

2023-01-02

Review of Bence Nemeth, How to achieve defence cooperation in Europe? The subregional approach. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022iv+192pp.

Cladi, L

<https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/20926>

10.1080/14702436.2022.2124157

Defence Studies

Taylor and Francis Group

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

Bence Nemeth, *How to achieve defence cooperation in Europe? The subregional approach*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022iv+192pp.

This is the accepted version of a book review for *Defence Studies*

The book acknowledges that subregional defence cooperation is a very important form of military cooperation in Europe. In the ever-expanding field of European security, this is an area of work that certainly deserves due attention. Examples of cooperation at a subregional level now abound in European security and in an increasing number of cases, states seem to prefer them to other forms of cooperation. According to Nemeth, they increasingly shape defence cooperation in Europe. They are peculiar because they can function without the involvement of NATO and the EU. Rather, they interact with European regional-level organizations such as NATO and the EU in a different way: they upload their preferences to or download policies from them.

In a nutshell, to understand European security cooperation, as Nemeth's book ultimately succeeds at pointing out, it is no longer enough to know about how states interact with one another, and it is no longer enough to know how the EU and NATO interact with one another. The subregional level, where smaller groups of states coordinate their defence efforts, ought to be prioritised. This is the case as it can lead to better understanding of emerging defence collaborative dynamics in European security cooperation. This is a book that generates more questions than answers, but this is inevitable because the complexity of European security cooperation lends itself to this kind of outcome. Whilst Nemeth's book ultimately seeks to provide fairly bold answers, somewhat overstating its claims about what policy-makers should focus on and the importance of the sub-regional level, his book will make you think in depth about European security cooperation.

Nemeth illustrates his argument by focusing on three subregional multinational defence cooperation frameworks (MDCs). An MDC is defined as 'any arrangement where two or more defence policy communities work together to enhance military capability in a permanently structured way' (p. 34). The MDCs that Nemeth focuses upon are the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), established by Denmark,

Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden in 2009, the British-French Lancaster House Treaties of 2010 and the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC) created by Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2011. From a methodological point of view, Nemeth utilises pattern match: he firstly isolates three patterns of rival explanations and argues that neither is suitable to explain the dependent variable. He then finds alternative empirically based patterns and develops his own theoretical framework. He proceeds to examine each of the factors of the theoretical framework in detail (chapters 4-8) and then highlight how they interact with one another (chapter 9).

Nemeth's theoretical framework comprises three structural and two situational factors. In his view, these are the most relevant factors concerning the creation of European MDCs. The structural factors are (a) the existence of a security community, (b) the perception that individual European armed forces do not have appropriate funds for defence and (c) previous defence collaborations between the participating states. The situational factors are (1) strong leadership by a group of enthusiastic high-level officials and good interpersonal chemistry between them and (2) a supportive political milieu for the defence cooperation. Nemeth argues that structural and situational factors interact with each other in a particular way to explain why states create MDCs. Here come Nemeth's book's key "punching lines". Firstly, he asserts that the best way to grasp the essence of defence cooperation is using defence policy communities (DPCs) as the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis should be DPCs instead of states, governments or international organizations. Secondly, that scholars need to be flexible as Nemeth himself draws upon a number of disciplines in his approach, mixing insights from various disciplines such as social psychology, security studies, political science, economics and public policy studies. The book generates some insights by arguing that financial crisis did not have any significant impact on creating the MDCs. However, it is possible that financial concerns might have accelerated the drive towards the creation of MDCs (chapter 5). Previous defence collaborations are highly relevant when DPCs want to create a new MDC (chapter 6). Moreover, good chemistry between leaders boosts cooperation (chapter 7).

All in all, this is a book that given its original topic, sparked significant curiosity. Nemeth sought to dig a hole in an area where very few scholars have paid systematic attention so far. As this is one of few attempts to shed light on an area which is currently being studied, it is somewhat unpreventable that some eyebrows are raised when reading this book, significantly diminishing the stroke of the argument and of the policy recommendations. I will focus on what I thought were the most significant shortcomings in my view.

Firstly, Nemeth consciously chooses not to focus on implementation. This is unfortunate because without focusing on the actual implementation of the MDCs, the reader is left without material to evaluate Nemeth's theoretical framework with. It is also unclear why, without a story of results of MDCs for states' security, let alone for European security cooperation, the answer for practitioners should be to, boldly, focus on 'the subregional level instead of the European level and know the defence policy community of your potential partners' (p. 167). Then again, 'This is how you achieve defence cooperation in Europe – developing good interpersonal relations and maintaining excellent situational awareness' (p. 167). Whilst it is hard to disagree with these statements, it remains somewhat less explicit how exactly are policy-makers supposed to have complete knowledge of what surrounds them? Do such policy-makers exist in the international system? Or do they have to make the most out of very challenging situations and often be unable to look past their term in office?

Secondly, Nemeth focuses on description of how MDCs came about in some cases but does not pay sufficient attention to what would rather be a more crucial and salient question, namely why states now seem to prefer MDCs to other forms of cooperation? This can't be done by Nemeth's theoretical framework because his story is one that deliberately chooses not to focus on states. We should, in fact, look past states in his story. If we do not focus on states, we cannot achieve a convincing explanation as to why states not only prefer MDCs, but perhaps more crucially, why they opt for one instead of another. On this latter point, the book offers some indications that personal chemistry among people involved, along with history of previously successful cooperation can be important factors for the success of an MDCs. Nevertheless, personal chemistry is notoriously difficult to operationalise and

measure. We are in the realm of assumptions, which are helpful to describe a situation rather than to explain it and unpack it. Moreover, what explains the duration of an MDC after new people get involved in it who may not have the same level of personal chemistry?

Finally, one of the structural factors that Nemeth chooses is the security community. Again, this is assumed rather than explained and duly problematised. I was left wondering about the following: does a security community in Europe still exist? If so, how has it resisted recent considerable challenges such as the Euro-crisis, Brexit, COVID-19 to name but a few? Why are states so keen on exploring potential for collaborations in smaller frameworks compared to what they were used to?

As anticipated above, this book generates more questions than answers and this is very important because it means that this book succeeded at generating the so-called “food for thought”. Generating curiosity and leading to more questions is challenging but Nemeth’s book threw the hook, and he deserves credit for seeking to identify the factors which possibly enable the creation of MDCs in Europe. When we have a far-reaching demonstration that the sub-regional level is the one that counts the most, then we can also have a crystal-clear theoretical contribution. For now, further digging is needed to make that happen.

Lorenzo Cladi
University of Plymouth