When Collaboration Works: High Politics and Realism’s Renaissance in Arms Collaboration Studies

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Abstract The theoretical benefits of shared development costs and interoperability in armaments collaborations have led to an increase in cooperative projects, and the policy’s popularity is only likely to grow. Nevertheless, most states fail to achieve their desired levels of collaboration. The question must therefore be raised as to what factors favour partnerships’ success. We argue that realist dynamics play a more significant role than hitherto appreciated. International armaments collaboration is a fundamentally difficult process. Major projects cost significant sums and often require decades to complete. Multiple stakeholders, ranging from military headquarters to corporate managers, may calculate that cooperation no longer serves their interests. Governments therefore need powerful incentives to overcome domestic opposition for collaboration to succeed. Realist interests – notably, the sense of collectively balancing against threats – provide governments with the requisite motivation to overcome domestic discontent. States within alliances stand to benefit more from collaboration because they alone profit from collaboration’s interoperability advantages. Alliances, furthermore, offer assurances in terms of supply security – sometimes through formal arrangements and at others through states’ common interest in not jeopardising the alliance – that mitigate this risk. Realist concerns, as expressed in formal alliances, thus incentivise governments to steer projects through to completion.

Keywords: Armaments collaboration, defence industries, NATO, European integration, realism

Introduction

Few defence-industrial questions are more important today than ascertaining why international armaments collaboration succeeds at times, and fails at others. Collaboration has occupied a central role in European states’ defence-industrial policies for half a century and is increasingly prized by non-European states, ranging from India to South Korea, as well. Today, few states can afford to develop and
produce their own weapons-systems. Even fewer states have the defence-industrial capabilities to produce all their armaments domestically: development costs have risen, military technology has become more complex, and competition for global markets have intensified (Chin 2004). With collaborative projects promising the procurement of cheaper, better weapons, faster, collaboration has become a popular policy for states facing the ever-increasing difficulty of keeping an up-to date military arsenal in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, such projects have yielded a wide range of results, and most states fail to achieve their desired levels of collaboration, with many partnerships dissolving before they reach the production phase.

Within the context of European politics, armaments are likewise a domain where integration is particularly differentiated. Certain groups of countries, indeed, have collaborated over long periods and especially well. France and Germany, for example, have collaborated for nearly half a century in a multitude of domains, including aircraft, helicopters and missiles. Italy, meanwhile, collaborates successfully with France on warships and Britain on helicopters. While these pairs of states have established enduring partnerships, with collaborative relationships gradually deepening into joint venture firms, other states fail to achieve similar outcomes. Submarine collaboration between Sweden and Germany, for example, collapsed in mutual acrimony. Switzerland, likewise, has floundered in its attempts to collaborate with either Austria or Germany; countries with which it shares a common language.

The question must therefore be raised as to what factors favour successful collaborations and what contribute to their failure. Although variables ranging from projects’ structures to leaders’ personalities can influence outcomes, the business management literature on corporate joint ventures suggests that choosing the “right” partner is the single most important determinant of whether projects succeed or fail. This, however, raises the related question of what makes for a good fit between partner countries. To fill this gap in armaments literature, we comparatively test the explanatory power of liberal, constructivist, institutionalist and realist analytic frameworks.

In our conclusion, we argue that realist dynamics play a more significant role than hitherto appreciated. International armaments collaboration is a fundamentally difficult process. Weapons projects are costly and often require decades to complete. Multiple stakeholders, ranging from military headquarters to corporate managers, may calculate that cooperation no longer serves their interests. Governments’ fears about their security of supply can likewise sour leaders’ views on collaboration. In the light of these challenges, governments need powerful incentives to overcome domestic opposition for collaboration to succeed.

Realist foreign policy interests – notably, the sense of collectively balancing against foreign threats – provide governments with the requisite incentives to push collaborative projects through to completion. States within alliances stand to benefit more from collaboration because they alone profit from collaboration’s interoperability advantages. Military alliances, furthermore, offer assurances in terms of supply security – sometimes through formal arrangements and at others through allied states’ common interest in not jeopardising the alliance – that mitigate collaborative projects’ inherent risks. At a final and more basic level, allied states’ commitments to collectively balance against threats endow them with a vested interest in their partners’ military power, which mitigates concerns about relative gains’ distribution amongst cooperating partners.