. Jens Stoltenberg declared: "All NATO Allies are affected by the pandemic. But not in the same way at the same time. So, when we effectively coordinate our resources, we make a real difference" (Stoltenberg 2020f). Furthermore, on April 15, 2020, the former Secretary General also "encouraged all Allies to make their capabilities available so General Wolters can coordinate further support" (ibid). Thus, coordination was an essential factor in executing policies designed to effectively respond to the pandemic threat, which provided a space to enable cooperation amongst Alliance members under NATO leadership. To achieve this, NATO asserted its role as a facilitator in the allocation of member states' resources, guaranteeing the distribution of support in proportion with the needs of Allies during the different phases of the pandemic.

The concept of resilience is inseparable from NATO as it is “enshrined in Article 3 of our [NATO’s] founding Treaty” (Stoltenberg 2020d), increasing in relevance as the organisation faced scepticism from the leaders of two global powers, Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron. On April 1, 2020, the former Secretary General stated that “NATO has developed baseline requirements for civilian resilience” (Stoltenberg 2020c) at a time when resilience was an absolute necessity for the states combating COVID-19. Thus, NATO, in the voice of Jens Stoltenberg, considered one of its main tasks in the pandemic context to have been fulfilled, reaffirming its role as an actor capable of responding to the needs of each conjuncture.

Additionally, the organisation vehemently reiterated its adaptation capabilities, maintaining a crucial role as a provider of international security by adjusting its mission to contemporary crises and threats. As Jens Stoltenberg expressed it, “NATO is able to adapt to the circumstances created by the COVID-19 crisis” (Stoltenberg 2020d). Later, Stoltenberg also highlighted NATO’s capacity to deal with potential threats by “adapting and changing and modernising” (Stoltenberg 2020f).

By developing an identity as a resilient and adaptive actor during uncertain times, NATO proved capable of positioning itself as a necessary requirement within the International System. NATO survived not only the pandemic threat but also the scepticism that had been surrounding it, improving its value not only as a security actor in traditional terms but also as a manager of disruptive crises in new and unprecedented spheres.

NATO’s key role in combating the pandemic threat was highlighted by references to the cooperation between the military and civil sectors. On March 19, 2020, Jens Stoltenberg stated that “military action now provides an extra capacity for the civil society to deal with crises” (Stoltenberg 2020a), and, on April 1 of the same year, he added that the “Allied armed forces [...] are providing vital support to civilian efforts, including field hospitals, transport of patients, disinfection of public areas, and securing border crossings” (Stoltenberg 2020c). This intertextuality mechanism displays not only the execution of policies in response to the threat (coordinated by NATO and carried out by member state Armed Forces) but also the continuous occurrence of recursive interaction, demonstrating the act of legitimisation by the audience as well as how the organisation was in receipt of symbolic authority to manage these measures in the name of NATO and its member states.

In addition, there were several pleas for investment in defence as a way of combating the COVID-19 pandemic as well as future crises. On March 19, the Secretary General stated that “by investing in our [NATO’s] military, we also provide a capacity which has proven useful in supporting civil society dealing

with crises like the coronavirus crisis” (Stoltenberg 2020a). Hence, the success of the securitising movement carried out by NATO allowed the organisation to reaffirm to its audience that its existence was not only necessary but also in urgent need of investment.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to understand how NATO constructed COVID-19 as an existential threat, grasping what led the organisation to portray itself as a securitising actor in the pandemic context. Despite its inclusion in NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept, the global health domain was not a priority for the organisation until the COVID-19 pandemic upturned the International System by threatening the *status quo* of generalised health security. We observed the discourses voiced by NATO’s representatives during the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic (between March and May of 2020) and analysed them through the theoretical framework of collective securitisation.

Our analysis demonstrates how NATO constructed COVID-19 as a window of opportunity to maintain its relevance in the face of the scepticism displayed by prominent actors, such as Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron, and to legitimise itself as a crisis manager in times of uncertainty. In order to prove its own effectiveness and consequently protect its survival, the organisation embarked on a securitising movement characterised by three momentums: the identification of COVID-19 as a threat; the priority, dimension and the risk of the health crisis becoming a security crisis; and NATO’s legitimacy for acting.

Furthermore, NATO’s role produced an unexpected impact on the route taken by its member states: given the initial state of sanitary nationalism, during which countries neglected cooperative values by turning to protectionist policies, NATO was able to act as a promoter and coordinator of mutual aid within the Alliance. NATO undertook the largest military deployment in times of peace, alongside the activation or reform of mechanisms such as NSPA, SAC, SALIS, and RAM, resulting in “more than 100 missions to transport medical personnel, supplies, and treatment capabilities” (Stoltenberg 2020f) by coordinating and leading cooperation amongst its member states.

The motives behind NATO stepping up as a securitising actor in the fight against COVID-19 were not merely related to the organisation’s purpose of ensuring security throughout its territory; instead, they approached the pandemic as an opportunity to act in the interest of protecting its survival, given the previously mentioned wave of scepticism regarding its relevance. Simultaneously, it contributed to the securitisation of disinformation by association,

which led NATO to declare its values faced an external threat carried out by the organisation's enemies, intent on undermining it.

Unlike traditional security theories, collective securitisation favoured an expanded view of securitising movements as it considers actors beyond the state. This allowed for a more dynamic perception of the practice of securitisation on the international stage, proving particularly useful when employed on our object of analysis, especially as COVID-19's cross-border nature demands consideration beyond the state. Specifically, discourse analysis of discursive acts was peremptory in confirming an international alignment with a specific vocabulary to construct the COVID-19 pandemic as a threat to human lives and the survival of IO. These examples underwent presentation through references to an *unprecedented crisis*, the *corona crisis*, or *COVID-19 as a threat to us all*, which resulted from discursive strategies to demonise the disease and appeal to member states to act collectively.

NATO broadened the scope of the organisation's range regarding its fields of action, reaching beyond previous conceptions of NATO as an organisation solely focused on *high politics* issues and moving the debate into the global health sphere. This article correspondingly results in a contribution to collective securitisation, which problematises and understands NATO as a collective securitisation actor, all the while comprehending its role in addressing issues that are not under its traditional umbrella, health threats for example.

Besides counteracting the lack of academic literature focused on NATO's actorness in the pandemic context and health threats in general, this analysis of COVID-19's early stage may serve as a starting point for further research with a broader time frame, allowing for questions about a new *status quo* in NATO's relationship with the health domain. Furthermore, future research avenues could focus on the securitising dynamic identified in this study as well as on how the domain of global health compares with other fields of NATO activity, whether the health domain has become a determining factor for the future of this organisation and the impact of the Ukraine invasion on developing the health field within NATO.

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