THE IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHY ON NATO’S SMART DEFENSE INITIATIVES

Abstract:

In 2011 NATO launched its Smart Defense Initiative which was intended to provide greater security with fewer resources combined with higher level of coordination and coherence among allies and partners. The importance of this initiative was once again highlighted at the 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago which welcomed national and transnational efforts to “develop, acquire and maintain the capabilities required to achieve its goals for NATO Forces 2020.” Most recently, the Alliance identified approximately 150 proposed multinational smart defense projects categorized in three different tiers based on the degree of progress made in implementing these projects. This paper discusses the impact of proximity on the initiation and advancement of various tiers smart defense projects, specifically the role of contiguity, regionalism and leadership in furthering the three constituents of smart defense capabilities—prioritization, specialization and cooperation. It also suggests theoretical implications about the role of geography in integrating NATO armed forces and in fostering compliance among allies and partners. Finally, this work sharpens the broader policy debate about defense coordination among allies and partners.

Key words: NATO politics, alliances, smart defense, geopolitics, NATO partnerships

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Introduction

The notion of smart defense (SD) was introduced by the NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in 2011 when he outlined the need for a new approach that will ensure “greater security, for less money, by working together with more flexibility.” Smart defense became particularly salient in the last few years due to the substantial cuts in defense allocations after the latest financial crisis and economic recession. A number of reasons prompted this new policy: First, after three rounds of post-Cold War expansion in 1999, 2004 and 2009, NATO has become the largest defense organization with twenty-eight different members and a population of over 700 million. Coordinating defense policies is often challenging for such a large institution. Second, NATO needs to address today a broader array of security threats that vary from traditional Article Five territorial defense against resurgent, revisionist or rogue regional powers in Eurasia and the Middle East, to non-traditional security commitments that include post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization, nation-building, energy security, defense from cyber espionage and others. The combination of scarce resources, numerous small allies with limited capabilities and a vast array of emerging and re-emerging threats naturally mandates advanced political dialogue and “practical cooperation so that NATO can preserve its ability to undertake operations when needed.”

Scholars and policy makers recognize that, in an age of austerity, NATO’s capacity to undertake operations with fewer resources rests on its ability to reach higher level of “coordination and coherence.” Smart defense suggests a set of policies intended to enhance security at a lower cost by fostering closer cooperation among NATO allies and partners. Nonetheless, these policies do not necessarily imply new ideas for defense cooperation. In fact, previous similar attempts were made in the 1990s and early 2000s when NATO launched the Combined Joint Task Forces, NATO Response Force, and the Prague Capabilities Commitments. How does this new initiative differ in comparison to previous defense cooperation initiatives among NATO nations? What are the key variables that facilitate and impede defense cooperation among different allies?

Shortly after smart defense’s initiation, the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation and the Deputy Secretary General were tasking with coordinating various policies. Intergovernmental conferences were consequently held in 2012 and earlier 2013. These led to identification of approximately 150 projects classified in three different tiers depending on the progress of individual projects. This paper surveys the extent to which

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1 Andres Fogh Rasmussen “Building security in an age of austerity,” keynote speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the 2011 Munich Security Conference, 04 February 2011.
the emergence of these projects is linked to geographic proximity and regional politics, thus overcoming political, security and cultural constraints to defense cooperation and integration. Specifically, we explore two hypotheses intended to evaluate the whether the emergence of these SD projects is driven by geographic proximity: (1) whether smart defense cooperation tends to emerge among neighboring countries, i.e. such that share common land border; and (2) whether countries belonging to the same geographic region are more likely to initiate or join a specific project because of the greater opportunities for security cooperation among these nations. The presentation is organized as follows: First, it surveys the literature on geography and its impact on conflict and cooperation in international relations. Second, the paper defines smart defense and discusses how it relates to NATO politics. Third, it presents a model that examines the connection between geographic space (in terms of lead nations, common borders and regions) and the emergence and advancement of NATO’s SD projects. Additionally, the paper checks the argument against alternative explanations of SD cooperation within NATO that include: (1) the size of participating nations and; (2) the specific area of SD cooperation. Fourth, the paper discusses some theoretical and policy implications of this new NATO policy and how it relates to NATO’s future role in International Relations. Additionally, it suggests policy recommendations how regional and spatial factors could strengthen SD’s effectiveness.

Geography and Alliances in the Literature on International Relations

Geography has puzzled for long time scholars of international relations as a predictor of various types international interactions. Most recently, political geography has been identified as a key predictor of enduring rivalries, thus leading to or facilitating the occurrence of international conflicts.\(^5\) The overwhelming evidence supports the observation that geographic proximity could be a powerful predictor for increasing the probability of war as majority of militarized conflicts have occurred between neighboring states.\(^6\) Nonetheless, geography could also influence the termination or resolution of militarized conflicts. For example Douglas Gibler found that peacetime alliances effectively removed contentious territorial issues between states effectively resolving long-standing territorial claims between states and reducing the likelihood of these states to go to war.\(^7\) Similarly, in cases where borders are well-defined and fully demarcated by a legal settlement or in instances that involve re-distribution of land among disputants,


the parties are much less likely to experience conflict after demarcation or re-distribution has occurred.  

Paradoxically, geographic proximity not only increases the likelihood of international conflicts, but also enhances opportunities for cooperation. For example, Joanne Gowa noted that contiguous nations and allies tend to increase their trading relations due to low transportation costs leading to enhanced economic trade. Other empirical models have shown that geographic distance reduces the volume of trade due to increased transportation costs, thus leading to an increase in conflict. Lastly, Robst, Polachek Chang found that while geographic proximity provides incentives for conflict, closer trading relations mitigate these incentives. Therefore, geography can determine both the level of conflict, and the degree of cooperation in a given international interaction: on the one hand geographic distance influences conflict directly; on the other it also affects the conflict indirectly though international trade, the presence of institutional commitments and other factors as well.

Most of the literature on the topic tends to overlook the importance of location and proximity as predictors of alliance formation and management; Joanne Gowa’s work is among the few exceptions. By and large, most of the literature on the topic belongs to realist, neo-liberal or constructivist traditions. Realist scholars tend to focus on power, threat, and interests. Stephen Walt argues that states can choose between two contrasting types of foreign policy behavior—to either align with a certain power, and therefore bandwagon, or balance against it. Other scholars attribute the choice of alignment policy to the potential threats that states face—states can either balance a threatening power or bandwagon with the most threatening state—the former pattern of alignment being far more common than that latter.

Additionally, states may also choose to ally with stronger states if other states with offensive military capabilities are likely to provoke other nations to form defensive coalitions. When choosing between the policy of balancing and bandwagoning, states are also constrained by their size and power— weaker states are more likely to bandwagon, rather than balance because they can do little to affect the outcome. Alternatively, strong states can turn the losing coalition into a winning one because their capabilities may play a key difference in the outcome of a conflict. Randy Schweller challenges this observation and notes that states have very different reasons to balance or bandwagon.

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While the aim of balancing is self-preservation and, therefore, is driven by the desire to avoid losses, bandwagoning is usually driven by the opportunity for gain. Realist explanations implicitly approach geography within the broader context of power whereas geographic location and spatial proximity could either facilitate or constrain a nation’s power and, therefore, its ability to form and manage successfully alliances.

Other scholars found that the formation and management of alliances may be linked not only to external, but also internal, state- or regime-related threats, especially in instances when countries experience competing allegiances, lack of legitimacy and control of the state apparatus. In these cases they form alliances as “a reaction not to the presence of an external threat, nor by domestic political compromise, but by the presence of both external and internal security challenges that reinforce each other.” Alliances can also bestow additional ‘private’ benefits that increase the military capabilities of certain states, as well as political opportunities for state’s leader to consolidate support at home by gaining political recognition, economic support, or legitimizing ideology. Finally, scholars of democratic peace approach alliances among democratic nations as a mechanism to consolidate their regimes and facilitate “systems of democratically controlled armed forces as well as habits of cooperation with NATO nations and neighboring partners.”

Two frameworks implicitly discuss the link between geography and functioning of alliances—neo-liberal institutionalism and security communities. Neoliberal scholars define alliances as international institutions that “provide information, reduce transaction costs, make commitments more credible, establish focal points for coordination, and in general facilitate the operation of reciprocity.” They approach institutions like NATO as a regional security regimes that establish stable rules and norms. Celeste Wallander noted that during the Cold War NATO invested in certain general and specific assets that include centralized command separate but integrated military and political decision-making bodies, and others. These organizational assets developed over many years became especially valuable in the last two decades to serve NATO’s new security missions because they facilitated transparency, integration, and negotiation among member states. From this analytical framework, geography can be approached as a key organizational asset—for example NATO’s expansion into Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe was frequently seen as an important asset that gave the Alliance

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access to strategically important locations and bases in Eastern Europe similar to Iceland’s key locations in the Atlantic Ocean.

Constructivism offers an alternative approach to explaining *raison d’être* of international alliances through the idea of security communities. These communities are “social groups with a process of political communication, some machinery for enforcement, and some popular habits of compliance.” They possess a capacity to act as a political unit and have “the ability of a unit to control its own behavior and to redirect its own attention.” By merging security and community, new types of interactions emerge where “the members of that community will not fight each other physically, but will settle their disputes in some other way.”20 The *degree of integration* highlights a key distinction: The amalgamated communities present a formal merger of two or more previously independent units into a single larger unit such as in the cases of the United States and Switzerland. Alternatively, pluralistic security communities retain the legal independence of separate governments as autonomous units where “two separate governmental units form a security community without being merged.” Karl Deutsch admits that the “pluralistic security communities turned out to be somewhat easier to attain [and] preserve than their amalgamated counterparts.”21 While geography is not mentioned explicitly as a key variable for political integration, the fact that amalgamated and pluralistic communities emerge in a distinct geographic area (Scandinavia, United States, Switzerland, Western Europe, and others) reaffirms the expectation that such integration occurs in confined geographic areas/regions. Nonetheless, the lack of comprehensive theoretical studies on the link between geography and the management of alliances once again highlights the need for further research on the topic to explain geography’s various distributional issues and unanticipated consequences related to the functioning and management of alliance politics.

**Smart Defense and International Security Cooperation**

The idea of smart defense became particularly relevant for NATO after 2009 as a new approach toward defense planning and appropriations. The initiative was intended to set the “right” priorities, enhance “pooling and sharing of capabilities” and help “better coordinate allied efforts.”22 Such an approach is warranted because of the need to ensure adequate national security policies at low cost and against the backdrop of defense cuts after 2010. NATO’s re-focusing collective defense, readiness to deploy troops to “the right place, at the right time, and with the right tools and training” and the improvement of both levels and the nature of defense spending are all essential ingredients of the new policy.23 Lastly, the smart defense is intended to provide framework that would steer

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Many thanks,

-- Ivan Dinev Ivanov