Smart Defence, Specialisation and Assured Access to Capabilities

Food for Thought Paper

**Prepared for IISS workshop,
27 November 2012, Brussels**

IISS The International Institute for Strategic Studies

Smart Defence, Specialisation and Assured Access to Capabilities

Food for Thought Paper

Role and task specialisation among NATO member states is an approach that carries significant risks, but also potentially high rewards.

On the one hand, specialisation is considered to be the most challenging of the three elements of the NATO Smart Defence agenda – the others being prioritisation and cooperation – because of its high impact on national autonomy. In effect, if nations were to focus on the provision of certain capabilities while disinvesting from other areas, on the understanding that another partner would cover what is given up, their mutual military dependency would rise considerably. Politically, nations would worry that they might be asked to provide capabilities to a mission in which they did not want to take part, or that countries on which they depended for a certain capability would not make it available.

In addition, virtually every defence review across the Alliance stresses deep uncertainty as perhaps the one key characteristic of the strategic environment. This makes it impossible to predict future contingencies and thus very difficult to assess future requirements. In this context, some governments would be worried about giving up capabilities that they might need urgently in the future. They know how difficult it would be to regenerate what has been lost. Strategic uncertainty thus turns into an argument against specialisation. It is therefore understandable that many analyses of NATO's Smart Defence initiative consider specialisation to be a bridge too far.

On the other hand, specialisation also promises greater rewards than prioritisation and cooperation, the other two elements of Smart Defence. Benefits could include more efficient resource allocation, as well as the opportunity to reduce unnecessary duplication among Allies and to shed obsolete capability. If specialisation were shelved because it was considered too difficult, it would be likely that the long-term ambition of Smart Defence – namely, to alter the way NATO members design, operate, maintain and discard military capabilities in order to enable NATO to meet its goals with fewer resources – would not be achievable.

'Specialisation by default' is already under way as NATO members engage in uncoordinated defence cuts which in many cases involve the complete elimination of some capabilities. As a result, NATO's collective capacity suffers. Those nations still providing the capabilities in question are being left with specialised roles purely as the result of other nations' actions. NATO's goal, therefore, has to be to set a path towards coordinated specialisation, through Alliance-wide consultations intended to achieve 'specialisation by design'. For this to happen, Allies need to consider mechanisms and policies that would reduce the risks of specialisation to a level at which they would become acceptable.

Dealing with uncertainty

In times of constraints on the financial resources available for defence, planners will look for ways to maintain a set of affordable capabilities that are relevant to perceived future military needs. NATO's Smart Defence agenda, including specialisation, is one means of seeking to do this. However, a security environment characterised by deep levels of uncertainty works against such strategies because future contingencies are difficult to predict. Governments, exercising their responsibility for national security, will tend to be reluctant to give up capabilities because in order to be best prepared for uncertainty, they need a broad capability spectrum.

Smaller NATO member states might be more willing to specialise because they mostly did not possess full-spectrum capabilities to begin with.

One approach would be for NATO to encourage member nations to establish mentoring agreements among themselves. The aim would be to provide a nation that agrees to disinvest from some selected capabilities with a partner who ensures that a minimum of skills, training and doctrine is maintained. Such residual capability in countries that are specialising would speed up the process of regeneration should the need arise in the future. It is very likely that in this model, larger member states would provide the anchor for several smaller ones. While larger members willing to provide such services might benefit themselves, for example in terms of a more efficient use of their training and education facilities, it seems clear that such an arrangement does not distribute benefits equally and larger partners would need to be willing to invest more than they get in return. In a way, such mentoring arrangements are what used to be called effective multilateralism before the term was misappropriated by the European Union for its security policy ambition: certain (large) states doing more than their fair share on the understanding that doing so enables others, who would otherwise not contribute, to add relevant capability to the specialised mix. Whether this or some other approach were adopted, it seems clear that means of fostering specialisation while coping with strategic uncertainty need to be developed.

Assuring Access

Any strategy to increase role specialisation within NATO will be considered faulty if it does not ensure that particular capabilities that are needed for Alliance operations – and exist within it – are provided when they are needed. Therefore, means to assure access will be crucial to the success of Smart Defence.

However, while specialisation could be expected to be effective in helping to meet budgetary targets, it could also be burdened with inefficiencies. The easiest way to assure access is to allow for redundancy of all capabilities affected by specialisation. Thus, if one country that possessed a particular capability opted out of an operation in which the capability was needed, it could still be provided from elsewhere within the Alliance. However, redundancy tends to subvert the central idea behind specialisation and behind Smart Defence more generally. It will be most important, therefore, to establish a balance between assured access, redundancy, and the need for greater efficiency in resource allocation. This will be a difficult balance to strike, both in concept and in practice.

One way to achieve a reasonable guarantee of access to capabilities would be for countries to enter into legally binding agreements to provide them. They would deliver a predetermined capability after receiving notice that it was required. Countries would be required to keep such assets at an agreed level of readiness, with fully trained personnel and support, mandated to conduct a predetermined range of missions for a defined period of time. Governments have entered into agreements of that nature with commercial providers of capability, for example in the areas of strategic air transport and tanker aircraft. In the past, NATO members have tasked NATO agencies to manage negotiations with commercial partners to set up such a framework. The disadvantage is that binding agreements are likely to demand a complex organisational structure to monitor compliance and manage implementation.

The approaches mentioned – building redundancy, and contractual agreements – are examples of ways in which specialisation could be achieved while allaying NATO members' concerns about national autonomy, mutual dependency and divergent choices on use of force. If role specialisation within the NATO Smart Defence agenda is to move forward, further thinking is needed to develop mechanisms that could limit the perceived risks for governments while avoiding the generation of excessive documentation and bureaucracy.