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Proud at NATO

In June 2019, I found myself at NATO headquarters in Brussels, staring at a poster featuring a rainbow flag superimposed with silhouettes of armed forces personnel. It was an unexpected encounter. I was there along with my co-authors to launch our new book (Wright et al, 2019) and participate in the 43rd Annual Conference of the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives (NCGP). In the conference programme, what was billed as a 'side-event' discussing 'integrating LGBTQI perspectives in allied and partner armed forces' was scheduled for the upcoming Thursday. I was curious. NATO is dominated by cisgendered, heterosexual, militarised masculine norms (Ibid) *and* is an alliance made up of thirty member states with differing socio-cultural and military levels of LGBTQ rights. The inclusion of such an event, in such a space, felt a little radical. There were murmurings amongst the delegates.

Holding the event within the framework of the NCGP conference was an interesting move. Including it as a side-event, noted on, but not part of, the official schedule of the NCGP conference, provided some delegates an opt-out. The event was organised jointly by the European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (EUROMIL), the Permanent Representation of Belgium to NATO and the Joint Delegation of Canada to NATO. Another interesting move. EUROMIL is an international non-profit organisation which promotes military professional organisation and trade union membership for European (not just NATO) soldiers and 'the inclusion of military service personnel into the social and labour legislation of the European Union' (EUROMIL, n.d.). One of its core goals is to 'promote the fundamental rights and freedoms of members of the armed forces in Europe' (Ibid). The exact motivations for the Canadian and Belgian delegations were not immediately clear, but both states are understood to be (more) inclusive in their LGBTQ (social and military) policies in a way that other NATO states are not. Of course, reading Canadian and Belgian 'progressiveness' vis-à-vis 'other' NATO members, is neither uncontested nor unproblematic. Whatever the motivations, the alignment of these two national delegations with EUROMIL allowed for a (LGBTQ) *rights and inclusion-focused* space to emerge *within* an already established (gender) rights and inclusion-focused space - the NCGP – wherein discussions could begin, however tentatively or temporarily.

Sitting through the event, it was interesting to note the emergence of two interrelated themes as participants detailed their personal and professional experiences and how they made appeals for more LGBTQ inclusion within NATO. Firstly, LGBTQ rights were framed as 'human rights', as a matter of 'individual liberty', 'common ideals' that NATO, as a values-led alliance should uphold within the institution and champion globally. Secondly, that including LGBTQ perspectives improved the alliance and - by extension – the security of its members; that diversity was 'critical to survive and prosper in a changing security environment'. Arguably, both framings are necessary to reconcile the inherent contradictions of promoting LGBTQ 'diversity and inclusion' within and across NATO.

It is simply not true that LGBTQ rights are valued equally across the alliance member states. In this sense, they are not 'shared' NATO values. Yet, promoting shared values of 'human rights', 'liberty', 'democracy' and 'the rule of law' has been a central way in which the alliance recast itself as a security community following the end of the Cold War. Centralising this pre-existing 'values-framework' allowed the participants to establish an (albeit tenuous) 'in' for discussions of LGBTQ rights within a resistant institution. It is a strategy that has been used previously to promoting gender equality (See Hurley, 2017; Wright et al, 2019). 'Diversity as strength' (and strength as operational effectiveness) furthers this association and is evident in campaigns such as #WEARENATO where unity *despite* difference is promoted (Hedling et al, 2022). Understood in this way, LGBTQ equality is understood as '*a* value' and to be '*of* value' which goes some way to reconcile – or perhaps conceal - the significant differences between member states.

Almost two years later, on 19th March 2021, NATO HQ hosted what was billed as the 'first ever' (online) conference on LGBTQ perspectives in the workplace. The event was organised by the staff-led volunteer group 'Proud at NATO', attracted 130 participants across civilian and military staffs, with the aim of providing a forum to discuss the experiences and challenges of LGBTQ people at work (NATO, 2021a). Interestingly, the specific details of the conference were not made public and it was an internal NATO event. There is some alignment here with the 2019 event, with these forums being established 'in house', though with some general promotion through the social media accounts of various participants and on the NATO website (Ibid; EUROMIL, 2019).

In a significant difference between the two events, the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, opened the 2021 Proud at NATO conference and his speech was made public. As can be seen below, his remarks contain several 'strength in diversity', 'inclusion as NATO-value', reconciliations that were evident at the 2019 event. However, it is his use – and framing – of *allyship* that is most interesting.

You Will Always Have an Ally in Me

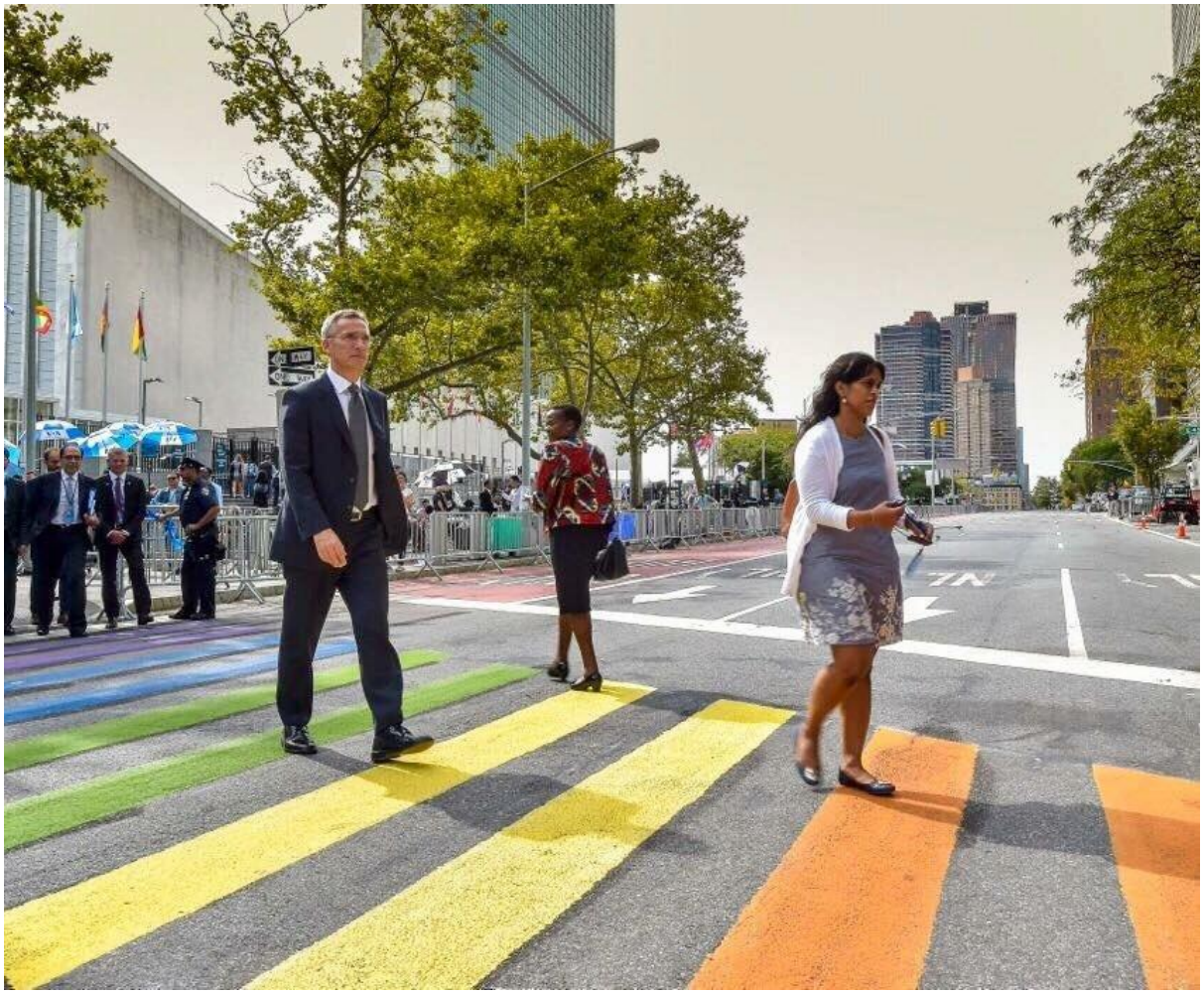
In opening the 2021 Proud at NATO conference Stoltenberg declared:

> Whether you are a member of the International Staff, the International Military Staff, an agency, or a national delegation – I am pleased and proud that so many of you have joined today's conference.
>
> I want to thank the dedicated volunteers who have come together to form a Staff Resource Group, promoting LGBTQ+ perspectives in the workplace. You are doing invaluable work in supporting diversity and inclusion at NATO.
>
> Every member of the LGBTQ+ community at NATO is a valued member of our staff and family. Because diversity and inclusion is at the heart of who we are and what we do.
>
> We are an alliance of 30 nations working together to protect our people and our values: freedom, equality and human rights. Drawing on all resources and all experiences makes us stronger, and better equipped to face the future.

> I believe real leadership includes understanding others, respecting others, and standing up for others. So I am glad that you are welcoming all "allies" to the discussion. And I don't just mean NATO member nations, but people who do not identify as LGBTQ+ themselves yet want to see a more inclusive world.
>
> You will always have an ally in me.
>
> NATO has come a long way on inclusiveness – but we can do more, and we still have a way to go. So today is only the beginning of an important conversation. I wish you a great, first Proud at NATO event.
>
> (NATO, 2021b)

What is most obvious in these remarks is that like at the 2019 event, LGBTQ rights are framed as both a signifier of 'NATO (family) values' and as a strategic benefit to the alliance. They are a marker of NATO identity and strength: *'diversity and inclusion is at the heart of who we are and what we do'*. Yet, they go further, fusing an understanding of leadership and allyship in interesting ways which complicate the positionality of Stoltenberg as an individual *and* head of the alliance. By opening the event, Stoltenberg uses the authority of his position as Secretary General to signify the importance of the event. Yet the remarks on leadership-allyship are delivered in the first person, the collective 'we' of NATO values in the first part, becomes an individualised 'I' and 'me' when discussing allyship. They are expressed as personal beliefs on what these concepts mean. Anderson & Accomando (2016) argue that 'claiming "ally" *as an identity* can limit and stifle the potential for lasting change because it centres the privileged individual, renders identity unidimensional, and shifts attention from a sustained political movement to the individual activist's identity'. By publicly identifying himself as an ally (though not an activist), Stoltenberg is describing what he is, rather than what he is going to do; the work is left to the volunteers, to the Staff Group.

The tensions between the collective and individual are also evident in some of Stoltenberg's social media posts. The image below has been used, somewhat inconsistently, on Stoltenberg's Twitter account to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) over several years dating back to 2017 (Stoltenberg, 2017) and on the NATO website (NATO, 2017). The image portrays the NATO Secretary General walking over a pedestrian crossing opposite the UN Headquarters in New York City. The crossing has been painted to represent a rainbow flag, recognised and used globally as symbol of LGBTQ rights. Stoltenberg is mid-crossing, in-mid stride, staring into the middle-distance (perhaps toward a more inclusive future?). One individual is crossing in front of him, another has passed him. There is a collective of men in suits, ties and lanyards waiting at one side of the crossing with a police officer. The road appears closed to traffic, with metal barriers and cones lining the edges of the road.



NATO Secretary General marks International Day Against Homophobia (©NATO, 2017)

The image is symbolic of the I/we tensions. Stoltenberg is alone. It is unclear whether the individuals in front and behind him are aides or associates. He is not wearing anything, or holding anything, that marks him out as the head of the alliance. He is dressed, as usual, in a non-descript suit and tie. There is no NATO imagery or symbols in the actual image, although the NATO logo was added to a 2021 post; the crossing is outside the UN Headquarters in New York, not NATO HQ in Brussels.

Therefore, like the use of 'I' in his Proud at NATO remarks, the composition of this image allows Stoltenberg to mark his allyship-leadership out as an individual. Like Anderson & Accomando (2016), Abdi (2021) argues that when conceived of in such ways, allyship can be 'shaped and determined by those who are structurally advantaged; engagement is optional, aspirational, intellectual or for personal development rather than as a social or collective responsibility; and that the dynamics of power in collaborative spaces often result in marginalised groups carrying the burden of educating, sharing narratives of trauma and holding the 'allies' to account'.

Framing allyship in this way then, may go some way in providing distance between Stoltenberg's personal views and his role as head of NATO. Yet this distancing is tenuous and complicated. He is still, obviously, the Secretary General of NATO, tweeting images and messages of LGBTQ rights and equality. It is impossible to entirely disentangle the two

personas. Stoltenberg is both individual ally *and* leader of a complex political-military alliance within which LGBTQ rights are not valued equally. Can – or should – these tensions be reconciled?

NATO the 'Teaching Machine' in a Queer International Context

In earlier work my co-authors and I analysed how, due to its unique structures and decision-making processes, NATO can be understood as a 'teaching machine'. (Wright et. al, 2019; see also Enloe, 1981). LGBTQ individuals and groups are proving themselves adept at working within NATO's structures to advocate for and advance change, to 'teach'. Aligning the early stages of this work with the NATO Committee for Gender Perspectives used institutional architecture to provide a forum and a (relatively) receptive audience through which to begin these conversations. Yet, returning to Abi's (2021) point, who is required to do the labour? The Proud at NATO Staff Resource Group are volunteers, dedicating their time, efforts, and selves to affect institutional change. Some of those speaking at the 2019 side-event reflected in the most personal terms and provided intimate reflections on their experiences as LGBTQ individuals. Here, the burden of education, of 'doing the teaching' within NATO's 'teaching machine' falls on those individuals and their willingness to share and recount trauma – and successes - in an alliance where many allies are unwilling to listen. The 2019 event, whilst demonstrating the potential of two states – Belgium and Canada – to act together to provide support, served to highlight the absence of the other member-states. Support from powerful actors such as the Secretary General can be effective. But how much do performative forms of allyship - wherein powerful elites risk very little in their pronouncements of support - actually advance sustained, institutional change?

Importantly, these institutional moves are informed by and infused with the broader international context. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the role of NATO as a provider of European and international security has once again become a focus of sustained political, media and academic debate. Many of these debates have centralised discussions of military power and strategic state interests. In doing so they offer an incomplete analysis. These factors are interwoven with the competing constructions of values and identity. As part of increasingly 'value-centred' claims, states like Russia and alliances such as NATO are drawing on gender and sexualities in the justifications for their foreign and security policies. Queer-informed research has demonstrated how states, international institutions and their leaders are using LGBTQ rights to frame understandings of themselves in their international relations. Whether this be as 'progressive allies' in the case of NATO, or as a defender of Mother Russia's 'traditional values' against the 'immorality' of a corrupt West. (Weber, 2016; Baker 2017; Wilkinson, 2018; Slootmaeckers, 2020; Cooper-Cunningham, 2022). These claims are playing out at various levels and across multiple platforms, including social media and have significant, material consequences for LGBTQ individuals and communities within those states and within NATO.

What then for NATO LGBTQ allyship? What *should* this look like? Is it possible or even desirable? The reflections above are offered at the start of a broader project – provoked by that first curious encounter at NATO HQ back in 2019 - which will investigate the complex and contradictory answers to these questions within and across the alliance. The manoeuvres, reconciliations and framings captured in the 2019 and 2021 events, the

speeches, tweets, and images, tell us some things, but not others. They raise more curious questions than definite answers; and that's a good place to start.

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