Sean Kay explored NATO’s role in Kosovo and explained how neoliberal theory effectively analyzes the dimensions of the conflict and explains how NATO’s guiding theories effectively constrained it.

Kay agreed with neoliberal theorists that “institutions matter,” but not always for the better; he found that the institution of NATO mattered in Kosovo because it constrained action, not because it helped the problem.

Kay said that NATO evolved from a military alliance between the United States and Europe to counterbalance Soviet power during the Cold War to become an organization devoted to preserving and promoting normative roles in Europe. Instead of dissolving at the end of the Cold War, it preserved much of its basic structure and procedures and revamped itself to promote democratic principles, enforce community values, and fight human rights violations.

When the conflict in Bosnia arose, NATO had several years to sit back, observe the action, and formulate a plan in response. In this case, the “war by committee” strategy, so intrinsic in NATO because it insists on consensus before action, allowed for a reasonable degree of success, said Kay. Peacekeeping and limited involvement in the conflict allowed NATO members to promote the normative goals they collectively espoused and a longer timeline afforded their careful, calculated collective action.

Kosovo was different. Despite earlier involvement in the Balkans, NATO was ill-equipped to deal with Slobodan Milosevic and the atrocities of his regime. NATO sought to extend its history of enforcing normative beliefs, but its inability to respond quickly ultimately made it ineffective. “War by committee” slowed the decision-making process. The fast, combat situation in Kosovo indicated that a slow response time was debilitating and restrictive.

Kay pointed out that NATO’s structure not only restricted their movements, but made it much easier for Milosevic to influence its decision-making process. Because NATO does not act without consensus and because voices within NATO are equally powerful, it was easy for the Serbs to slyly impact policy by injecting their own views through NATO member states. As Kay put it, Serbs were an active part of an institutional discussion on how to deal with them.

As evidenced by the ease with which Milosevic was able to sway the sharing of information, Kay said that institutional climates can negatively effect security provisions. He said that in NATO, security is compromised by the perceived need to have all information from all parties before acting.

Kay argued that the only way for NATO to be an effective force in the twenty-first century would be to reform its decision-making processes, which might actually be impossible because it would take a consensus to reform these practices. He predicted that NATO will become increasingly irrelevant due to it inability to agree or act on issues of international security.