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## Security Threats, American Pressure, and the Role of Key Personnel: How NATO's Defence Planning Process is Alleviating the Burden-Sharing Dilemma

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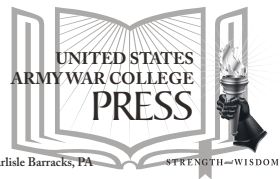
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**SECURITY THREATS, AMERICAN PRESSURE, AND  
THE ROLE OF KEY PERSONNEL:  
HOW NATO'S DEFENCE PLANNING PROCESS IS  
ALLEVIATING THE BURDEN-SHARING DILEMMA**

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John R. Deni



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**John R. Deni**

**October 2020**

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## FOREWORD

Many say one of NATO's greatest strengths is its ability to conduct multinational military planning through its integrated military command. If this statement is true, the quadrennial NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is one of the alliance's crown jewels. Through this process, the alliance strives to ensure it has the capabilities and capacity necessary to handle numerous threats and challenges across the alliance's three mission areas: collective defense, crisis response, and cooperative security. For several allies, the NDPP is their only defense planning process. For the alliance, the NDPP represents a major element in the organization's efforts to distribute fairly the burden of the member states' common security requirements.

This monograph is more than a descriptive account of the NDPP, although the monograph provides an in-depth, insider-informed treatment of the rather esoteric bureaucratic procedure. Dr. John Deni addresses a most unusual—and yet most welcome—outcome of the 2014–18 iteration of the NDPP. In 2017, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, none of the capability targets identified in the NDPP were left on the negotiating table. Previously, capability targets were identified by the alliance's secretariat, but they remained unfilled as allies failed to assume responsibility for them. In 2017, though, a new precedent was set—one that represented a significant victory for advocates of more equitable transatlantic burden sharing.

Unpacking the reason all capability targets were apportioned for the first time in over a quarter century can help both US and European policy makers address continued challenges in burden sharing. By replicating

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what worked in the 2014–18 iteration of the NDPP as well as continuing to improve on the successes achieved to date, the United States has a better chance of ensuring it has capable allies by its side with the necessary capacity to address emerging security challenges. Dr. Deni offers several recommendations that should help policy makers maintain and strengthen the NDPP in the years ahead. For this reason, the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this study as a contribution to the national security debate over burden sharing and multilateral collaboration.

*Carol V. Evans*

CAROL V. EVANS  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute and  
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## SUMMARY

How can NATO and its most important member, the United States, better ensure more equitable transatlantic burden sharing? One of the key tools the alliance uses to distribute capability and capacity burdens fairly is the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). The NDPP consists of five distinct steps that unfold over a period of four years. The purpose of the NDPP is to harmonize defense planning among the allies by identifying the types and quantity of forces necessary to undertake the alliance's full spectrum of missions: collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security.

In this monograph, Dr. John Deni examines the case of the 2014–18 NDPP. During this iteration of the quadrennial NDPP, for the first time in a quarter century, the allies agreed to accept all of the capability targets the alliance's international secretariat identified as necessary to fulfill NATO's missions. After more than 25 years of a steadily widening gap in transatlantic burden sharing, the allies apparently reversed course and took a major step toward greater equity.

Why was the NDPP so effective in 2017? The most obvious answer might be the changed threat environment, resulting from Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Another explanation might be the role US President Donald Trump played in browbeating European allies when the subject of NATO was raised. But did other circumstances or events contribute to the effectiveness of the NDPP? This study relies on an array of primary and secondary sources—including over two dozen interviews with personnel directly involved in the 2014–18 NDPP—to unpack the events

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and decisions that ultimately resulted in a significant improvement in transatlantic burden sharing. The research findings reveal answers that are sometimes intuitive and at other times surprising.

Understanding why and how the allies changed course on burden sharing through the 2014–18 NDPP is important for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, this case provides valuable lessons US officials and NATO leaders can apply as they work their way through future iterations of the NDPP, especially given the fiscal challenges flowing from coronavirus disease 2019. To leverage the lessons of the 2014–18 NDPP, this study concludes with recommendations for replicating what worked, avoiding what did not, and continuing to refine the process to ensure transatlantic burden sharing continues to trend toward greater equity.

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**INTRODUCTION**

For modern military enterprises, defense planning—the political and military process used by countries to provide the capabilities needed to meet the countries' defense commitments—is critical, and defense planning is equally critical for modern intergovernmental security organizations like NATO. Every four years, NATO implements the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). This process provides a framework within which national and alliance defense planning activities can be harmonized to meet agreed-upon defense capability targets in the most effective way. The goal is to ensure the timely identification, development, and delivery of the necessary range of interoperable forces to undertake the alliance's full spectrum of missions, including collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. Most notably, the NDPP includes the allocation of specific military requirements to individual allies or groups of allies. Usually, this allocation is the most contentious part of the NDPP. For many allies, the NDPP is their primary defense planning tool, and, as such, it is deeply entwined with issues regarding NATO's purpose, the commitment of all allies to strengthening their own defenses, and the viability of NATO's mutual defense clause.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Alexander Mattelaer, "Preparing NATO for the Next Defence-Planning Cycle," *RUSI Journal* 159, no. 3 (June/July 2014): 30–35.

In 2017, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, none of the defense capability requirements identified and allocated to allies through the NDPP were left on the negotiating table; in NATO parlance, all of the capability targets were apportioned among the allies. All of the capability targets being apportioned was a remarkable achievement in terms of burden sharing—an achievement NATO hopes to replicate in the future. In previous iterations of the NDPP, requirements for specific military capabilities would be considered and debated, but they were not always apportioned to specific allies or groups of allies, leaving the alliance open to considerable risk.

Why was the NDPP so effective in 2017? Was the process effective because of the changed threat environment, resulting from Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria? Was the process effective because of newly inaugurated President Donald Trump's relentless emphasis on fairer transatlantic burden sharing and the 2-percent defense spending goal? Did the alliance simply drop its standards and lower the requirements, thereby making meeting the requirements easier for allies? Or were other variables, such as public opinion or shared norms of behavior, at play? What factor or factors explain why the allies changed their burden-sharing behavior in 2017, and how might this successful outcome be replicated in future iterations of the NDPP?

Understanding why and how NATO achieved this goal in 2017 is important for both practical and theoretical reasons. Regarding the former, the 2014–18 iteration of the NDPP provides valuable lessons US officials and NATO leaders can apply as they work their way through the 2018–22 NDPP and future

iterations, particularly in the wake of economic dislocation induced by coronavirus disease 2019. Replicating what worked, avoiding what did not, and continuing to refine the process can help to promote fairer burden sharing as well as the fulfillment of critical requirements necessary for the defense of all NATO members.

Understanding how sovereign members of an intergovernmental organization share burdens remains an important academic pursuit in political science theory.<sup>2</sup> Unpacking the case of the 2014–18 NDPP will help to shed light on organizational behavior, bureaucratic processes, the role of “policy entrepreneurs” in organizations, and alliance management. Studying the 2014–18 NDPP will also fill gaps in the growing body of literature on NATO behavior.

This study employs a qualitative methodology known as process tracing, which is a useful tool for within-case analysis.<sup>3</sup> Process tracing focuses on the unfolding of events or situations over time and in detail. By developing an in-depth understanding of

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2. For example, see Jo Jakobsen and Tor G. Jakobsen, “Tripwires and Free-Riders: Do Forward-Deployed US Troops Reduce the Willingness of Host-Country Citizens to Fight for Their Country?,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 40, no. 2 (2019): 135–64; Tim Haesebrouck, “Democratic Participation in the Air Strikes against Islamic State: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14, no. 2 (2018): 254–75; Tomáš Weiss, “Between NATO and a Hard Place: Defence Spending Debate in Germany and Czechia,” *European Security* 28, no. 2 (2019): 193–211; and Marina E. Henke, “Buying Allies: Payment Practices in Multilateral Military Coalition-Building,” *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 128–62.

3. David Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing,” *Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011): 823–30.

the key steps in an event or situation—in this case, the NDPP—a researcher is able to characterize and analyze change, which in turn allows one to draw causal inferences from the available diagnostic evidence—in this case, interviews and other direct communications with 25 individuals closely involved in the NDPP as well as public opinion data, threat assessments, official government pronouncements and rhetoric, and economic and fiscal data. Next, I further operationalize the decisions to apportion all NDPP capability targets by examining defense spending patterns during the mid-2010s. Although not conflating defense spending with burden sharing is important, the former necessarily underpins decisions made by NATO allies on whether to accept capability targets apportioned through the NDPP and share burdens fairly.

Before examining how the NDPP played out in 2017, one must examine the NDPP's constituent steps. Following this examination, the monograph analyzes the available scholarly literature to determine the reasons allies might have behaved differently in the 2014–18 iteration of the NDPP. This analysis leads to several hypotheses, which are then tested against the story of the 2014–18 NDPP. Then, the monograph attempts to summarize key lessons learned and offer policy makers recommendations on how to replicate the success of 2017.

Based on the available evidence, the most important variables in explaining the events of 2017 were the changed threat environment, political pressure from Washington, and the role of policy entrepreneurs working within NATO. Together, these three explanatory variables best explain the novel outcome of the 2014–18 NDPP. Not

coincidentally, these variables also point toward some of the recommendations policy makers might consider leveraging to promote more equitable burden sharing in the future.

This monograph will demonstrate many NATO entities, such as the NATO International Staff and Allied Command Transformation (ACT), are involved in the NDPP. These entities are bureaucratic actors distinct from the military or civilian officials of allied governments. In most instances, identifying or referring to the NATO entities specifically makes sense; however, in some cases, the monograph will refer to the entities collectively as the alliance's "international secretariat."

## **THE NATO DEFENCE PLANNING PROCESS**

The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) consists of five distinct steps that unfold over a period of four years. The purpose of the process is to harmonize defense planning among the allies by identifying the types and quantity of forces necessary for undertaking the alliance's full spectrum of missions in terms of collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. Getting the mix of capabilities and capacity right and then spreading the mix out fairly is no quick or easy feat because the alliance is now comprised of 30 countries, each with a wide variety of political, fiscal, international, and other factors shaping defense planning and budgeting. In the words of one observer, harmonization through the NDPP is designed "to bring order to chaos."<sup>4</sup>

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4. Officials from the US Mission to NATO, interview by the author, October 24, 2017.



The first step in the NDPP is the development of the Political Guidance for Defence Planning. This guidance, in the form of a document approved by all NATO allies at the defense minister level, sets out the objectives for the alliance to achieve. The Political Guidance is more specific than the broader strategic documents from which it is drawn, such as the alliance's strategy document, the Strategic Concept. The Political Guidance applies agreed-upon alliance policies to the defense planning context. The Political Guidance reflects the threats, risks, and challenges the alliance expects to face and identifies the number, scale, and nature of operations the alliance should be able to conduct. This latter concept is typically referred to as the alliance's Level of Ambition.

The second step in the NDPP is the determination of military requirements. Allied Command Transformation (ACT) leads the process by using the Level of Ambition and other information in the Political Guidance to develop an initial list of requirements, which may be quantitative or qualitative in nature. Allied Command Operations (ACO) provides input as well, particularly by verifying the initial ACT list will be sufficient for current operational plans and no requirement gaps will remain. The final, consolidated list of required capabilities identified through this process is known as the Minimum Capability Requirements (MCR).

The third step of the NDPP is the apportionment of requirements through the setting of capability targets for individual allies. Major players in this step include ACT, which has the lead initially; ACO; and defense planners from the NATO International Staff and NATO International Military Staff. Together, these entities apply two principles to ensure equity

as they apportion capability requirements to specific allies: fair burden sharing and reasonable challenge. Through the use of these principles and in consideration of other factors, such as relative national wealth, the alliance tries to avoid saddling allies with an unfair burden relative to other allies or demanding more than an ally is reasonably capable of delivering based on its defense budget and force structure. The result is a target package for each ally that identifies existing and future capabilities requested by NATO and includes associated priorities and time lines. The targets are expressed in terms that provide sufficient flexibility for innovative solutions to fulfill capability target requirements.

Allied Command Transformation (ACT), with support from ACO, explains the apportionment in meetings at NATO Headquarters and at apportionment workshops all allies are expected to attend. Thereafter, personnel from ACT, ACO, the NATO International Staff, and the alliance's International Military Staff conduct consultation meetings in allied capitals. Based on these consultations, the International Staff takes the lead to refine or otherwise clarify the capability targets (and related justifications) for each ally.

After the capability target packages have been revised, the International Staff leads a series of Multilateral Examinations. During these examinations, the allies review and agree on each target package on the basis of "consensus minus one" – the ally whose target package is the subject of examination cannot veto an otherwise unanimous decision by the rest of the allies. But if an ally objects to its target package, the ally only needs to convince one other ally to break the consensus. For this reason, allies have been known to engage in quid pro quo. Collusion on technologically

advanced military hardware is more common because it tends to be expensive.<sup>5</sup>

If, after the Multilateral Examinations, some targets are “unapportioned,” the commanders of ACO and ACT conduct an operational impact assessment. Typically, most targets – but not all – are apportioned.

After all Multilateral Examinations have been completed, the final, agreed-upon capability target packages are forwarded to the North Atlantic Council for submission to allied defense ministers. Defense ministers then adopt the packages and agree to integrate them into their national defense planning processes.

The fourth step in the NDPP is to facilitate implementation. The NATO international secretariat primarily occupies a supporting role during this step, helping to assist allies as they fulfill their national target package commitments, either individually or through multinational projects. Given the nature of defense acquisition, this step unfolds continuously.

The fifth and final step of the NDPP is to review the results. This step is conducted every two years, providing opportunities for course correction. The International Staff leads this examination of whether and how allies are meeting their allocated capability targets. Data for this assessment is provided by all allies in the form of their national defense plans and policies, military forces and capabilities, nonmilitary forces that could potentially contribute to alliance operations, and the spending details of their national defense budgets. After the examinations have been completed, overview summaries of each finalized

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5. Member of the NATO International Staff, interview by the author, October 12, 2016.

assessment are then compiled into a Capability Report that is reviewed and agreed upon by the North Atlantic Council, which then provides the report to alliance defense ministers.

## WHAT DRIVES BURDEN-SHARING DECISIONS?

Capability shortfalls have long been a recurring issue within NATO, particularly during the Vietnam War era, when US operational demands outside of Europe compelled American leaders to remove a division's worth of troops as well as several combat aircraft squadrons from Europe.<sup>6</sup> But during most of the Cold War, allies accepted their capability apportionments relatively easily, primarily because of the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990s, the demise of the Soviet Union led to dramatic unilateral cuts in defense budgets and reductions in force structure across the entire alliance. Especially as the alliance became involved in expeditionary operations in places such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, cuts in defense budgets and force structure made accepting capability apportionments and fulfilling capability targets more difficult for allies. As a result, NATO defense planning routinely resulted in unallocated capabilities—until 2017. In that year, as the NDPP unfolded, not a single

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6. Diego Ruiz Palmer, *A Strategic Odyssey: Constancy of Purpose and Strategy-Making in NATO, 1949–2019* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2019), 53.

7. Member of the International Staff, interview by the author, October 24, 2017; and civilian official assigned to the Dutch delegation to NATO, interview by the author, October 24, 2017.

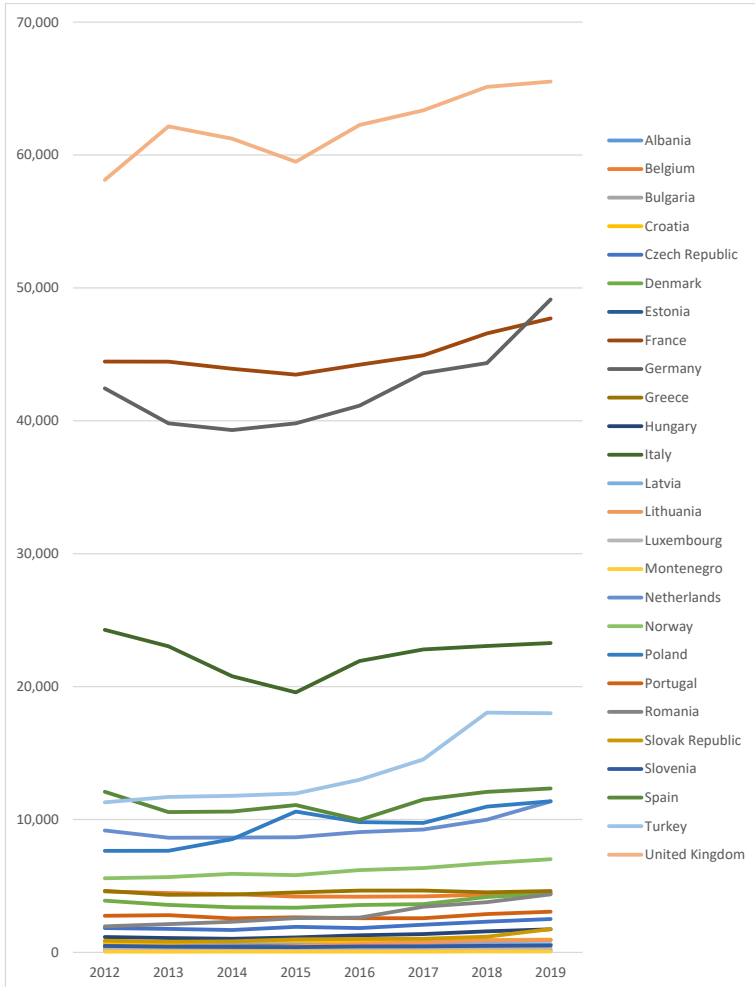
capability target was left unallocated for the first time since the end of the Cold War. What changed?

### **The Importance of Increased Defense Spending**

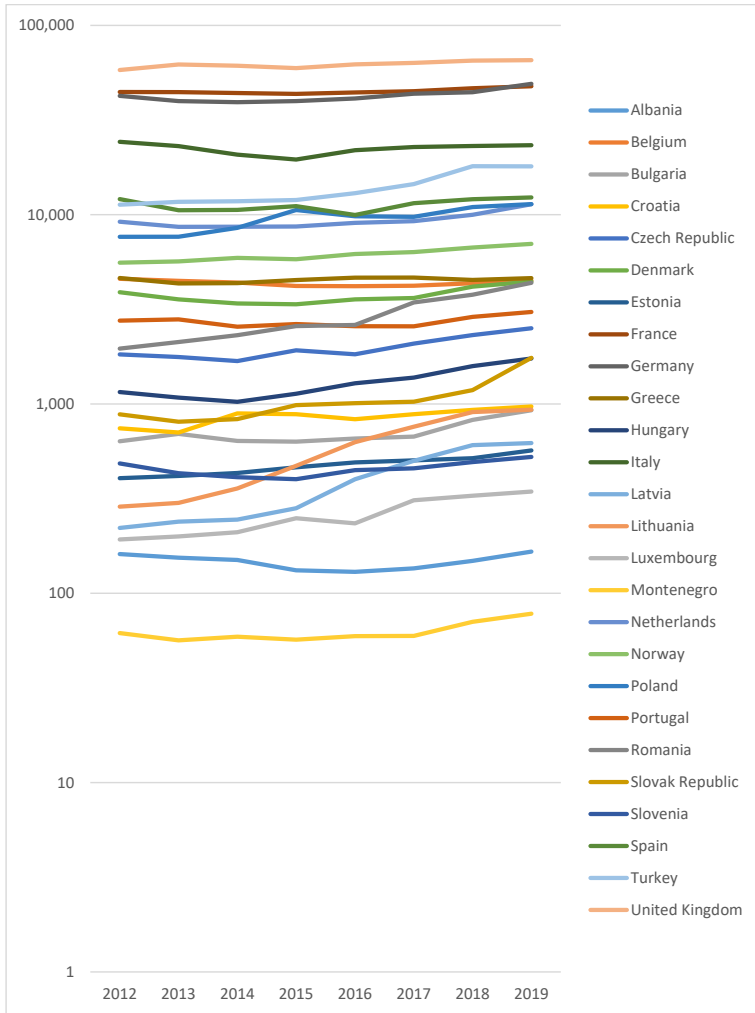
The apportionment of all capability targets was very likely made possible by the availability of additional defense budget resources. In other words, allies increased government spending and allocated the increase to defense, reallocated budget resources away from nondefense and toward defense accounts, or both. Indeed, nearly all European members of NATO increased their defense budgets after 2014 and 2015. Figure 1 depicts defense spending by European NATO members from 2012 through 2019 in constant 2015 millions of US dollars. In nearly all cases, spending rose after 2014 and 2015.

Given the wide disparity in the magnitude of defense spending among just the European allies, figure 2 displays the same data using a logarithmic scale. Although some of the changes from year to year are slight, the trend across nearly the entire alliance has been upward since 2014.

European allies were possibly siphoning funds from other nondefense budgetary accounts instead of expanding overall government spending. Regardless, the outcome was the same: Available defense resources increased, enabling (but not compelling) alliance members to agree to the apportionment of all NDPP capability targets.



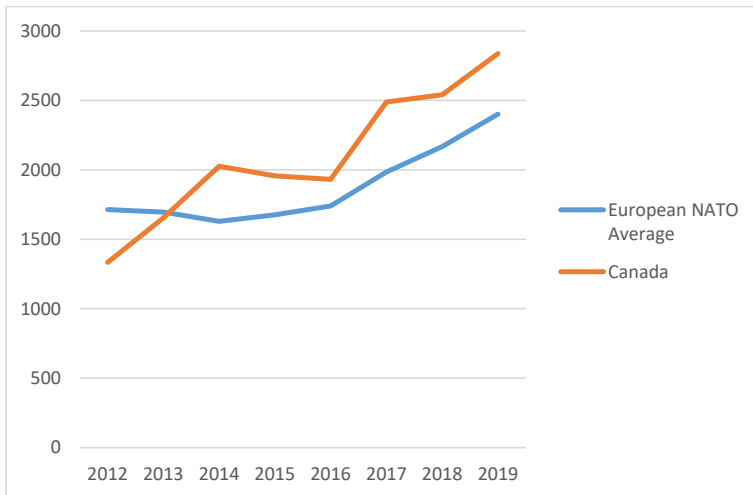
**Figure 1. European NATO defense spending in constant 2015 million US\$**



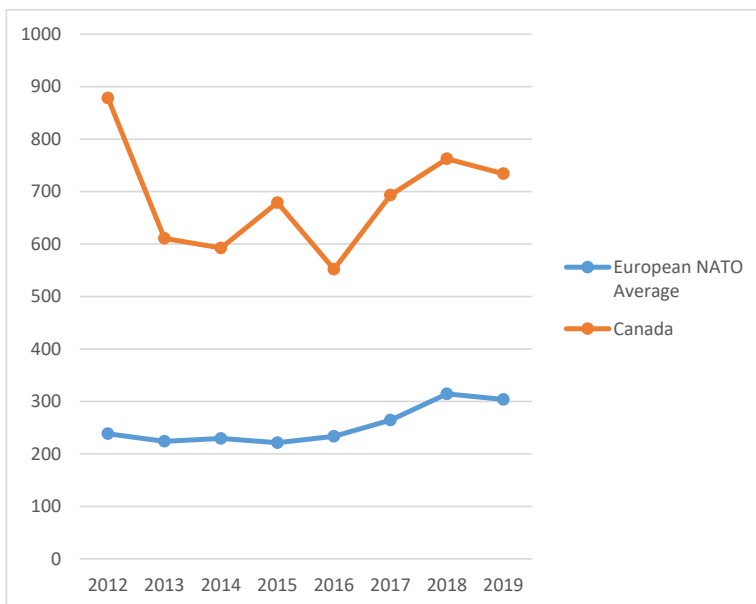
**Figure 2. European NATO defense spending in constant 2015 millions (US\$), log scale**

Could NATO allies have shifted money from military accounts or activities not recommended through the NDPP to capabilities and capacities that were part of the allies' respective capability target packages? In other words, perhaps allies were simply shifting funds within their respective defense budgets. For example, allies could have been moving funds out of current operations and into military procurement accounts as NATO operations in Afghanistan were waning. The available evidence indicates this shifting probably did not occur. By disaggregating defense expenditures, one can see nearly all categories of military spending were trending upward for European NATO members after 2014, as seen in figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 (the available data for 2019 is insufficient). (Note that NATO includes in the Other Defense Expenditures category operations and maintenance expenditures, other research and development expenditures, and any expenditures not allocated among the Equipment, Personnel, and Infrastructure categories.) This upward trend means instead of shifting money among defense accounts – from the accounts that did not help the ally in question fulfill its capability targets to the accounts that did – European NATO allies relied on increased defense spending across the board.





**Figure 3. Equipment expenditures in 2015 constant millions (US\$)**



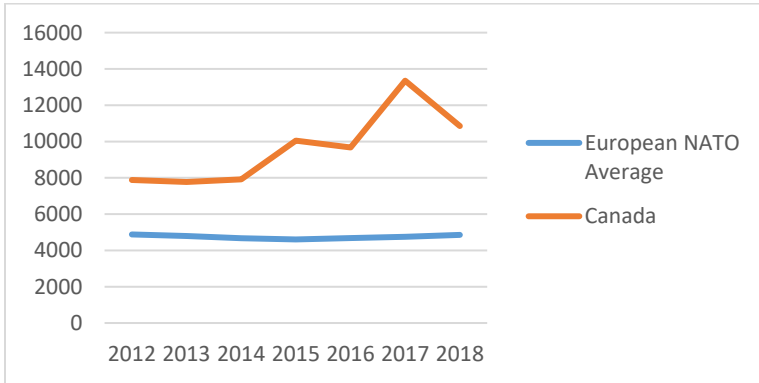
**Figure 4. Infrastructure expenditures in 2015 constant millions (US\$)**

Increased defense funding therefore appears to have been a necessary factor for members to agree to the apportionment of all NDPP capability targets. To be clear, though, increased defense funding did not necessarily mean NATO allies were compelled to use the additional resources for the apportionment of all NDPP-assigned capability targets. For example, allies could have decided to devote their additional defense funds to military capabilities and capacities that were not included in their capability target packages but were considered to be more useful for other national defense priorities outside of NATO.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, separating defense spending from burden sharing as distinct political choices is important. But NATO as well as many scholars tend to view burden sharing through the prism of defense spending, especially in terms of the alliance-wide goal of spending the equivalent of 2 percent of the countries' gross domestic product on defense. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this monograph, although defense spending and burden sharing are clearly related—the former is a necessary element of the latter—they are not to be conflated. If one were to assume defense spending was the only measure of burden sharing, then one could conclude Greece, which routinely spends more than the equivalent of 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, is carrying a fair share of the defense burden. But this statement is highly debatable because Greece spends most of its defense budget (70 percent) on personnel and has a poor record of contributing to major NATO operations. For example, Greece typically contributed fewer troops to NATO's International Security Assistance Force mission in

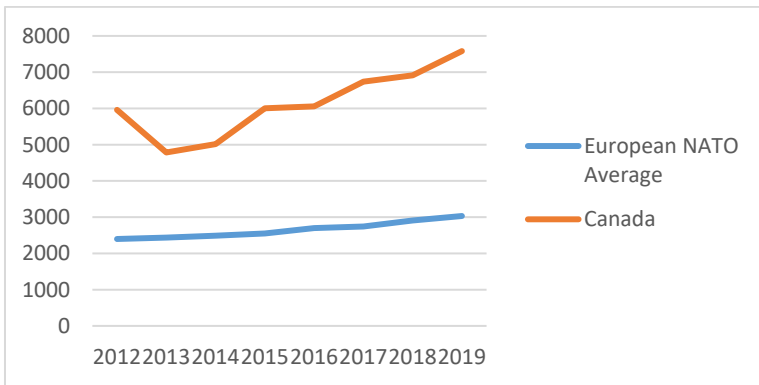
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8. Alexander Mattelaer, "Revisiting the Principles of NATO Burden-Sharing," *Parameters* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 25–33.

Afghanistan than many smaller allies like Latvia did; Greece even contributed less than some non-NATO partners, like New Zealand.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 5. Personnel expenditures in 2015 constant millions (US\$)**



**Figure 6. Other defense expenditures in 2015 constant millions (US\$)**

9. NATO, "ISAF Placemats Archive," updated May 23, 2017, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/107995.htm>.

## Scholarly Literature on Burden Sharing

A vast amount of scholarly literature addresses the determinants of burden sharing; thus, mining this body of work for independent variables to help explain the 2014–18 NDPP is reasonable. International relations, political economy, comparative politics, and foreign policy decision making provide answers to questions surrounding burden sharing, defense policy, and resource allocation. Dividing the available literature into two broad categories—domestic or state-level determinants and international or system-level determinants—is helpful.

Among the scholars who favor state-level determinants, some argue regime type is the most important variable for explaining whether and how states decide to shoulder more of the common defense burden.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, governments that are led by a single key decision maker—such as a president or a prime minister in a single-party parliamentary system (that is, a parliamentary system in which a single party controls the government)—may be more willing to shoulder more of the defense burden, in an operational sense at least, than governments comprised of parliamentary coalitions.

Other scholars point to public opinion as having a substantial impact on the willingness of political leaders to share defense burdens and increase defense

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10. David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

spending.<sup>11</sup> The public-opinion theory can be a two-way street, with political leaders attempting to shape public opinion through strong narratives that justify burden sharing.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the point remains political leaders have greater freedom of action to assume greater defense burdens if the leaders also have public opinion on their side. Other scholars rely on role theory, the pursuit of prestige, or strategic culture—that is, popular conceptions of the actions a country should take, what the country’s place is, or how the country should engage—as important determinants in whether and how a country decides to

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11. Rachel A. Dicke et al., “NATO Burden-Sharing in Libya: Understanding the Contributions of Norway, Spain and Poland to the War Effort,” *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 22, no. 4 (2013): 29–53; Jo Jakobsen, “Is European NATO Really Free-Riding? Patterns of Material and Non-Material Burden-Sharing After the Cold War,” *European Security* 27, no. 4 (2018): 490–514; Justin Massie, “Why Democratic Allies Defect Prematurely: Canadian and Dutch Unilateral Pullouts from the War in Afghanistan,” *Democracy and Security* 12, no. 2 (2016): 85–113; Richard C. Eichenberg and Richard Stoll, “Representing Defense: Democratic Control of the Defense Budget in the United States and Western Europe,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 47, no. 4 (August 2003): 399–422; and Thomas Hartley and Bruce Russett, “Public Opinion and the Common Defense: Who Governs Military Spending in the United States?,” *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 4 (December 1992): 905–15.

12. Jens Ringsmose and Berit Kaja Børgesen, “Shaping Public Attitudes towards the Deployment of Military Power: NATO, Afghanistan and the Use of Strategic Narratives,” *European Security* 20, no. 4 (2011): 505–28.

share the defense burden.<sup>13</sup> Some research has shown a country's decisions may differ depending on its size, with smaller allies more concerned with perceptions across the alliance.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, some scholars rely on political-economic explanations for burden sharing. Decisions to increase defense spending—an apparently necessary but not always sufficient element of increased burden sharing—are often related to domestic economic performance. Advocates of this perspective therefore argue burden sharing decreases in economically difficult times and periods of fiscal belt-tightening.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to state-level determinants, many scholars have argued in favor of system-level variables when trying to explain burden-sharing behavior. The geopolitical environment, especially international security crises and threats, arguably forms the most important systemic variable. Proponents of this perspective argue when a state perceives a security threat or is engaged in a crisis, the state is more willing to increase its defense

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13. Stephen J. Cimbala and Peter Forster, *The US, NATO and Military Burden-Sharing* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 18; Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Jordan Becker, "The Correlates of Transatlantic Burden Sharing: Revising the Agenda for Theoretical and Policy Analysis," *Defense & Security Analysis* 33, no. 2 (2017): 131-57.

14. Weiss, "Between NATO and a Hard Place," 193-211.

15. Ellen Hallams and Benjamin Schreer, "Towards a 'Post-American' Alliance? NATO Burden-Sharing After Libya," *International Affairs* 88, no. 2 (March 2012): 313-27; and Andrew Richter, "Sharing the Burden? US Allies, Defense Spending, and the Future of NATO," *Comparative Strategy* 35, no. 4 (August 2016): 298-314.

spending and to take on a greater share of common defense burdens.<sup>16</sup>

Other scholars have found when a state is part of an alliance, the state's share of the common defense burden is essentially inversely proportional to the amount of defense provided by the state's allies, especially for larger members of an alliance.<sup>17</sup> Thus, if a member of an alliance is taking on more of the shared defense burden, the member may be doing so because its allies are shirking their responsibilities. A related phenomenon arguably more common in seemingly permanent alliances like NATO is burden shifting. Because members of an alliance such as NATO presumably have an interest in the alliance's continued existence, they avoid engaging completely in free riding, which might lead to abandonment by

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16. Andrew Bennett et al., "Burden-Sharing in the Persian Gulf War," *International Organization* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 39-75; William Nordhaus, John R. Oneal, and Bruce Russett, "The Effects of the International Security Environment on National Military Expenditures: A Multicountry Study," *International Organization* 66, issue 3 (Summer 2012): 491-513; and Gary Zuk and Nancy R. Woodbury, "US Defense Spending, Electoral Cycles, and Soviet-American Relations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30, no. 3 (September 1986): 445-68.

17. Keith Hartley and Todd Sandler, "NATO Burden-Sharing: Past and Future," *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 6 (November 1999): 665-80; Joseph Lepgold, "NATO's Post-Cold War Collective Action Problem," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998): 78-106; John R. Oneal and Paul F. Diehl, "The Theory of Collective Action and NATO Defense Burdens: New Empirical Tests," *Political Research Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (June 1994): 373-96; Glenn Palmer, "Corralling the Free Rider: Deterrence and the Western Alliance," *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (June 1990): 147-64; and Mancur Olson Jr. and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 48, no. 3 (August 1966): 268.

the members that are carrying the burden or to the collapse of the organization. Instead, each ally tries to shift some amount of its defense burden to its allies without completely wrecking the alliance.<sup>18</sup>

Another potential system-level independent variable is the role played by international norms of behavior.<sup>19</sup> Through iterative coordination over time, some scholars argue, alliance members form stronger cooperative habits with each other, particularly those related to deterrence and international security.<sup>20</sup> In other words, some alliance members may have chosen to maintain solidarity with each other versus choosing to once again cut defense spending, shirk responsibilities, and leave some capability targets unapportioned, even while others were increasing spending and providing more security goods.

Instead of freely choosing to maintain solidarity, perhaps the allies perceived coercive pressure from the United States—the dominant member of the alliance—to accept all capability targets. The fear of abandonment by the alliance’s most important member could conceivably motivate European members to take on a greater share of the common defense burden as a means of safeguarding the American commitment

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18. Wallace Thies, *Friendly Rivals: Bargaining and Burden-Shifting in NATO* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003).

19. Frédéric Mérand and Antoine Rayroux, “The Practice of Burden Sharing in European Crisis Management Operations,” *European Security* 25, no. 4 (October 2016): 442–60.

20. Russell Hardin, *Collective Action* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Robert Axelrod, “An Evolutionary Approach to Norms,” *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1986): 1095–112; and Glenn Palmer, “Alliance Politics and Issue Areas: Determinants of Defense Spending,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 1 (February 1990): 190–211.



to their security.<sup>21</sup> Washington's attempted use of coercion vis-à-vis its allies is nothing new in burden sharing or defense spending. But coercion has had a limited record of success in this regard, at least among the larger members of the alliance, like Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Turkey, Spain, and Poland.<sup>22</sup>

Borrowing from principal-agent theory, perhaps the alliance organization wields some degree of influence over allies' national defense spending and subsequent national decisions on the apportionment and acceptance of capability targets. Since the end of the Cold War, the alliance, especially NATO's international secretariat, has grown in authority and influence in some issue areas through the process of internationalization, particularly vis-à-vis smaller allies that lack Pentagon-sized defense establishments.<sup>23</sup> This growth in authority and influence should not imply NATO has become a supranational body; rather, the levers of control available to NATO's many principals mean the agent is unlikely to ever spin completely out of allies' control. But this growth in authority and influence means the international secretariat wields influence in processes

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21. Jens Ringsmose, "Paying for Protection: Denmark's Military Expenditure during the Cold War," *Cooperation and Conflict* 44, no. 1 (March 2009): 73-97; and Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461-95.

22. John R. Deni, *NATO and Article 5* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); and Charles A. Kupchan, "NATO and the Persian Gulf: Examining Intra-Alliance Behavior," *International Organization* 42, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 317-46.

23. Sebastian Mayer, ed., *NATO's Post-Cold War Politics: The Changing Provision of Security* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

such as the NDPP and decisions on whether to agree to the apportionment of all capability targets.

Finally, some scholars argue both domestic-level and international-level factors explain defense-spending and burden-sharing outcomes. Scholars who advocate this integrative or blended approach have generally found international threats drive increases in defense spending or decisions to take on greater burden sharing, and domestic political and economic factors drive the purchases countries make with their additional resources or the specific form of burden sharing the countries undertake.<sup>24</sup>

## **The Hypotheses**

To summarize the discussion above, the existing scholarly literature on burden sharing helps to generate a list of reasonable hypotheses that might conceivably explain the NDPP events of 2017.

- Hypothesis 1 (regime type): Alliance members led by presidents or prime ministers in single-party parliamentary systems were most willing to agree to the apportionment of all NDPP capability targets.
- Hypothesis 2 (public opinion): Public opinion in most allied countries favored increased defense spending, which enabled political leaders to agree to the apportionment of all NDPP capability targets.
- Hypothesis 3 (domestic political economy): Alliance members leveraged the apportionment of all capability targets as a means of addressing

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24. Bennett et al., "Burden-Sharing in the Persian Gulf War," 39-75; and Kupchan, "NATO and the Persian Gulf," 317-46.

widespread unemployment and poor economic prospects domestically.

- Hypothesis 4 (external security threat): The increased sense of threat posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—coupled with limited European military capacity to respond—compelled all allies to agree to the apportionment of their capability targets.
- Hypothesis 5 (collective action dilemma): Each member of NATO feared its allies would shirk their respective responsibilities, and, therefore, alliance members decided independently to agree to the apportionment of their individual capability targets.
- Hypothesis 6 (shared norms): Alliance members perceived a sense of solidarity within the transatlantic community, which led to a consensus on the need to agree to the apportionment of all capability targets.
- Hypothesis 7 (American coercion): European members of the alliance, fearful of American abandonment amid rising security challenges, yielded to coercive pressure from Washington to agree to the apportionment of all capability targets.
- Hypothesis 8 (international secretariat's influence): The alliance's international secretariat successfully wielded the NDPP to either convince or cajole allies to agree to the apportionment of all capability targets.

The next section examines in detail the 2014–18 iteration of the NDPP, paying particular attention to the events of 2017.

## THE 2014–18 NDPP

In June 2015, NATO defense ministers met in Brussels and approved the Political Guidance, including the input from the NATO Military Committee and both Allied Command Transformation (ACT) and Allied Command Operations (ACO). The revised Political Guidance followed in the wake of the alliance's momentous Wales Summit in September 2014. Although the Wales meeting was originally conceived as a victory lap following the winding down of major allied combat operations in Afghanistan, the summit agenda was upended by two key events earlier that year: Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's declaration of an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq. These twin security challenges prompted a significant reappraisal of NATO's ends, ways, and means. The drafting and approval of the 2015 Political Guidance was one of the first expressions of this reassessment.

The issuance of the 2015 Political Guidance fulfilled the nearly yearlong effort to complete step 1 of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP).<sup>25</sup> The 2015 Political Guidance—significantly lengthier than previous versions—devoted considerably more attention to deterrence and collective defense, topics that had faded in relative importance since the end of the Cold War, when NATO began to embrace out-of-area expeditionary operations in places like Bosnia and Afghanistan. The revised Political Guidance also represented a reopening of the internal NATO debate between collective defense—traditionally the focus of

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25. NATO, "Statement by NATO Defence Ministers," Press Release (2015) 094, June 25, 2015, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_121133.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_121133.htm).

allies worried about Russia – and crisis management – more often the focus of allies along NATO’s southern tier.<sup>26</sup> As NATO moved to reembrace collective defense with a renewed focus on Russia, the new Political Guidance did not call for an abandonment or a scaling back of crisis management missions. Instead, the alliance would maintain a 360-degree approach to security – in other words, NATO would attempt to be all things to all allies.<sup>27</sup> Avoiding hard choices early in the planning process would have serious implications in later stages of the NDPP. In short, allies would soon see a full-spectrum alliance requires a significant expansion of military requirements.

Through the fall of 2015 and the winter months that followed, ACT, in coordination with ACO and defense planners on the NATO International Staff and the International Military Staff, developed the Minimum Capability Requirement (MCR). As noted earlier, the MCR maps the broad guidance outlined in the Political Guidance to specific military capabilities and forces. Convincing the allies the minimum capabilities necessary to fulfill NATO’s Level of Ambition would have to expand was no easy feat. Largely left to key leaders in ACT, this task required explaining to the allies the reason the MCR was expanding from its previous iteration.<sup>28</sup> Allied Command Transformation (ACT) based its arguments

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26. Aylin Matlé and Alessandro Scheffler Corvaja, *From Wales to Warsaw: A New Normal for NATO?*, Facts & Findings no. 187 (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, e.V., October 2015).

27. John R. Deni, “Staying Alive by Overeating? The Enduring NATO Alliance at 70,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 17, issue 2 (June 2019): 157-73.

28. Senior defense planner on the NATO International Staff, interview by the author, October 25, 2017.

on the dramatically changed security environment confronting the alliance. Given this argument, any objective observer would have found arguing against the expansion of the MCR difficult. Even though the allies do not approve the MCR, it is a foundational document for the development of the capability targets; thus, the allies' ultimate acknowledgment of the necessity of an expanded MCR in March 2016 was an important event.

This acknowledgment and acceptance of ACT and ACO's justification was critical—without it, the international secretariat would have found convincing the allies to accept increased targets in their capability packages later on much more difficult. Ultimately, the allies acknowledged the expanded MCR for several reasons. First, of course, were the persuasive arguments regarding the changed threat environment.<sup>29</sup> But ACT benefited from having conducted an in-depth analysis in 2015 of the previous NDPP to identify lessons learned.<sup>30</sup> This identification of lessons learned gave ACT, ACO, and the International Staff awareness of the likely key points of friction with the allies as the 2014–18 NDPP unfolded. The identification of lessons learned also created a body of knowledge on the requirements for the international secretariat to move forward and ensure the MCR would be perceived by allies as thorough and valid.

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29. Petr Pavel, Curtis M. Scaparrotti, and Denis Mercier, “Joint Press Conference” (speech, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium, May 18, 2016), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_131048.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_131048.htm).

30. Retired senior military officer formerly assigned to Allied Command Transformation (ACT), interview by the author, May 21, 2020.

A key reason the 2016 MCR was viewed as more relevant than it had been in the past was by the 2014–18 iteration of the NDPP, ACT and ACO were using more rigorous analytical techniques to translate the Political Guidance into the MCR. These improved techniques convinced the allies the expanded MCR, as developed by ACT, ACO, the International Staff, and the International Military Staff, was a vital and valid representation of the capabilities NATO needed.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, another important reason the allies approved the MCR was the degree of transparency involved in its development, which had improved over previous NDPP iterations.<sup>32</sup> Throughout 2015 and 2016, the international secretariat regularly briefed allied delegations in Brussels. Typically, these meetings occurred with individual delegations, but they were also conducted in small group or regional contexts as well as with all allies at once. Some meetings were held over breakfast, and others over lunch, but all had the objective of providing allies with maximum accessibility to the most senior ranks of the international secretariat to address allies' concerns, maintain rumor control, and achieve buy-in on the MCR as it was being built.

Completion of the MCR meant the NDPP could shift to step 3, the apportionment of capability targets. The Multilateral Examinations that form a critical

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31. Defense investment experts on the NATO International Staff, interview by the author, October 26, 2017.

32. Civilian official assigned to the Danish delegation to NATO, interview by the author, October 25, 2017; military official assigned to the German delegation to NATO, interview by the author, October 26, 2017; and retired senior military officer formerly assigned to ACT.

part of step 3 were slated to start in spring 2017, and Portugal was the first country up for discussion.<sup>33</sup>

Weeks before, in the spring, Lisbon had indicated it would not accept the capability targets it had been allocated. To avoid being saddled with the targets it wanted to reject, the Portuguese delegation at NATO Headquarters in Brussels had lined up several other allies to voice objections during Portugal's Multilateral Examination. These objections would thwart consensus among the other allies, thereby preventing Portugal from having to agree to its apportioned capability targets.

As Portugal's Multilateral Examination unfolded, the Portuguese delegation indicated it was under strict guidance from Lisbon to give no ground. As the meeting broke for lunch, representatives of the US delegation to NATO approached the International Staff members who were chairing the examination. The Americans suggested canceling the rest of the meeting because they were concerned when the decision arose later that day on whether to apportion capability targets to Portugal despite its objections, at least one other member of the alliance would break consensus. From the US perspective, such an event would set a terrible precedent at a critical time for the alliance, opening the door for other allies to fend off capability target allocations successfully during their respective Multilateral Examinations.

Instead of canceling the afternoon session, some key members of the International Staff approached the Portuguese delegation during the lunch break. These members spoke at length, and, in the name of

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33. Attendees at Portugal's Multilateral Examination, interview by the author, October 2017.



allied solidarity, the International Staff implored the Portuguese to not request other national delegations to support Portugal's rejection of targets. Eventually, the Portuguese delegation relented, agreeing in the end not to seek support from other allies to break consensus over Portugal's apportioned capability targets.

This procedure became the model other allies followed over the next several months—that is, all allies agreed not to seek support in breaking consensus on their apportioned capability targets. The International Staff, and the alliance more broadly, had averted an unhelpful outcome at a time when the security environment had changed dramatically in Europe; when allies were looking for signs of solidarity and reassurance, especially Eastern European allies; and when the alliance genuinely needed to expand its military capability and capacity. All Multilateral Examinations ended by summer 2017, and not a single capability target was left on the table unapportioned.

Following the Multilateral Examinations, NATO entities worked to assist allies in implementation, including through multinational projects and commonly funded projects. Next, the international secretariat began step 5: reviewing the results. This step was accomplished by examining baseline capability surveys from each of the allies. These surveys were originally due by the end of July 2017, but numerous allies missed this deadline as they continued to gather information.

As the baseline capability surveys were completed, the International Staff began another series of consultations with each ally to achieve a fuller understanding of each ally's implementation efforts. This work continued through mid-2018. Obviously, some capability targets required long lead times for

development, acquisition, and fielding, but in some cases the International Staff found serious progress toward achieving the allocated capability targets. The International Staff found several examples of good-faith pursuit of high-profile, expensive capabilities that allies had only reluctantly accepted originally. Most notably, in some limited cases, the International Staff also found evidence of allies pursuing capability targets they had originally contested before the Multinational Examinations.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, in some cases allies appeared to be hedging on capability target implementation in a variety of ways. For example, some allies simply pushed out the time line for the delivery of allocated capabilities. A heavy infantry brigade was a common target allocated to a number of larger or medium-sized allies, and the International Staff assessed some Southern European allies were slow to put plans in place to deliver this capability, in part because the capability did not appear to mesh well with national defense agendas.<sup>35</sup> In one case, an ally said it could achieve initial operating capability of this target with 24 months' notice, which essentially amounted to a rolling, indefinite delay.

Nevertheless, the 2014–18 NDPP was, overall, a major success in the alliance's effort to reembrace the commitment to mutual defense as defined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. For the first time in a quarter century, alliance capability targets were apportioned without objection, and NATO made

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34. Defense planner on the NATO International Staff, interview by the author, February 5, 2018.

35. Representative of the US delegation to NATO, interview by the author, November 26, 2019.

tangible, unmistakable progress toward strengthening deterrence and reassurance.

## **EXPLAINING THE 2014–18 NDPP**

Why did the Portuguese delegation effectively agree to its apportioned capability targets during its Multilateral Examination? Why did every other ally follow suit? Why did the 2014–18 iteration of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) result in such a different set of outcomes relative to previous NDPP iterations? The available evidence, including interviews with direct participants, discussions with observers of the process, and official statements and policy documents, indicates no single factor caused allies to accept their capability targets. Rather, a variety of factors appear to have been important.

First, nearly every individual interviewed for this monograph cited the changed threat environment. The new threat environment comprised several events and threats, but, in particular, the role played by Russia cannot be overstated.<sup>36</sup> Russia's invasion

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36. Senior civilian on the NATO International Staff, interview by the author, March 4, 2016; defense planners on the NATO International Staff, interview by the author, March 4, 2016; senior defense planner on the NATO International Staff; US military officers assigned to the US Mission to NATO, interview by the author, October 24, 2017; civilian official assigned to the Dutch delegation to NATO; civilian official assigned to the Danish delegation to NATO; Defense planner on the NATO International Staff, interview by the author, October 25, 2017; military official assigned to the German delegation to NATO; defense investment experts on the NATO International Staff; military official assigned to the Italian delegation to NATO, interview by the author, October 26, 2017; and military official assigned to the Romanian delegation to NATO, interview by the author, October 26, 2017.

and de facto occupation of the Donbas, Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea, and Russia's unremitting efforts to destabilize countries across the continent politically and intimidate them have together formed the most important event in regional security since the unification of Germany. From the end of the Cold War until Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO had slowly but steadily lost the ability to conduct large-scale maneuver warfare, a capability necessary, if not sufficient, to defend against a Russian attack. Alliance manpower, doctrine, strategy, training, and equipment had shifted toward smaller, lighter, and expeditionary operations, such as those in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

In the halls of NATO Headquarters and in allied capitals, allies recognized reconfiguring the alliance toward deterrence and defense against Russia required a major reinvestment in conventional maneuver warfare capabilities.<sup>37</sup> Official alliance pronouncements in 2014, 2015, and 2016 made this shift in attitude clear as well. At the 2014 Wales Summit, the alliance stated it would "reverse the trend of declining defence budgets," and "increased investments should be directed towards meeting . . . capability priorities."<sup>38</sup> At Wales, the allies agreed to a Defence Investment Pledge and a Readiness Action Plan, including priorities such as "improving the robustness and readiness of our land forces for both collective defence and crisis response."<sup>39</sup>

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37. Mattelaer, "Revisiting the Principles."

38. NATO, "Wales Summit Declaration," Press Release no. (2014) 120, September 5, 2014, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm).

39. NATO, "Wales Summit Declaration."

Several months later, at the June 2015 defense ministers' meeting, allied defense ministers reiterated the changed threat environment required the "transformation of our forces and capabilities and the way we employ them."<sup>40</sup> The defense ministers also reaffirmed their commitment to "reversing the trend of declining funding for defence" because of the changed threat environment and Russia's destabilizing activities across Europe.<sup>41</sup> At the October 2015 defense ministers' meeting, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted through efforts initiated since the 2014 Wales Summit, the alliance had made "the biggest reinforcement to . . . collective defence since the end of the cold war," which would result in "a deterrence which is so essential to make sure that all NATO countries are safe and that they can rely on NATO."<sup>42</sup>

In 2016, the allies agreed at the Warsaw Summit to endorse a new deterrence and defense posture, which included stationing trip-wire forces in the newer allied countries of Eastern Europe on a continuous basis—a post-Cold War first. The allies also agreed to provide "heavier and more high-end forces and capabilities, as well as more forces at higher readiness."<sup>43</sup> Clearly, a concern was growing within NATO and in allied capitals that Russia had dramatically altered the security environment in Europe, and the

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40. NATO, "Statement by NATO Defence Ministers."

41. NATO, "Statement by NATO Defence Ministers."

42. Jens Stoltenberg, "Press Conference" (speech, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium, October 8, 2015).

43. North Atlantic Council, *Warsaw Summit Communiqué* (Warsaw: North Atlantic Council, July 9, 2016).

alliance needed to respond by increasing readiness, capabilities, and capacity.

Second, the officials interviewed for this monograph broadly agreed, even if they did so grudgingly, the American obsession with the 2-percent goal and burden sharing in general played an important role in the allies accepting their capability targets.<sup>44</sup> The focus on the 2-percent goal is typically attributed to Trump, but the defense spending target has been in the forefront of NATO leader discussions since the 2014 Wales Summit and President Barack Obama's second term, and arguably well before then.<sup>45</sup> Clearly, presidential and prime ministerial attention, focus, and rhetoric have a way of driving decision making at all other echelons of government. When the heads of state and government agree on spending targets, defense ministers gain influence and power in interagency and interministerial debates, particularly relative to finance ministers, who often wield decisive authority over doling out fiscal largesse. As Obama did before him, Trump—who has arguably more profoundly instrumentalized the threat of American abandonment than any of his predecessors—has used

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44. Civilian official assigned to the United Kingdom delegation to NATO, interview by the author, March 3, 2016; US military officer assigned to the US Mission to NATO, interview by the author, August 11, 2016; US military officers assigned to the US Mission to NATO; civilian official assigned to the Dutch delegation to NATO; civilian official assigned to the Danish delegation to NATO; civilian defense planner on the NATO International Staff, interview by the author, October 25, 2017; and military official assigned to the Romanian delegation to NATO.

45. Christina Wilkie, "Trump Is Pushing NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense. But So Did Obama and Bush," CNBC, July 11, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/11/obama-and-bush-also-pressed-nato-allies-to-spend-more-on-defense.html>.

his authority to ensure burden sharing and defense spending have remained at or near the top of every NATO summit agenda since 2014, coercing and cajoling his counterparts to do more.<sup>46</sup>

For instance, in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Obama called for more equitable burden sharing in NATO's response: "One of the things that I think, medium and long term, we'll have to examine is whether everybody is chipping in."<sup>47</sup> Later, during the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO's leaders reiterated their commitment to the 2-percent defense spending goal and related defense investment goals, especially the Defence Investment Pledge. Obama spoke of the pledge during his remarks to the press following the Wales meeting, and he would continue to raise the issue during the remaining years of his presidency.<sup>48</sup>

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46. For example, see Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, "Trump Discussed Pulling US from NATO, Aides Say amid New Concerns over Russia," *New York Times*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>; and John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 143–46.

47. Barack Obama, "EU-US Summit Address" (speech, EU-US Summit, Brussels, Belgium, March 26, 2014), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-obama-addresses-nato-strength-at-march-26-news-conference-in-brussels/2014/03/26/ade45c16-b4f2-11e3-b899-20667de76985\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-obama-addresses-nato-strength-at-march-26-news-conference-in-brussels/2014/03/26/ade45c16-b4f2-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html).

48. Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit Press Conference" (speech, 2014 Wales Summit, Newport, Wales, September 5, 2014), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/05/remarks-president-obama-nato-summit-press-conference>; and Nolan D. McCaskill, "Obama Urges NATO Members to Pull Their Weight," *Politico*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/obama-nato-pay-fair-share-231405>.

In April 2016, in remarks intended for average European citizens, Obama argued “Europe has been complacent about its own defense,” and he implored Europeans to bear their fair share of the burden.<sup>49</sup> Later that same year, at the Warsaw Summit, Obama raised the issue again with his European counterparts, noting to the press afterwards: “The majority of allies are still not hitting that 2 percent mark—an obligation we agreed to in Wales. So we had a very candid conversation about this. There’s a recognition that given the range of threats that we face and the capabilities that we need, everybody has got to step up and everybody has got to do better.”<sup>50</sup>

Trump has made the 2-percent spending goal the signature issue of his interactions with European allies on security matters. As a candidate, Trump appeared to tie the 2-percent spending commitment to whether the United States should defend particular allies, implying Washington should reconsider coming to the

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49. Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the People of Europe” (speech, Hannover Messe Fairgrounds, Hannover, Germany, April 25, 2016), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/25/remarks-president-obama-address-people-europe>.

50. Ayesha Rascoe and Yeganeh Torbati, “Burden Sharing Woes to Cloud Obama’s Trip to NATO Summit,” Reuters, July 6, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-obama-idUSKCN0ZM2KX>; and Barack Obama, “Press Conference by President Obama after NATO Summit” (speech, 2016 Warsaw Summit, Warsaw, Poland, July 9, 2016), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/09/press-conference-president-obama-after-nato-summit>.



aid of any ally that does not meet its commitments.<sup>51</sup> Since his earliest days in office, Trump has returned to this theme whenever discussing the subject of allies.<sup>52</sup> Eventually, Trump would even claim credit for the turnaround in alliance defense spending, even though the turnaround had begun before his election.<sup>53</sup> At a minimum, Trump can at least be given credit for aggressively keeping burden sharing on NATO's front burner, following in the footsteps of and building upon the work of his predecessors.

At the working level, during the 2014-18 NDPP, the American delegation to NATO amplified the rhetoric emanating from the top of the Executive Branch. In particular, the US delegation indicated it would not pick up any targets other allies had rejected. In other words, Washington would not place itself in the position of guaranteeing no targets would be left unapportioned.

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51. Donald Trump, "Foreign Policy Speech" (speech, Center for the National Interest, Washington, DC, April 27, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html>; and Donald Trump, "Speech at the Republican National Convention" (speech, Republican National Convention, Cleveland, Ohio, July 20, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html>.

52. Donald Trump, "Trump's Address to Joint Session of Congress" (speech, the Capitol, Washington, DC, February 28, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/02/28/516717981/watch-live-trump-addresses-joint-session-of-congress>.

53. C. K. Hickey, "NATO Defense Funds Have Been Building for Years, but Trump Wants the Credit," *Foreign Policy*, December 3, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/03/nato-defense-funds-have-been-building-for-years-but-trump-wants-the-credit/>.

Finally, in addition to renewed threats to European security and pressure from Washington for more equitable burden sharing, a third factor seems to have been critical in the 2014–18 NDPP: the role played by the NATO international secretariat.<sup>54</sup> In spring 2015, NATO hired a new director for defense planning, and just months later, ACT named a new head of capability development. These key staff moves came on the heels of the appointment a year-and-a-half before of a new assistant secretary general for defence policy and planning: Heinrich Brauss, a retired German general officer.

Together, these new staff members and their staffs instituted several key changes to the NDPP. First, the staff members built a more rigorous and transparent burden-sharing analysis capability known as the Burden Equivalency Model.<sup>55</sup> This model was vital to ensuring eventual acceptance by the allies of the allocated capability targets. The more rigorous burden-sharing analysis—and the transparency surrounding it—allowed allies to understand how ACT, ACO, and the International Staff arrived at their conclusions about the burdens countries were carrying.

Rigor, transparency, and iterative consultations proved to be an invaluable part of the NDPP. To be clear, allies still tried to push back on the findings of the international secretariat and shift burdens to other allies during step 3, but the depth and scope

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54. Civilian official assigned to the Dutch delegation to NATO; senior defense planner on the NATO International Staff; military official assigned to the German delegation to NATO; defense investment experts on the NATO International Staff; military official assigned to the Italian delegation to NATO; and retired senior military officer formerly assigned to ACT.

55. Senior defense planner on the NATO International Staff.

of information available for defending particular assessments and target allocations typically helped to carry the day.

The high-quality information led to more robust Multilateral Examinations, including the pivotal Portuguese examination in February 2017. Additionally, the international secretariat evinced a high degree of diplomatic creativity in finding a solution that permitted the Portuguese to remain true to guidance from Lisbon while nonetheless ensuring no capability targets would be left unapportioned.

Additionally, the international secretariat proposed a redefinition of the time lines available to the allies to fulfill their capability commitments. The “short term” was lengthened from five years to six years, and the “midterm” from 15 years to 19 years in duration.<sup>56</sup> The lengthening of time lines made agreeing on the acquisition of specific capabilities in the midterm easier for allies because they had more time to do so.<sup>57</sup> The willingness of policy entrepreneurs in the NATO international secretariat to pursue their remit to its utmost in these ways was therefore critical at several points to the success of the 2014–18 NDPP.

What do these key conclusions drawn from the 2014–18 NDPP tell us about the relative strength of the hypotheses outlined earlier? Clearly regime type (hypothesis 1)—in which presidential systems or single-party parliamentary systems were expected to accept capability targets more willingly—did not matter in the 2014–18 NDPP. Portugal, a parliamentary democracy, held elections in November

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56. Defense planner on the NATO International Staff.

57. Military official assigned to the Italian delegation to NATO; and military official assigned to the Romanian delegation to NATO.

2015, resulting in a minority government led by the center-left Socialist Party. This minority government was in place in February 2017 during Portugal's Multilateral Examination, when the country agreed not to seek support for the rejection of its apportioned capability targets. Moreover, all NATO allies—a variety of presidential and parliamentary systems—followed suit.

Hypothesis 2 (public opinion) appears to have played a minimal role in explaining the 2014–18 NDPP outcomes. Certainly, European populaces had become somewhat more willing to spend money on defense—which would facilitate greater burden sharing—but only in a relative sense. Polling data from 2016 shows only in a small number of countries—such as Poland and the Netherlands—did the public favor increasing defense spending.<sup>58</sup> Most countries favored maintaining defense spending at existing levels, which in 2016 nonetheless represented an increase from previous years.

Even less evidence supports hypothesis 3 (domestic political economy) having carried any significant weight in explaining the outcomes of the 2014–18 NDPP. By 2016, European economies were emerging—albeit slowly—from the depths of the Great Recession of 2007–9. Average year-on-year growth rates in gross domestic product in the EU reached 2 percent in 2015

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58. Bruce Stokes, Richard Wike, and Jacob Poushter, *Europeans Face the World Divided* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, June 13, 2016).

and even moved slightly higher in 2016.<sup>59</sup> Although some European economies were showing stronger growth rates than others, domestic political economic factors do not appear to have been a strong motivator in decision making vis-à-vis the NDPP.

Similarly, little evidence indicates an especially robust collective action problem (hypothesis 5) was at play in the 2014–18 NDPP, driving smaller allies to engage in free riding and to push burdens toward larger allies. In fact, the allies that attempted to shift burdens were the larger ones, and they attempted to push burdens onto both large and small allies.<sup>60</sup> But when presented with the rigorous analysis and background data amassed by the NATO international secretariat, allies typically dropped this tactic.

Having ruled out these hypotheses, a collection of other hypotheses—external security threat (hypothesis 4), American coercion (hypothesis 7), and the international secretariat’s influence (hypothesis 8)—is the strongest explanation. The clear evidence of a dramatically changed security environment in Europe; the consistent American emphasis on fairer burden sharing; and the rigor, transparency, and creativity of the international secretariat in shaping and implementing the NDPP together best explain the success NATO achieved in the 2014–18 NDPP.

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59. Silvia Amaro, “Euro Zone Growth Outpaces the US for the First Time since the 2008 Crash,” CNBC, January 31, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/01/31/euro-zone-gdp-hits-05-in-last-quarter-of-2016-beating-estimates-january-inflation-at-18-unemployment-falls.html>; and “Stable GDP Growth Continues in the EU and United States,” UN Economic Commission for Europe, 2017, <https://www.unece.org/info/media/news/statistics/2017/stable-gdp-growth-continues-in-the-eu-and-united-states/doc.html>.

60. Retired senior military officer formerly assigned to ACT.

Additionally, shared norms (hypothesis 6) played a minor role: The international secretariat employed arguments based in part on solidarity and shared burdens that helped convince the Portuguese not to seek support for the rejection of their apportioned capability targets. But in terms of explanatory power, this hypothesis does not appear to be on the same level as the other three.

## **CONCLUSION: BUILDING UPON SUCCESS**

The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is a major bureaucratic undertaking for both the alliance organization and the allies. For a very small handful of larger allies, like the United States, national interest and other objectives drive defense requirements and force development to the degree NATO requirements are more of an afterthought. For many more allies, though, the NDPP represents their primary defense planning tool. For an alliance based on consensus and fair burden and risk sharing, the NDPP is a vital process. The 2014–18 NDPP placed the alliance on a footing to achieve significantly more equitable sharing of common defense burdens among the NATO allies. How can NATO and its leading ally, the United States, build on this success and replicate it in future NDPP iterations? This section of the monograph will attempt to glean key lessons and offer some policy recommendations, addressing first the components that should remain unchanged in future NDPP iterations and then the components that should perhaps change.

Among the aspects that should remain unchanged, the foremost aspect is analytical rigor and transparency throughout the NDPP on the part of the international

secretariat. The quantitative and qualitative analysis tools like the Burden Equivalency Model built by ACT and then used by ACT, ACO, and the International Staff, though not perfect, were critical to bolstering the validity of the MCR document and the apportioned capability targets that flowed from it. These tools made pushing back against the central assumptions and findings and results of the NDPP more difficult for allies.

Concomitant with the right tools was the international secretariat's willingness to show allies how those tools were built and used. Transparency was vital to keeping all stakeholders engaged and feeling they were part of the broader process and team effort. Iterative consultations over time with the stakeholders increased the credibility of the international secretariat and its analysis. Transparency and a willingness to engage repeatedly in various formats—one on one, multilateral, regional, and so forth—helped to convince the allies the results of the NDPP were valid.

Finally, policy makers in Washington and at NATO Headquarters in Brussels should bear in mind the importance of individual leaders and personalities in key NATO international secretariat billets. The expertise, motivation, creativity, and initiative of the key players within the NATO international secretariat were essential to the success of the 2014–18 NDPP. Though civilian officials might occupy a billet for many years, keeping most military personnel in the same posts for more than a handful of years is not feasible. In the military establishments of larger allies, military personnel rotate from one job to another every couple of years. Nonetheless, when new civilian and military personnel are assigned to particular billets

at NATO, the most senior levels of the international secretariat—as well as the alliance’s leading official—ought to assess through face-to-face meetings, references, and other means whether designees have the right mix of skills and characteristics necessary for organizational success. The processes and authorities for accomplishing this assessment do not necessarily exist today, but allies ought to consider addressing this important issue of personnel management.

As for the changes that should occur for future NDPP iterations, the most obvious problem is the NDPP lacks an enforcement mechanism. According to one observer, if allies can survive two hours of rough questioning every two to four years, then skating through without taking on additional requirements is possible.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, some allies’ practice of accepting an apportioned target without fully acknowledging they will fill it, though certainly a creative diplomatic method of not leaving capability targets on the table, creates problems of its own. For instance, during step 5 of the NDPP, when allies are asked to show progress they have made toward their targets, an ally may have no funded plan to develop a capability the ally has ostensibly committed to delivering, and the alliance cannot force a remedy.

Fixing this problem is difficult, primarily because the alliance comprises sovereign states, and it has little in the way of penalty mechanisms. Certainly, coercion through naming and shaming is one of these tools, but, as suggested above, it is a limited one. Although the alliance may lack much in the way of “sticks,” it does have “carrots” in the form of benefits that are

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61. US military officer assigned to the US Mission to NATO, interview by the author, March 4, 2016.



unrelated to security and that allies value, and many of these carrots are tied to prestige. For example, allies covet billets for their military officers, facilities paid for in part by NATO, command structure elements, the honor of hosting summits, and invitations to participate in major events and activities. Some of these benefits, such as facilities, cannot easily be taken away from allies who are shirking their burden-sharing responsibilities. But tying these carrots to performance on capability development or other measures of burden sharing might spur greater commitment and yield more impressive results. In an alliance of sovereign states operating by consensus, no easy path for putting such tools in place exists. Nonetheless, with effort and leadership and under the right circumstances, the alliance has shown the ability to achieve dramatic and sometimes previously unthinkable results; both the 2014 Wales Summit and 2016 Warsaw Summit demonstrate this ability.

Additionally, Washington can apply pressure as a means of encouraging burden sharing, although a telephone is perhaps a more useful instrument than a megaphone in this instance for two reasons. First, the former method of communication allows for more discrete messaging. Not all European audiences respond in the same way to loud, public American coercion. Allies that are more Atlanticist or that like to perceive themselves as good allies may be more willing to heed Washington's concerns, even if delivered loudly and publicly. For these countries, presidential pressure has an impact. Elsewhere, though, boisterous American coercion comes across as bullying, gets exploited by domestic political opponents, and makes spending more on defense and

taking up more of the shared burden more difficult to advocate for policy makers.

Second, a telephone implies two-way dialogue, and a megaphone does not. In other words, allies will be more willing to heed American concerns when the allies think Washington will, in turn, provide them a greater voice in other contexts or a reward in a domain not necessarily related to NATO or defense. In a sense, some reward for being a good ally and sharing burdens must be offered beyond the obvious security benefits. Most allies want to be perceived domestically and internationally as having influence in Washington.

In addition to adding teeth to the NDPP, NATO ought to consider developing an NDPP training course on the international secretariat. This monograph found the international secretariat played a vital role in facilitating the unprecedented success of the 2014–18 NDPP. Given the importance of the international secretariat, ensuring the many lessons learned from the 2014–18 iteration will be propagated throughout the staff and over time will be vital, especially among military staff members being introduced to the process for the first time. At present, only a broad, four-day defense planning course (N5-36) offered at the NATO School in Oberammergau, Germany, is open to both NATO international secretariat personnel and personnel from national military establishments. The alliance ought to craft a course for the international secretariat that examines in depth the modalities and mechanisms involved in the NDPP.

In addition to lacking an appropriate NDPP training course for NATO international secretariat personnel, the NDPP lacks a common lexicon or taxonomy used from one NDPP iteration to the next as well as consistently by NATO to describe capability

priorities. For instance, the meaning of “capability shortfall” has shifted, and the definition of “the usability of land maneuver formations” is not used consistently by the alliance. Common understanding among the many international secretariat personnel and allied defense establishments on both sides of the Atlantic is vitally important, and the lack of an enduring, more consistently applied taxonomy hinders such understanding. Obviously, technological advances will necessitate updates in terminology, but a more standardized, consistently used taxonomy for capabilities and end states that can endure across NDPP iterations and be employed across alliance functions could make establishing common knowledge easier for allies and international secretariat personnel.

Finally, the secretariat should continue to ensure the NDPP is regularly modernized to address emerging security challenges and scenarios. For example, although the NDPP has long addressed cyber issues, it does not yet specifically address information operations during peacetime. Such operations by Russia, China, and others pose a challenge to the alliance under the threshold of Article 5 and are arguably more likely to occur than a major conventional attack launched by Moscow against the West. Certainly, NATO and the allies’ defense establishments must plan and prepare for worst-case scenarios, but addressing emerging, arguably more likely challenges and the capabilities necessary for meeting them would help to improve the relevance of the NDPP.

The NDPP is a critical tool for the alliance. The process enables NATO to shape the capabilities of the allies and, in doing so, fundamentally facilitates the ability of all allies to fulfill their obligations

to each other as embodied in the Article 5 mutual self-defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty. The 2017 success of the NDPP may have marked a turning point in the seemingly endless transatlantic debate over burden sharing. But the allies will need to redouble efforts to ensure they build upon the success of 2017 in future NDPP iterations, particularly as the recession induced by the coronavirus pandemic places downward pressure on defense spending across the alliance over the next several years.



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AND THE ROLE OF KEY PERSONNEL:  
HOW NATO'S DEFENCE PLANNING PROCESS  
IS ALLEVIATING THE  
BURDEN-SHARING DILEMMA**

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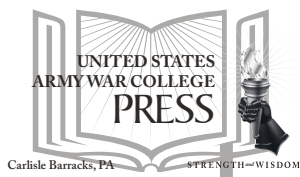
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