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The challenge of burden-sharing

Historically associated with transatlantic discords about the Atlantic alliance, burden-sharing is a term that comes and goes on the policy agenda.¹ Last year, Robert Gates made the headlines when he chastised most of his European counterparts for not shouldering enough of the burden in the NATO-led operation in Libya. Evoking the spectre of a “two-tiered alliance” made up of those “willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership... but don’t want to share the risks and the costs,” the outgoing US defence secretary warned, “[t]he blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the US congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the

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¹ Keith Hartley and Todd Sandler, “NATO burden-sharing: Past and future,” *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 6 (November 1999): 665-80.

necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.”² A few months earlier, Gates had made similar comments, this time about what he saw as the Europeans’ over-eagerness to pull out of Afghanistan, where their troops make up less than a third of the total forces deployed. In a way, Gates had a point. In the last 10 years, the US’s share of total NATO spending has indeed jumped from 50 percent to 75 percent, in no small part because of America’s own formidable increase in military expenditures after 11 September 2001.

Accusations of free-riding have marred transatlantic relations ever since the creation of the Atlantic alliance in 1949. Then as now, the rhetoric of burden-sharing has served as a useful rhetorical weapon to blame those who were seen as not contributing enough to the cause. Each time, however, Washington’s call has fallen on deaf ears, at least in public. In private, European and Canadian officials highlight other contributions they think they are making to NATO operations, for example in the shape of development aid or considerable troop casualties in Afghanistan. They mention UN peacekeeping missions, such as in Lebanon, where the US is not involved. Cynics admit that they never really bought much into the military adventures into which the US threw them, and that the US itself did not seem to believe much in the Libya mission. The reality, French foreign minister Alain Juppé retorted to Gates, is that it is the Europeans who “think the Americans aren’t doing enough.”³

The evolution of the transatlantic debate suggests two things. First, burden-sharing is about more than NATO. One cannot just look at defence spending at a time when humanitarian aid, diplomatic mediation, and the fight against climate change can all be considered contributions of a sort to collective security.⁴ Disentangling what counts as a contribution to which public good is no easy thing. Second, burden-sharing is a contested political concept. Statesmen and diplomats do not speak the abstract language of public choice, with its “non-excludable” and “non-rival” goods. Rather, they talk about “being fair,” “doing what you can,” and “making a real

2 “Gates: NATO has become two-tiered alliance,” press release, US Department of Defence, 10 June 2011, www.defense.gov.

3 “Showing the strain,” *Economist*, 16 July 2011.

4 Han Dorussen, Emil Kirchner, and James Sperling, “Sharing the burden of collective security in the European Union,” *International Organization* 63, no.4 (fall 2009): 789-810.

contribution.” In other words, they speak the normative language of justice rather than the utilitarian language of economics.

Rather than attempting to prove who’s right and who’s wrong, our research agenda is to reconstruct the practical logic of the claims that bedevil global governance. Our starting point is that we have to understand the logic of burden-sharing a lot better before we start pointing fingers at other countries and congratulating our own. In our ongoing project, we look at how government elites construe the good of collective security, the different contribution strategies that they develop, and the domestic and international constraints and opportunities that they face in implementing such strategies. We address each of these issues in turn.

WHAT IS GOOD?

The first question that comes to mind is how to define “the good.” In a broad sense, international security is assumed to be a collective good. One does not need to be a moral relativist to admit that “the good” is not a self-evident notion. Some countries, like the US, may have deployed troops in Afghanistan because their leaders think that western security is threatened by a Taliban regime. Others, such as Poland, are there because their leaders feel threatened by Russia and see the deployment of their troops alongside US forces as a contribution to European security. There is always symbolic politics involved in defining what the good is. In Canada, for instance, continentalists tend to define Canadian security in terms of trade relations with the US, while internationalists emphasize a world order underpinned by multilateralism. Your interpretation of the public good will determine how you want burden-sharing to be allocated.

The second question is how much you value the good, however defined. To be sure, political leaders may underestimate the benefits of a collective good, what public choice theorists call free-riding. Italian leaders, to take one example, do not always seem to realize that their geographical position and regime weakness make them highly dependent on the Euro-Atlantic security umbrella. But conversely, some countries may contribute to collective security because their political leaders value security tremendously, for ideological reasons or otherwise. This is arguably the case of Britain, where the “special relationship” has acquired an ontological importance that defies strategic rationality.

A third possibility is to derive individual benefits from the public good. In addition to privatization, such as when allied countries obtain military bases or armaments contracts, the literature has explored the existence of

excludable altruistic and prestige benefits. Altruistic benefits refer to the moral satisfaction derived from adhering to a norm of reciprocity. Alexander Betts' study on refugee protection suggests that states such as the Netherlands and Scandinavia provide disproportionately high levels of asylum and voluntary contributions to refugee agencies because they have "long-established norms of humanitarianism and solidarity both domestically and abroad that create a domestic demand to actively provide humanitarian support."⁵ Prestige benefits are accrued when the act of contributing more than expected provides political capital and bargaining power in an organization. For example, Canada's ambitious strategy in Afghanistan has in part been shaped by the government's desire to punch above its weight at the NATO table and thereby acquire easier access to the Pentagon.

CONTRIBUTION STRATEGIES

Even assuming that governments agree on what the public good is, it is very hard to know what counts as a meaningful contribution. Political leaders are skilled at emphasizing their contribution and downplaying others. This suggests that governments use their contributions to provide different public goods strategically. Two analytical challenges are involved here. The first is to find out which institutional context is better adapted to capture a public good, and thus where contributions should be made. For example, the public good of western security has often been tied up with NATO. But what about the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or the UN? Are contributions to these institutions not also contributions to western security? How can we account for the fact that Germany makes a bigger contribution to environmental security than Canada?⁶ Because there is a division of labour among international organizations that is itself a kind of burden-sharing, the contribution of a state to an organization also depends on its contribution to other organizations. It is difficult to evaluate the offsetting strategies that derive from the multiple membership of states. Finding a global measure of burden-sharing that would encompass these embedded strategies is a challenging task.

5 Alexander Betts, "Public goods theory and the provision of refugee protection: The role of the joint-product model in burden-sharing theory," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16, no. 3 (September 2003): 287.

6 Edward A. Page, "Distributing the burdens of climate change," *Environmental Politics* 17, no. 4 (August 2008): 556-75

The second challenge when evaluating contribution strategies is to find indicators that capture contributions other than budgetary ones, for example diplomatic “*bons offices*,” troop deployment, niche expertise, or casualties. In this regard, the literature on burden-sharing has often been limited by the availability of data. In the context of NATO, James Sperling and Mark Webber include exposure to risk, a necessarily qualitative judgment, as a key component in the burden-sharing equation.⁷ This is another way of saying that 500 soldiers in Kandahar is not quite the same as 500 soldiers in Mazar-i-Sharif, or that a big Greek army is not the same contribution to western security as a big Dutch army. A key objective of burden-sharing is to ensure that countries bring the *right* capabilities, not just any capabilities.

Each state has a comparative advantage with regards to certain kinds of contributions, from which strategies will derive. For example the value of Norway’s diplomatic mediation expertise is worth more than Poland’s because the Nordic country generally benefits from a better international reputation. Some kinds of contribution are more popular in some contexts than in others. Some are easier to make in some contexts than in others. The case of Germany, where parliamentary control of the armed forces is stronger than in the UK, Canada, or France, is telling: we cannot reasonably expect the same level of military contribution from Berlin. Domestic considerations play an important role in determining the size and kind of contribution.⁸ From this perspective, building new criteria of “fair” burden-sharing could offer a better picture of provision strategies according to what countries *can* do and not according to what they *should* do.

CULTURES OF BURDEN-SHARING

Each institutional context—NATO, the financial sphere, or the whaling regime—is governed by different rules of the game when it comes to distributive justice. The burden-sharing literature so far has been mostly interested in uncovering the aggregation technology that rules over the provision of a public good. How contributions combine, in this view, is driven by the nature of the public good. Some goods call for a best-shot technology because their attainment depends on the biggest contributor.

7 James Sperling and Mark Webber, “NATO: From Kosovo to Kabul,” *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (May 2009): 491-511.

8 Andrew Bennett, Joseph Leggold, and Danny Unger, “Burden-sharing in the Persian Gulf War,” *International Organization* 48, no. 1 (winter 1994): 39-75.

Others depend on a weakest-link technology because their attainment depends on the smallest.

Surprisingly, little research has been done on how international organizations and international regimes generate their own cultures of burden-sharing, through norms, dominant worldviews, and decision-making procedures. By assuming some degree of institutional autonomy, we open up the possibility that international organizations have an independent effect on burden-sharing.⁹ In the World Trade Organization, for instance, the logic of hardnosed bargaining is considered to be legitimate. In other organizations, for example the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, the logic of give-and-take tends to be privileged. While the public good of a stable set of trade rules is understood to allow for the naked expression of self-interest, the public good of a world without pandemics is seen to necessitate self-restraint and occasional displays of self-sacrifice. Notions of appropriateness and justice differ from one context to another. In a way, the debate on burden-sharing is also a struggle to reach agreement on the purpose, the objectives, and the priorities of an international organization.

Funding rules tend to reflect cultures of burden-sharing. Take international security organizations that deploy “peace” missions. NATO distinguishes common costs, which are shared according to a formula loosely related to each member’s relative GDP, from individual operation costs, where the inherently disproportionate rule applied is that costs lie where they fall. In an organization based on the unanimity rule, these principles are very hard to change. The GDP criterion is also applied at the United Nations, in the sense that wealthier countries contribute more. But countries with a per capita GDP of less than \$9564 receive a 20 percent discount, while countries with a per capita GDP of less than \$4797 receive an 80 percent discount. Moreover, the organization pays the individual member-states that contribute military personnel for a peacekeeping operation. In that sense, the UN follows a progressive taxation model, while NATO follows a flat tax model. The OSCE, for its part, follows a poll tax model whereby every member pays a roughly equivalent amount. In this negotiated system, Italy pays as much as Germany, and Canada pays more than half as much as the US.

9 Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

In calling for broadening the research agenda on burden-sharing, we are aware that there is a tradeoff. Multiplying the number of relevant actor-level and institution-level variables makes it more difficult to develop quantitative models. At the same time, it also makes it more difficult to point the finger at certain countries. In this light, Canada is probably not the military dwarf and NATO free-rider that it was portrayed to be in the 1990s: troop casualties and a fairly high deployment tempo in the 2000s have laid this bad reputation to rest.¹⁰ But Canada is not the leading contributor pictured in the Canadian media either. France and the UK are deploying more than twice as many troops as Canada and, in general, European countries are contributing to several organizations, not just NATO and the UN. While Italy is contributing little relative to its major-state status, it also does not seem to be getting much influence in return for its contribution. As for the US, it is indeed contributing a great deal, but the evidence suggests that it benefits from global security a lot more as well.

Before we engage in naming and shaming, it is worthwhile for specialists in the research and policymaking communities to address a few key questions. Do states share a common definition and evaluation of “the good”? What can they realistically contribute towards attaining it? And, finally, which domestic and organizational constraints do they face? Without serious consideration of these questions, any debate on burden-sharing runs the risk of becoming a futile exercise.

¹⁰ Benjamin Zyla. “NATO and post-Cold War burden-sharing: Canada ‘the laggard’?” *International Journal* 64, no. 2 (March 2009): 337-59.