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SMART DEFENSE

Brave New Approach or Déjà Vu?

Paul Johnson, Tim LaBenz, and Darrell Driver

As North Atlantic Treaty Organization heads of state and government gathered in Chicago for the 2012 NATO summit, the alliance was once again faced with an abundance of issues and challenges. Initially forecasted as a brief, in-progress review of the decisions taken at the 2010 Lisbon, Portugal, gathering, the Chicago summit quickly emerged as an important crossroads moment for the sixty-three-year-old alliance. The future of the alliance's forces in Afghanistan, continued support to Libya, cyberdefense, and missile defense were but a few of the pressing issues that found their way into an ambitious agenda and the summit's final declaration. Nevertheless, it was the formal unveiling of the alliance's collective response to years of declining defense budgets and accelerating defense austerity that would quietly take center stage. This initiative, labeled "Smart Defense," was described by NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen as a way to "build greater security with fewer resources but more coordination and coherence."¹ It consists of three basic pillars: setting strict priorities for investment, pooling and sharing responsibility for developing required capabilities, and coordinating the development within certain states of niche capabilities on which the broader alliance might rely.

As will be discussed in the following pages, however, Smart Defense is not an entirely new concept. Resource pooling and multinational capability development have been elements of alliance cost-saving efforts and capability goals for well over a decade. These previous efforts have met with only mixed success, but they do offer important lessons for how the more expansive Smart Defense approach might succeed in forging deeper defense integration as a means of building critical alliance capabilities. By establishing early procedures to ensure that shared multinational capabilities will be available when crises emerge, providing

clear capability priorities for limited defense budgets, and integrating multinational capability development appropriately into defense planning, the alliance can avoid some of the past difficulties encountered by multinational initiatives. Successful implementation of Smart Defense will be no panacea; however, it does promise the best hope for success in maintaining NATO effectiveness through the budgetary issues that will face the alliance over the coming decade.

SMART DEFENSE: NEW NAME, MORE AMBITION, AND OLD CHALLENGES

NATO has been no stranger to the problems of building and maintaining required security capabilities. In the post-Soviet era, encouraging member states to sustain viable commitments to the alliance's three strategic tasks—collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security—has been an inveterate challenge.² The established alliance goal is for member states to spend at least 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, but the actual spending for European states has dropped to an average of 1.6 percent, with a large number of allies spending closer to 1 percent.³ Indeed, since the demise of the Soviet threat, defense spending among European members of the alliance has fallen by almost 20 percent overall, even as the combined GDP of these states has risen by approximately 55 percent.⁴

Add to this the persistent presence of national defense bureaucracies that continue to give priority to the larger manpower requirements of territorial-defense forces over smaller, more deployable formations;⁵ the result has been an alliance continually marked by capability shortfalls and a chronic reliance on the United States to fill critical gaps. Even the successful NATO air campaign in Libya became a testament to the capability challenges that plagued the alliance. Though European allies delivered over 90 percent of the ordnance during the operation, the United States provided most of the targeting, intelligence, and refueling assets, as well as delivering to allies the precision-guided munitions they would need to continue the air campaign when their own limited stocks were expended.⁶ This prompted ever more vocal worries that the alliance was slouching toward either irrelevance or a two-tiered system in which the United States would provide security guarantees while the remainder of the allies opted for more circumscribed roles limited to peacekeeping or humanitarian-focused contributions.⁷ Indeed, Robert Gates chose the occasion of his farewell address as secretary of defense to European allies to make the case for investment in the starkest possible terms, arguing that “if current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, future U.S. political leaders . . . may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost.”⁸ Nevertheless, as the financial crisis and public budget reductions have resulted

in projections of European defense expenditures falling by another 2.9 percent between 2010 and 2015, the outlook for NATO capabilities looks ever more dire.⁹

Against this backdrop, Secretary General Rasmussen has assumed the mantle of cheerleader in chief, encouraging allies to redouble their commitments to the alliance and its needs. Warning that the “fundamental challenge facing Europe and the alliance as a whole . . . [is in] how to avoid having the economic crisis turn into a security crisis,” Rasmussen has led NATO’s response to growing austerity. His approach has been to acknowledge the obstacles to defense spending in an economic downturn while calling for attention to spending priorities, the advantages of states pooling limited resources to invest in agreed-on collective capabilities, and the potential of assigning some capabilities for development only by certain allies.¹⁰ Given that European allies’ defense spending remains 60 percent that of the United States and about three times that of the next largest spender, China, the concept of pooling resources for needed capabilities rather than spreading them redundantly across twenty-six sovereign nations has a compelling logic.¹¹ This is especially true as defense budget reductions suggest the need to deconflict such divestment so that the same capability does not suffer everywhere. Smart Defense’s somewhat collectivist approach to meeting capability demand has sought, then, to answer the challenge of defense austerity with ever more thorough alliance defense integration. Yet Smart Defense has not been without its detractors.

The primary criticisms are based on two defining and potentially fatal problems. First, many nations have been reluctant to reduce the scope of their defense investments, despite declining budgets. Smart Defense, in varying degrees, requires states not to prepare for the full range of contingencies that could threaten the security of each but rather to concentrate on a narrower set of capabilities. It would not be individual states but NATO, as a collective alliance, that would be capable of defending nations across the full range of potential threats. This requires a significant degree of trust among allies that none will be abandoned in time of national need or, equally problematic, entrapped into participation in NATO missions that run counter to perceived national interests.¹² The challenge lies in how to assure the availability of a multinationally developed and fielded capability when there are as many potential vetoes of its use as there are participants. The case of Libya is illustrative of the kinds of difficulties that might be incurred in an alliance with so high a degree of security interdependence. Only nine of twenty-eight members were prepared to attack ground targets; only two (Britain and France) would assume the risk of employing attack helicopters; and Germany refused to participate in the operation altogether.¹³ Under such circumstances, capabilities pooling and niche specialization could result in either an inability to field critical multinational capabilities or a few nations blocking mission approval altogether for fear of being pressured to participate.

For these reasons, states have historically been extremely reluctant to cede national sovereignty and autonomy on matters of security and defense. The European Union (EU) example is informative. Despite their relatively rapid movement toward economic integration over the last two decades, EU member states have been cautious on integration of their security sectors. The EU's Common Security and Defense Policy promised to focus on the relatively benign purpose of developing a "distinctive civil-military approach to crisis management," but achieving state commitment for the required integration of capabilities in the face of diverging national interests has proved much more difficult.¹⁴ Persuading European states to trust more thoroughly in the benefits of greater defense integration will be no easy task. As has been argued, there is "a great contrast between the cooperative way in which European countries fight wars, and the insular way in which most of them prepare for them."¹⁵

A second major criticism of the Smart Defense initiative is that it has been tried before, with mixed success. To be sure, the ambitiousness of the Smart Defense initiative is novel, but the concepts of resource pooling, capabilities sharing, and niche specialization have been around for several years. The Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI), which grew out of the 1999 NATO Washington Summit, is illustrative. A continuation of earlier, smaller efforts dating back to 1970 to address the growing military and capabilities gap between the United States and the rest of NATO, DCI was intended to be a first serious step in identifying the core capabilities nations would need to bring to alliance operations and then seeking commitments from states to procure such capabilities.¹⁶ The initiative laid out several broad categories for future NATO defense-capability development: engagement and survivability; deployability and mobility; sustainability and logistics; and command, control, and communications. Under these broad headings, fifty-eight short-, medium-, and long-term capabilities would be addressed over two years through NATO's planning process.¹⁷ It was an ambitious undertaking, but at the time optimism and support for change were on the rise. The initiative garnered wide endorsement, and allies expressed a particular desire to address command-and-control, deployability, and readiness shortfalls highlighted by the recent Balkan campaigns, which were still fresh in the minds of many.¹⁸ Indeed, soon after the DCI agreement the alliance was able to point to positive movement: nearly two-thirds of the fifty-eight capabilities were being included in the current year's "Force Goals," representing "a clear indication of DCI's success in its early stages[,] . . . which will move the DCI from being a one-time initiative to becoming a fully integrated part of NATO's force planning process."¹⁹

The aspirations of the Washington Summit soon encountered the fiscal and bureaucratic realities in allied capitals. Only ten months after the DCI agreement, William Cohen, then the U.S. secretary of defense, complained that very

few nations had made any real headway toward procuring DCI capabilities.²⁰ It would soon become apparent that DCI was overly ambitious and lacked the teeth it needed. It required from signatories no firm national commitments or deadlines, and few nations were prepared to forsake sovereign defense interests and priorities to honor the “spirit” of the accord.

In response to the shortcomings of DCI, the 2002 Prague Capabilities Commitment (PCC) looked to more specific, quantifiable goals and recognized more directly “the role of specialization, or niche capabilities,” especially for new members of the alliance.²¹ Similarly, it placed “greater emphasis” on “multinational commitments and pooling of funds,” to enable “smaller countries to combine resources to purchase hardware that would be unaffordable for each alone.”²² As a result of this new approach, by the summit in Bucharest in 2008 NATO could point to some modest successes. The Netherlands had led a group of nations in pooling financial resources to convert conventional bombs into more modern smart munitions; Germany was leading a consortium of nations to acquire much-needed strategic air transport; and the Czech Republic was leveraging its expertise in chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear response to assume the lead in this niche capability.²³ Indeed, in the closing declaration of the Lisbon Summit in 2010, heads of state and government tasked their defense ministers to “work on multi-national approaches and other innovative ways of cost-effective capability development.”²⁴

Thus, in successive broad commitment initiatives there has been a clear expansion of efforts to encourage greater multinational cooperation as a means of addressing critical alliance capability shortfalls. In this sense, there is a good deal of truth to the argument that “Smart Defence . . . appears as little more than a new attempt to implement an old idea.”²⁵ Nevertheless, lack of originality is no fault in itself. At issue is the degree to which earlier multinational projects have been able to deliver improved capability for the alliance. On that score, reviews have been mixed. While successful examples of multinational capability development are clearly present, enough challenges have plagued earlier efforts to warrant careful attention to the question of how such obstacles might be overcome in the future.

AVOIDING DÉJÀ VU: LESSONS FOR SMART DEFENSE AND THE FUTURE OF NATO

Though Smart Defense is still very early in its transition from concept to implementation, there are existing examples of multinational-capability collaboration that can offer useful insight. Some of these cases are explored below: the Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg) Deployable Air Task Force (DATF), the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), the NATO Airborne Early Warning and Control (NAEW&C) program, and NATO Special Operations Forces. These

cases suggest the importance of fixing responsibility by clearly assigning national “leads” for each program, the advantages of ensuring that a project’s participating nations share similar strategic interests and cultures, and, most important, the critical need to ensure that capabilities developed through multinational cooperation will be available for NATO employment when the need for them arises.

The Deployable Air Task Force

One of the most successful pre-Smart Defense collaborative initiatives to date has been the Benelux DATE. The task force has its roots in a pooling and sharing arrangement of the 1970s in which Belgium and the Netherlands, together with Norway, jointly purchased the Lockheed F-16A and F-16B fighter. Formally founded in September 1996, the DATE initially comprised Belgian and Dutch air force components and a deployable ground-security force from the Luxembourg army. Faced with small and diminishing defense budgets, the Benelux states sought to leverage geographic, cultural, and security similarities to provide deployable air “packages” for alliance operations that they could no longer support individually. Born, then, of budgetary necessity, cultural familiarity, and shared strategic interests, this partnership has produced flexible and scalable air-capability packages for a broad range of potential operations.²⁶ Since 2004, other NATO member states with F-16s, as well as C-130 transports—Norway, Denmark, and Portugal—have joined the DATE. In fact, DATE would prove one of the few bright spots for European involvement in the air campaign against Serbia in 1999, flying about 12 percent of all allied fighter missions, at a 95 percent readiness rate.²⁷ Indeed, in light of the readiness rates achieved over the life of the F-16 partnership between the U.S. Air Force and the European Participating Air Forces, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway are looking to extend cooperation through joint purchase and collective training and maintenance programs for the next-generation F-35 Lightning II.²⁸

More recently, the DATE has seen successful service in Afghanistan, expanding its capabilities over the years to include command and control, transportation, logistics, and operational planning.²⁹ In April 2012 there was a further expansion of the DATE principle, with the Benelux states signing an agreement to deepen the integration of all of their armed services to include training, exercises, and the shared use of each state’s airfields. Of the arrangement, Pieter De Crem, the Belgian defense minister, observed that the participating states were “headed towards a completely new structure, with tri-national command[,] . . . a first step towards full integration of material and towards joint deployability.”³⁰

Its successes and proven ability to expand cooperation have made the Benelux DATE a model for the kind of multinational programs the Smart Defense initiative hopes to foster within the alliance as a whole. Nevertheless, DATE has had

some important advantages not universally available in partnering arrangements. First, DATF was initially possible because of the participating nations' common purchase of the F-16; shared procurement of the same platform eliminated interoperability obstacles and made future, more thorough operational integration possible. Second, the involved nations shared important political ties, enjoyed a long history of cooperation, and possessed common strategic cultures. These factors become especially important when a group of nations moves to employ a capability together in an actual operation. Capabilities that are jointly *employed* are the crux of the matter—they open the door to situations in which one or more nations may refuse to participate or, worse, block employment of the capability altogether. In short, DATF is indeed an important model for future multinational projects, but the specific circumstances that contributed to its success must be allowed for if the alliance hopes to replicate its success in other projects.

SAC and the NAEW&C

Critical areas where NATO has been especially keen have been strategic airlift, airborne early warning, and airspace command and control. For this reason, ongoing capability collaboration in NATO's Strategic Airlift Capability and its Airborne Early Warning and Control programs emerge as additional models for the kind of programs Smart Defense has sought to encourage. Originated by the PCC and led by Germany, the SAC initiative is a partnership of ten member states and two participating nations of the Partnership for Peace to share the cost of needed strategic airlift. SAC has been in operation since 2009 and is manned by personnel from all partner countries, operating leased U.S. C-17s out of the Pápa Air Base in Hungary. It is complemented by a second initiative, the Strategic Airlift Interim Solution (SALIS), which operates under contract for six Antonov An-124-100 transport aircraft.³¹ In both SAC and SALIS, participating nations are allocated flight hours that they can use for their own priorities, including their contributions to NATO missions and operations. The intended long-term solution is the purchase of Airbus's new A400M, though the delivery of that aircraft has been delayed repeatedly by developmental setbacks.³² The A400M problems notwithstanding, multinational air heavy-lift has demonstrated the potential of cost sharing and multinational burden sharing in otherwise prohibitively expensive programs.

NAEW&C is one of the longest-running and arguably the most successful of the alliance's pre-Smart Defense collaborations. Started in 1982 and based in Geilenkirchen, Germany, the program today fields seventeen E-3A aircraft to fulfill NATO's early-warning and control requirements. The unit is manned by personnel from sixteen countries and has supported operations in the Balkans, Iraq, the United States (post-9/11), Afghanistan, and most recently Libya, as well

as a long list of major international events. The unit is commanded by alternating German and American commanders, with the deputy commander generally coming from the British Royal Air Force. NATO has established forward operating bases and forward operating locations for its Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) in Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Norway. With this long history of support to alliance operations, NAEW&C is routinely cited as a mature example of how pooling and sharing can yield an enduring capability.

The alliance would be wise to look carefully at the successes and challenges of these programs as it considers future large-investment, multinational initiatives. Both have demonstrated the value in sharing investment in capability areas where no single nation has the budget or need to pursue the capability alone. They have also demonstrated the importance of having core groups of “lead” nations and central stakeholders to keep programs moving and to champion them from procurement to implementation. NAEW&C, however, is unlike SAC and SALIS in that it is a collectively employed asset, whereas in SAC and SALIS flight hours are distributed among nations, which decide individually how to use them. Past refusals to participate in collective-asset operations—or, worse, vetoes of asset use—have revealed the enormous risks to the availability of multinationally operated and employed assets. At one point in 2003, owing to objections by France, Belgium, and Germany, Turkey was denied access to NAEW&C aircraft just before the Iraq war, and German objections would subsequently delay the aircraft’s deployment in Afghanistan.³³ Germany later would withdraw its AWACS aircrews from the Libya operation, delaying employment there until German crews could be shifted to Afghanistan to free other nations’ crews for Libya.³⁴ Perhaps more troubling, Canada’s announcement that it would withdraw from the program altogether by 2014 puts in question the sustainability of multinational programs.³⁵ Thus, for an alliance in which “coalitions of the willing” may increasingly characterize future operations, multinationally employed capabilities bring with them an entirely new set of complexities.

NATO Special Operations Forces

NATO Special Operations Forces (SOF) represents one of the most comprehensive examples of multinational capability collaboration. Until recently, NATO SOF was an ad hoc mixture of the SOF forces of twenty-eight nations, with no real coordination and integration. The NATO SOF Transformation Initiative (NSTI) was begun in 2006 to address persistent interoperability problems. To improve SOF employment, a variety of efforts have since emerged, including the establishment of a NATO SOF Coordination Centre (NSCC) in the NATO Special Operations Headquarters and the development of common SOF doctrine, procedures, and, to a more limited degree, equipment, through the NATO SOF Training and Education Program.³⁶

The NSCC has rapidly become a model for the transatlantic SOF community, bringing together representatives from each of the partner nations to coordinate, plan, train, and exchange best practices. Although this center has no command authority, it has become valued for its high level of return in shared SOF training, education, and integration. The success of the NATO SOF initiative prompted Admiral William McRaven, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and creator of the NSCC concept, to offer the NSCC as a model for regional special-operations coordination centers.³⁷

The experience of NATO SOF suggests that linking capability development to a clear NATO mission has important advantages. Rather than have a broad range of disassociated national capability development, it can be advantageous to cluster needed capabilities under the missions within which they might be employed and then organize collaborative groups around those missions. The SOF example is particularly instructive here. SOF is a mission area in which participants from disparate nations share cultural affinity derived from its unique function. Similar communities of practice might be leveraged in other areas—cyberdefense and stabilization/reconstruction, to name but two. However, mission-focused organization does not address the critical issue of availability, especially the withdrawal of key nations on the eve of an operation. Indeed, organizing capability development into mission-focused domains may increase the quality of resulting capabilities but make it even more likely that lack of political consensus will undermine eventual employment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SMART DEFENSE

The above programs represent but a few of the multinational initiatives that predate the current Smart Defense discussion. They remind us that multinational capability development did not spring fully formed from the head of Secretary General Rasmussen in 2011, and they provide the alliance an opportunity to take stock of the challenges that Smart Defense poses. The most important of these challenges is that of ensuring the availability of multinational capabilities for alliance missions. As the previous cases indicate, Smart Defense offers much promise for projects where employment is not contingent on unanimity, where shared procurement of platforms eliminates interoperability problems, and where use is easily divisible among participants.

Additionally, where capability employment is in fact contingent on the agreement all of the participants, we know from the Benelux DATF example that similarity in strategic cultures and security interests can be an important foundation for that agreement. As an instructive example, analogous global interests and similar histories of global military presence served as the basis for a 2010 Franco-British treaty on military cooperation.³⁸ While such cultural affinity will

not ensure political agreement on capability employment, it can limit the risk that a partner nation will block a particular use because of predictable political differences.

Ultimately, however, if NATO is going to rely more heavily on multinationally employed capabilities in the future, clearly agreed guidelines will be necessary. These guidelines will especially need to acknowledge the likelihood that not every nation will agree to participate in every operation. They will also need to address how such a shared capability is to be addressed within NATO defense planning. In short, the issue of assured availability will need to be tackled before Smart Defense can achieve the significant impact envisioned by its proponents.

Beyond the immediate and overarching question of availability, earlier multinational initiatives also attest to the value of fixing responsibilities within projects and clearly identifying nations to lead them. SAC and AWACS, in particular, have benefited from having core groups of nations committed to the projects and seeing them as crucial to their respective security interests. The importance, shown by experience, of clear linkage between multinational projects and the requirements and interests of their participants suggests that top-down, alliance-directed Smart Defense initiatives are less likely to be effective than bottom-up initiatives, proposed by the nations themselves. Consequently, as NATO Headquarters looks to integrate Smart Defense more fully into its defense planning processes, it should look to do so from a position as facilitator, rather than attempting to direct cooperation by decree. By establishing clear capability requirements, allocating national capability targets so as to meet those requirements, and providing nations the framework and support they need to explore multinational capability solutions as required, the alliance can set the conditions for successful cooperation. But it cannot mandate it.

Finally, the lessons of DCI and PCC have shown that overly ambitious or abstract capability initiatives often succumb to collective-action complexities. DCI was found wanting largely because it set goals without fixing responsibility. PCC set more specific capability goals but has been burdened by the ambitiously large set of capabilities it set out to advance in a future of declining budgets. Consequently, Smart Defense will need to adhere closely to its own first principle of prioritization. This will require the alliance to identify the more limited set of critical capabilities it will require in future contingencies and to set the conditions for potential multinational cooperation in achieving those goals. In short, as budget austerity strains an alliance already plagued by defense underspending, NATO will need to focus resources on the most pressing priorities in areas where the most significant gaps exist.

Fortunately, the alliance is beginning to recognize these imperatives. There is growing appreciation that “clustering” capabilities around mission areas that

focus smaller groups of states in meaningful ways is important. The topic of clustering emerged as early as 2011, in a speech by Secretary General Rasmussen to the Munich Security Conference.³⁹ Since then, the concept of mission-organized-and-focused capability development has surfaced within NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT). Together with National Defense University, in Washington, D.C., ACT has begun to explore the concept of "mission focus groups," by means of which critical missions would be established with allies afforded the opportunity to lead efforts.⁴⁰ Moving to mission-focused clusters of NATO allies will not be easy. In fact, it will not even be desirable unless satisfactory methods of dealing with capability availability are found. Nevertheless, as the above examples demonstrate, there exist viable models, and the principle will likely become more attractive as defense budgets continue to contract.

Similarly, the alliance has begun a complementary effort to Smart Defense, the Connected Forces Initiative. The purpose is to preserve the operational ties between allied militaries that have emerged from ten years of conflict in Afghanistan, by expanding combined education and training programs and enhancing multinational exercises.⁴¹ To support this effort, the United States has committed that it will, for the first time, provide one brigade combat team on a rotational basis to the NATO Response Force (NRF), the alliance's first-response force package, composed of land, maritime, and air components from a variety of contributing nations.⁴² This U.S. commitment, which will include annual NATO training events for at least part of that brigade, promises both to add new energy to the NRF mission and to provide a vehicle for continued transatlantic partnering in the post-Afghanistan era.

As NATO looks to implement the Smart Defense concept, these are the kinds of integrative efforts that offer the best hope for advancing its capabilities. The alliance should rapidly look for ways to fast-track such solutions, before today's urgency to preserve and bolster needed capabilities becomes tomorrow's operational crisis. Given recent defense-budget decrements, NATO's decade-long, evolutionary approach to multinational capability development and defense integration will likely not have another decade to perfect itself.

The 2012 Chicago Summit saw the alliance take important, if tentative, steps toward dealing with its most pressing challenge, continued defense austerity. Despite Smart Defense's detractors, one can appreciate the enormous untapped integrative and cooperative potential of a twenty-eight-nation alliance that accounts for over 80 percent of global defense spending.⁴³ By directly tackling the issue of availability, by establishing clear priorities, and by appropriately integrating multinational capability development into existing defense planning, the alliance can avoid some of the past difficulties of multinational initiatives. "Smart Defense

initiatives” may be, as Robert Gates argued, no “panacea” for fixing atrophying NATO capabilities, but short of a dramatic and unexpected increase in the allies’ defense budgets, greater and more targeted cooperation may yet be its last good hope for weathering the current economic and budgetary storm.⁴⁴

NOTES

- An earlier version of this paper was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Joint and Combined Warfighting School, Norfolk, Virginia. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policies or positions of the Joint Forces Staff College, Department of Defense, or U.S. government.
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