

Analytic Eclecticism and Atlantic Burden Sharing: A Reply to Jordan Becker

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I would like to thank my colleague Jordan Becker for taking the time to engage with my scholarship on NATO burden sharing (BS). I am also delighted to see that he finds it important and agrees with my main findings and the suggestions I present in my recent *JIOS* article on “NATO Burden Sharing: A Research Agenda,” particularly on how to create a second generation NATO BS research program by integrating the positivist and post-positivist epistemologies.

I very much welcome the opportunity to engage with what I think has become the start of a very fruitful discussion and to perhaps respond to some of the key points that came out of that discussion. I am also grateful to the *JIOS* editors for making this conversation possible. Hopefully, our discussion will lead to more debates (and responses) in the future.

Given that Becker has already done an excellent job of summarizing the article’s key arguments, I will jump straight into the debate. I will offer some direct responses and more detailed explanations and perhaps clarifications as to where I think the scholarship on NATO burden sharing could head, what new “explanatory value” it holds, and how to “integrate” the literature’s positivist stream into this new post-positivist research program.

To start with, Becker is right in his assessment that my article mainly points out the theoretical and methodological limitations of the current BS research program. At the time I wrote that article, I did not have the space to elaborate in greater detail what such a post-positive research program might look like—that is, what particular theoretical and methodological frameworks *might* be useful to increase the explanatory value of future BS studies. I will do this further below and suggest that what we need is an epistemological turn in the literature toward an analytical eclecticism.¹ This would nicely correspond to what Becker has called “methodological reconciliation.” I very much welcome his recent works using ACA that tries to integrate strategic culture as an independent variable in a more positivist research program on BS (Becker 2017) and see this as a possible way toward operationalizing analytical eclecticism.

Before I further outline what I mean by analytical eclecticism, I am glad to see that we both agree that assessing or even measuring BS is not an easy task, not analytically, theoretically, or politically. This, in part, explains why BS debates since the birth of NATO in 1949 at times have been loud, and sometimes vulgar, tasteless, or even hostile toward other allies. The political dimension of BS should not be underestimated and is an important dimension of the analysis. We do not have to go back too far in history to be reminded of the tone (and consequences) of these debates. Earlier this year, Donald Trump visited the new NATO headquarters in Brussels and pretty much told his European allies in a lecture style format that the U.S. wants the Europeans to share more of the collective burden—to simply spend more on defense. This was a classic number-crunching argument, but it largely misses the point, as I will show below. Either way, while certainly undiplomatic, if not offensive to some, Trump’s remarks hit a very sensitive nerve in the political debates on NATO BS, and it ticked off many states and their leaders personally.

1. I thank Patrick James for this suggestion.

In that sense, I am delighted to see that Becker and I agree on the main deficiencies of the literature on NATO burden sharing and that our discussion is inspired by offering a new generation of burden-sharing studies that advances new insights (theoretical, methodological) and empirical findings. Having said that, we differ slightly, as I show below, in our theoretical and methodological approaches. However, we are united in our conviction to combine, if not integrate, positivist and post-positivist scholarship on BS, perhaps by using a mixed-methods approach. In that sense, we most certainly have overcome the deep theoretical, rigidly fiercely fought methodological battles that characterize much of the earlier BS scholarship (e.g., Sandler 2014).

We also agree that we cannot simply juxtapose positivist versus post-positivists epistemologies on BS and conclude that one is superior to the other or that one provides “better” explanations of social or empirical phenomena than the other. We can thus *not* suggest or conclude that either methodological approach be disregarded entirely. At the end of the day, these are impossible calls to make. There is no agreement in the literature on what a deep or shallow, a richer or poorer, a superior or inferior explanation is and how to determine or measure it. We should abandon this epistemological hackling altogether.

A second but related point is that we should remind ourselves that following either a positivist or a post-positivist epistemology essentially means studying two things. The exchange between Becker and myself here are, perhaps, an example of this, because we do not entirely agree on the dependent variable: what burden sharing is. If I read his comments to my article correctly, his suggested ACA approach remains predominantly positivist in the methodological sense, treating BS as an outcome. In contrast, I have suggested (Zyla 2015) that it *also* should be considered and analyzed as a process or practice of international politics (Neumann 2002; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny 2001). In other words, we use the same term (burden sharing) to study two slightly different things. To be sure, there is absolutely no issue with adopting either of the two approaches in one’s research program, but we need to be conscientious and transparent of what variables we focus on and what generalization can(not) be derived from those studies.

Analytical Eclecticism and NATO BS

Analytical eclecticism as an approach to studying NATO BS holds great promise to overcome these theoretical blinders that I sketched out in the article, as well as above. It also allows us to overcome the institutional barriers in the respective fields of study (e.g., international relations, international political economy, public administration, etc.) that BS scholars associate with. To be sure, when using the term analytical eclecticism, I follow Sil and Katzenstein (2010) who charge that above all, analytic eclecticism is *not* an alternative model of research. Rather, it is an intellectual viewpoint that complements and selectively combines different theoretical and epistemological frameworks and narratives (some later scholarship suggested that we might call it a meta-theory).

Moreover, analytical eclecticism seems to be driven by analyzing policy problems, not digging into theoretical or methodological preferences. Analytic eclecticism, some scholars charge, “[. . .] begins with research questions that are framed so as to capture, not bracket, the complexity of interesting political phenomena” (Sil and Katzenstein 2011, 482–83). NATO BS undoubtedly belongs in this category. In that sense, analytical eclecticism allows us to analyze very complex, multi-dimensional, and policy-relevant research problems (e.g., NATO BS). Thereby, it nicely complements traditional and parsimonious theorizing (e.g., see Shapiro 2005). Analytical eclecticism is thus “a means for social scientists to guard against the risks of excessive reliance on a single analytic framework and the simplifying assumptions that come with it” (Ibid., 414; see also Jervis 2005). Such an approach, I suggest, would most likely push the explanatory value of future BS studies. Moreover, Becker, I believe, would agree with me on this, and I see his latest scholarship on ACA that tries to integrate strategic culture as an independent variable in a positivist research program as a welcome contribution in this regard.

Having said that, I think Becker and I disagree methodologically in some minor ways. In response to his first point, I slightly disagree, epistemologically speaking, with his assertions that bivariate analysis can push the research program forward. What most current BS studies units (e.g., Sandler and his various associates) do is—directly, indirectly, openly, or hidden behind academic jargon—work with strong rationality assumptions in their modeling. (This is also, I contend, what the bivariate correlation does that he describes.) Those assumptions are then paired with positivist epistemologies to generalize about trends in NATO BS. The obvious result is that the literature tends to be dominated by deductive, hypothesis testing research designs and methodological individualism. In turn, this obviously limits researchers in making inferences from data that they gathered and interpreted (Zyla 2016), and begs to ask the much deeper questions: *why, how, etc.* Again, Becker's first point only touches upon this when he notes that we need to also consider expeditionary activities rather than just capabilities. In contrast, I suggest we need to consider expeditionary forces as a social process whereby a number of state and non-state actors make a decision on what that contribution might look like, why it should (not) take place, how, and what the overall (strategic) objective might be to achieve, based on which normative or value rational predispositions, etc. Becker is correct in his assertion under point two that some studies on BS (especially informed by liberal IR scholarship) have looked inside states; the so-called joint product model that Becker rightfully identifies under point four also partially accomplished this. Yet, epistemologically these studies remained strongly rationalist, which is my point here, treating the state as a “transmission belt” (c.f. Moravcsik) rather than analyzing the social processes that are at the heart of decisions on capabilities, force contributions, etc.

To make my point more clearly, positivist scholarship treats burden sharing as an outcome rather than a social process that occurs way before the decision(s) for or against BS are made. Put simply, what the literature needs is to study the intersubjective meanings that states assign to NATO BS, the social forces within those states trying to influence the BS process, and if and how actors' norms, beliefs, or values do play a role in BS decisions.² These social predispositions do not primarily derive from material interests that states undoubtedly have; they are socially constructed and reflexively inform BS behavior of actors involved in BS decisions and thus states (Keck and Sikking 1998). In short, rationalist and positivist studies have extremely little to say on *why* a particular BS trend exists (i.e., free riding) and *why* it occurred at a particular point in time, because it is not merely cost-benefit analyses that inform states' motivations for or against BS. In short, social variables must also find their way into the formal modeling. As I will show below, Becker's suggested approaches on integrating strategic culture in a positivist research program through, for example, automated content analysis, only partially overcomes this dilemma. It can only be the beginning of a long list of potential ideational variables that *might* be at play in BS decision-making processes.

The constructivist scholarship in international relations has produced some significant and influential scholarship over the past decade or so that a future eclecticist research program on NATO BS should engage with. At the heart of that inquiry are the intersubjective meanings, societal norms, values, and beliefs and power structures (s.f. Foucault and Mèrand 2012).

What does that mean more concretely? As suggested above, the constructivist scholarship, for example, as well as critical theory or postcolonial theory offer significant and well-established theoretical frameworks that *could* inform and guide future BS studies. They suggest additional variables that classical, positivist scholarship has not been able to investigate or “test” for the reasons mentioned above. I do not have the space to fully elaborate on these points here due to space constraints. One might, for example, think of studying the roles of ideas and identity as variables that undoubtedly challenge politician's belief systems and thus influence political decisions (Hansen 2006; Wendt 1999; Adler and Haas 1992; Risse

2. I have started such analysis in (Zyla 2015) distinguishing between material and nonmaterial variables, which is what Becker has called for in his first point.

2010; Weldes 1999). Also entirely overlooked in current BS studies is the process of states' and their agents' learning (Risse 2004; Checkel 2007). Moreover, perceptions of BS (Wendt 1992; 1994) and norms (Wendt 1995; Finnemore 1996; Katzenstein 1996; Klotz 1995) *could* be studied as justifications for social actions (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Houghton 2007; Finnemore and Sicking 1998) or be seen as the source of social power (Hurrell 2002). Security communities sharing a common identity (Williams and Neumann 2000; Anderson, Ikenberry, and Risse 2008; Kopstein and Steinmo 2008) or social communication and discourse in collective action situations (Habermas 1996; Cox 1981) are also noted as additional possible variables.

In conclusion, offering a post-positivist methodological turn in the literature in the spirit of analytical eclecticism, combined with a nonmaterialistic (or social) ontology would most certainly push the NATO BS research program into new areas. Above all, I suggest, it would allow us to better *understand* 1) how states define NATO's public goods in their domestic polities, 2) what meaning they assign to it, 3) what *value-rational* (rather than instrumentally rational) motivations drive states' burden-sharing behavior, and 4) how national burden-sharing values are (perhaps) negotiated and traded in NATO's political marketplace of ideas and meaning.

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