

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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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 a modern intergovernmental security organization like NATO. Every four years, NATO implements the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), which 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. For many allies, the NDPP is their primary defense planning tool.

The goals of the NDPP are 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.

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 operational risk and potentially undermining allied security. In 2017, in the middle of the 2014–18 iteration of the NDPP and 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. Therefore, the 2014–18 NDPP placed the alliance on a footing to achieve significantly more equitable sharing of common defense burdens among the NATO 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.

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? Or were other variables at play?

Understanding why and how NATO achieved this goal in 2017 is important for both practical and theoretical reasons. The 2014–18 iteration of the NDPP provides valuable lessons US officials and NATO leaders can apply as they work their way through 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. 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's behavior.

Because this study relies on process tracing as a means of identifying and qualitatively assessing potential explanatory variables, the study begins by examining 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. After summarizing key lessons learned, the monograph offers policy makers recommendations on how to replicate the success of 2017.

Based on the available evidence—including an array of personal interviews with personnel directly involved in the 2014–18 NDPP—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, the variables also point toward some of the recommendations policy makers might consider leveraging to promote more equitable burden sharing in the future.

First, several improvements to the NDPP implemented in the 2014–18 iteration should remain unchanged. Foremost among these improvements are analytical rigor and transparency throughout the NDPP on the part of the international secretariat. New analysis tools built by Allied Command Transformation and then used by the entire international secretariat, though not perfect, were critical to bolstering the allocation of capability targets to individual allies.

Transparency was also 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.

Individual leaders and personalities in key NATO international secretariat billets also played a vital role. The expertise, motivation, creativity, and initiative of these policy entrepreneurs were essential to the success of the 2014–18 NDPP. 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.

In addition to the elements of the 2014–18 iteration that should remain unchanged, some aspects of the NDPP need to be strengthened. Most importantly, the NDPP continues to lack an enforcement mechanism. Fixing this problem is difficult, primarily because the alliance comprises sovereign states and it has little in the way of penalty mechanisms. For this reason,

instead of relying on “sticks,” the alliance may want to use its “carrots”—that is, the benefits allies occasionally realize through membership—more effectively. 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. Tying one or more of these carrots to performance on capability development or other measures of burden sharing might spur greater commitment and yield more impressive results.

Additionally, Washington can better leverage its leading role by showing a willingness to permit allies taking on shared burdens to have a greater voice in other contexts or to provide these allies with a reward in a domain not necessarily related to NATO or defense. Most allies want to be perceived domestically and internationally as having influence in Washington; thus, American leaders can and should leverage this desire for prestige more effectively.

NATO also ought to consider developing an NDPP training course on the international secretariat. Given the importance of the international secretariat—and, especially, key policy entrepreneurs—ensuring the many lessons learned from the 2014–18 iteration will be propagated throughout the staff and over time, especially among military staff members being introduced to the process for the first time, will be vital.

In addition to building appropriate training courses for NATO international secretariat personnel, NATO should consider building a common lexicon or taxonomy to be 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 an understanding.

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.

The NDPP is a critical tool for the alliance, enabling NATO—and, hence, its leading member, the United States—to shape the capabilities of the allies. In doing so, the NDPP fundamentally facilitates the ability of all allies to fulfill their obligations to each other under the terms 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. If so, the allies will need 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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