Since 1989 the West has been confronted by the stark reality that weak states can pose as great a danger to international stability and security as can strong states. In fact, it is the lack of power that concerns most today. From the Balkans to Africa, across the Middle East through South Asia and into the Pacific, weak states have resulted in conflicts that regularly drag the international community into their quagmires of death, destruction and stagnation. Although George H.W. Bush foresaw a new world order at the dawn of the 1990s, the reality was suddenly a new world disorder that seemed itself to herald what journalist Robert Kaplan termed ‘the coming anarchy’. The Cold War world was ordered and predictable, Kaplan argued, and with the new world being anything but ordered, the West would soon find itself nostalgic for the familiarity of the Cold War era. It was in this period that the United States and its allies in Europe began to intervene around the world to uphold stability and security. Oftentimes this involvement relied on a military-civilian dichotomy. The US solders generally carried the brunt of the military effort, whilst the Europeans were left to coordinate and carry out reconstruction and development after combat operations. NATO provided the European-American interface in such interventions, for example in the Balkans. Afghanistan has followed much the same progression.

The problem for NATO is that a military alliance just may not be relevant to nation-building. The challenges in the new security environment require more than just military capacity. Problems such as a failing economy, a lack of governance and the rule of law, disease, and so on, require more than simply military force. Of course NATO is not the only international organization. Although NATO may represent the core of the idea of the West, it is only one of several international organizations created in the wake of World War II. These other organizations often
are seen as having more relevance to state-building. Institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank are increasingly called upon to act proactively to help manage failing states. Historically these institutions have been more strongly supported within the North Atlantic Area by Canada and the European allies than the US. While many American policy-makers acknowledge the relevance of international institutions to maintaining world peace, no mainstream American policy-maker believes that these institutions should be able to impinge upon American sovereignty. The US remains firmly wedded to a modernist view of world politics where institutions are simply a tool of policy, as is the use of force. Depending on the extent of their liberal inclinations, Americans generally do not consider institutions as capable of governing world politics at a supranational level. Europeans, on the other hand, generally do believe that international institutions can provide a workable framework for global governance and the management of global crises.

Given this belief, it is imperative that international organizations such as NATO, the UN and the EU to name but three can work together in a crisis situation, each contributing their value-added skills to create a complete effect that, it is hoped, can help pull weak states out of their downward spiral. Thus, NATO’s ability to (a) utilize civil–military capability within the alliance structure and (b) to work in association with other international actors are critical to the sustainability and eventual success of any peace-building mission. Confidence in these abilities was behind Germany and Canada’s push for NATO to enter Afghanistan under the ISAF mandate, a move that would also allow them to support the US war on terror whilst avoiding involvement in Iraq. Using NATO to nation-build alongside the UN and EU was more palpable than invading Iraq on George W. Bush’s coat-tails. The argument going in to Afghanistan was that international organizations such as the UN, the World Bank, the EU and NATO are supposed to work proactively to manage crisis situations. If one looks at the literature, however, the prevailing view of international organizations is that they exist to help build trust amongst actors and reduce the negative effects of what realists call the ‘security dilemma’.

These organizations were established to manage a balance of power and constrain state action. They were not meant as organizations that would work within states to build governments. These institutions are generally seen as functionalist in that they are tools through which states can advance the national interest. This function may be compatible with the ethic of crisis management that animates the West today, but