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REVIEW

National Armies and NATO, 1949–1991.

Jan Hoffenaar & Brian McAllister Linn (eds.)

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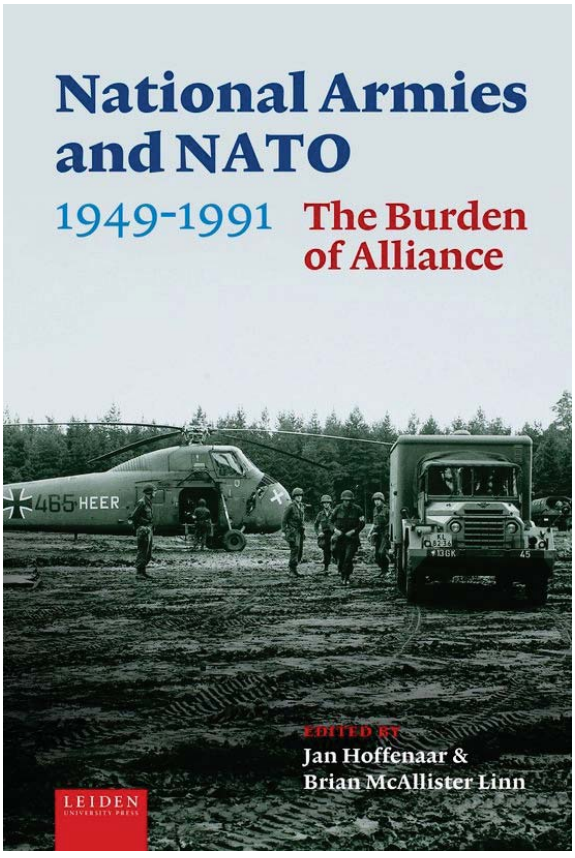

This is an academic work bringing together contributions from various specialists on the relationship between different national armies and NATO during the Cold War period. To this end, the book adopts a comparative approach, structured around country-specific case studies within the framework of NATO and participation in the Atlantic Alliance during the period under review, which leads the reader to an inevitable comparative analysis combining military history, defence policy decisions and, in a broader context, international relations.

The volume brings together specialists in military history and strategic studies, mostly affiliated with European and North American universities, defence studies institutes, and research centres in contemporary history and international security. For example, the editors are Jan Hoffenaar, a Dutch historian and military officer, and Brian McAllister Linn, an American military historian, professor at Texas A&M University and a leading authority on the history of the US Army.

Thus, each NATO country is the subject of a chapter analysed by an expert from that country, providing archival knowledge and primary sources, direct experience within the organisation, and political, doctrinal and strategic contextualisation in relation to national defence policies, alongside a diversity of historiographical approaches inherent in the authors' varied backgrounds. There is also a civil-military balance, combining university academics, historians linked to military archives and defence analysts, with a wide geographical diversity that allows for the inclusion of NATO's core powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany), the middle powers (Canada, the Netherlands), the southern flank (Spain, Turkey, Greece, Portugal) and the Nordic countries.

The book features the aforementioned Hoffenaar and McAllister Linn, who provide a solid historiographical foundation in a comprehensive introduction, before moving on to examine the cases by country in relation to their NATO membership. In order of chapters: John Keess on Canada, Iben Bjørnsson on Denmark, Olivier Schmitt on France, Dieter Krüger on Germany, Dionysios Chourchoulis on Greece, Jan Hoffenaar again on the Netherlands, Jorge Silva Rocha on Portugal, Ignacio Fuente Cobo on Spain, Ayşe Ömür Atmaca and Zerrin Torun on Turkey, Huw Bennett on the United Kingdom, with the second editor, Brian McAllister, concluding the volume by examining the US case.

The central thesis of the work, clearly formulated in the introduction, is that NATO should be understood not as a homogeneous structure, but as an alliance deeply marked by tensions between national interests and collective commitments, where the concept of the 'burden of alliance' is key—that is, the difficult balance between the distribution of responsibilities and their political, military and economic costs at the national level.

Another of the book's strongest arguments is that NATO functioned—and to a large extent continues to function—as a transactional agreement, where states weigh up the costs and benefits of their participation. This is reflected in US leadership based on pure strategic calculation, European dependence on US nuclear deterrence, and constant negotiation over military contributions.

Derived from these premises are others such as the structural asymmetry within the alliance, national interests that never disappeared, the profound transformation of national armies through their NATO membership, and the tensions between commitments made and specific needs; in this case, the analysis of the impact of colonial wars (France, Portugal, United Kingdom) and US foreign policy (Vietnam) is particularly relevant.

This is a very solid book, although it has some limitations, such as its focus on an almost exclusively analytical approach to government positions and the impact on military structures; however, one might wish for greater attention to public opinion and its reactions, as well as a broader view of the impact on social and economic factors, particularly regarding defence budgetary policies.

The absence of some relevant cases, particularly Italy, is also striking. Furthermore, the focus is centred on land forces, leaving naval forces, the air dimension and the alliance's nuclear strategy in the background.

The chapter on Spain is particularly thought-provoking and is authored by Colonel and IEEE analyst Ignacio Fuente Cobo. It offers a comprehensive and well-documented overview, putting forward a clear thesis: Spain played an essential strategic role in Euro-Atlantic security long before its formal accession to the alliance, and its integration was the result of a complex evolution, marked by political asymmetries, bilateral dependence and progressive military adaptation.

Initially, Spain was excluded from NATO, although it was always militarily indispensable in a theoretical response to a Soviet attack on Europe, going on to establish a bilateral link with the United States through the 1953 agreement, under which the Americans, in exchange for defence aid, secured the use of the bases at Rota, Torrejón, Zaragoza and Morón, although certain equipment could not be utilised; for example, during the Ifni War (1957–58), when Spain was unable to operate certain aircraft due to US restrictions.

Fuente Cobo notes a shift in the 1960s and 1970s, the period when actual accession negotiations began, with another agreement, this one from 1970, which brought greater Spanish control over US bases and the partial end of certain opaque clauses. Franco's death and the Transition paved the way for Spain to join the alliance, with a clear commitment leading up to its definitive accession in 1982, where the author highlights how Spain contributed significant capabilities—for example, more than 300,000 soldiers serving in key land, naval and air forces—but in exchange for a restriction that now seems significant, namely that Ceuta and Melilla remained outside the NATO umbrella.

Following PSOE's change of stance in 1986, then the ruling party, pragmatically accepting Spain's membership of NATO—a decision ratified in that year's referendum, although the 'yes' vote won by a narrow margin of 52.5%—certain conditions were imposed, such as non-integration into the military structure, a ban on the introduction of nuclear weapons, and a reduction in the US military presence. In Fuente Cobo's view, NATO also led to the transformation of the Spanish Armed Forces through the standardisation of procedures, equipment and operational

culture, certain key reforms (the 1983 META Plan, the 1990 RETO Plan and the 1994 NORTE Plan, which reduced and restructured units) and the consolidation of a unique model in which Spain retained control of its armed forces but participated in NATO through coordination agreements and the temporary transfer of operational control. A highly autonomous model.

As was the case with other member countries of the alliance, the end of the Cold War rendered this model obsolete, as the Soviet threat no longer existed and NATO was undertaking new missions. In 1999, Spain finally integrated into the military structure, with the consequences of full standardisation to NATO standards, the end of the asymmetrical bilateral relationship with the United States, and the gradual but certain full integration into the transatlantic architecture. In short, according to the author, who offers a mature interpretation based on first-hand knowledge, Spain did not join NATO abruptly, but rather after decades of functional integration and a long preceding period under asymmetrical conditions.

Beyond this chapter on Spain, in conclusion the work pursues a clear objective, namely to analyse how national armies integrated, adapted to, or resisted NATO's demands during the Cold War (1949–1991), thereby examining the difficult balance—if not tensions—between national sovereignty and allied commitments, but it also allows us to analyse military planning within NATO during this crucial formative period, which was undoubtedly different from its current objectives and needs, and where it is evident that NATO was not a homogeneous bloc, but a system of constant negotiation between national interests and collective strategy.

This is a work of particular use to those wishing to explore the history of NATO, the comparative analysis of defence policies, and an understanding of the origins of current debates surrounding the transatlantic collective security organisation, for in a post-Cold War bipolar context, many of the structural tensions remain and have even intensified.

In short, this is a significant contribution both to the history of the Cold War and to the analysis of contemporary NATO, particularly in a context of renewed geopolitical tension. The book also has the advantage—much appreciated by the reader—of explanatory sections at the end detailing the abbreviations used, which are inherent to the NATO environment and the military sphere, as well as a comprehensive index.

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