Who offers what? The troop contribution of post-communist states to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan, 2007-2021

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Abstract

Since NATO expanded the alliance after the cold war with countries that were formerly part of the Soviet sphere of influence, the new allies have made significant and sometimes above average contributions to the military operations. This research presents two dimensions on which post-communist NATO members can be divided, and dives into the question how much these variables affect troop contribution to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan. By collecting data from different public sources, a clear visual and numerical image will be created of the troop contribution and modernisation of defence for four different clusters of countries. Results show that post-communist nations overall contribute more to these military operations, but that not every group is equal in terms of how many troops are contributed. Modernised armies are in general less likely to contribute troops, while countries that have a higher domestic and regional threat perception are more avid to fight for their NATO security guarantee.

Introduction

After the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, most states that used to be aligned with the Soviet Union ascended to both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In the latter organisation, they have been avid members, contributing a lot of troops per capita to their international operations. This raises the question: why do post-communist states contribute more troops relative to the pre-1990s members of this alliance? Whereas the EU pursues to include all European nations as a long-term goal, NATO lacks such a design. The organisational design did not account for integrating all European nations, rather it was designed with an ideologically divided Europe in mind (Fierke & Wiener, 1999, p. 722). The ascension and avid participation are therefore remarkable from the new member states (Lubecki, 2021, p. 56). Not only did the countries join the alliance led by their former rival, the United States (US), research suggest the post-communist nations often have contributed relatively more troops than some of the countries that found the alliance (Jakobsen, 2018, p. 503). Not every new member state is equal: while some hold a geopolitically strategic importance, but lack a sizeable military (Lubecki, 2021, p. 46), other countries have more capacity modernize and adapt quickly to Western standards (Šimunović, 2015, p. 197-198).

The research will offer a theoretical insight into the dynamics that shape the decision of these countries to contribute more troops. The results show variation between different communist countries, where a rise in threat perception also means an increase in troops. The results could help in understanding the effectiveness of the ascension and integration process for new states to NATO and other military alliances, as well as offer suggestions what existing member states need or need not to do, to raise themselves to an equal level with these new member states.

I will first make a summary of some of the existing literature on troop contribution to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan by post-communist nations. I will then create a framework on which to divide these countries among two dimensions, based on this literature review. By

analysing different measurements, the results show post-communist nations show a higher contribution to these operations: closer inspection of different theorised categories show certain patterns in their behaviour, such as readjustments to changing security environments at home and the influence of investment in Research and Development (R&D).

Literature Review

Scholars have suggested several motivations for the new NATO member states to contribute more troops to international operations. Four reasons have appeared in past literature: threat perception and security guarantees, the political alignment of domestic government, the pressure exerted by the United States government to modernise and contribute troops, and finally, the level of army modernisation.

Threat perception of post-communist NATO states

Threat perception is based on several parameters, such as trust, reputation and status of the threat and threatened (Wrange & Bengtsson, 2019, p. 451-452). Post-communist NATO member states have varying levels of threat perception when it comes to the Russian Federation, which directly or indirectly was involved with the governments of these states in the second half of the twentieth century. These countries perceive these threats reduced by becoming an integral part of the American-led NATO alliance.

Though it took longer for some countries than others, at the end of the 1990s it became a foreign policy aim for all to become a NATO member, as Article 5 of the NATO Charter requires all members to come to the aid of one member state under attack. This would deter foreign powers from aggressive acts, these states figured (Jakobsen, 2018, p. 495). The perception of the Russian Federation as a threat has always been more prevalent in border areas of former Soviet territory, as they are closer to Russia and have experienced aggression by the Soviet Union in the past (Jakobsen, 2018, p. 501). Russian foreign policy also describes these states as 'a zone

of vital interest' where the Russian Federation would do anything to 'protect' the Russian minorities there (Schimmelfennig, 2009, p. 38). There are four countries that have this higher threat perception due to this reason, which all share a land border with Russia. Ever since their democratic transition, Polish governments held a regard for a "large scale war" with Russia in their defence doctrine after the collapse of the Soviet Union – they would have to maintain a large army that would make significant contributions to NATO operations (Piekarski, 2014, p. 80-81). The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that ascended to NATO in 2004, had been directly occupied and administered by the Soviets between 1945 and 1990, which led to an internal perception of always being unsafe from Russian expansionism. For these countries, protection by the West and a relatively large defence expenditure, is seen as fundamental to the survival of the state.

For other countries part of the former Soviet sphere of influence, such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, Soviet intervention in 1956 and 1968 respectively left scars that permanently increased threat perception from Russia (Lopez-Reyes, 1999, p. 34). However, the support for the United States also is relatively lower in these countries. This can be attributed to the fact that these countries were liberated from Nazi Germany by the Soviets, with the Soviet Union and later Russia imposing the notion of them as liberators. This framing works less well in Poland and the Baltics, as (parts of) their territory was annexed by the Soviets (Missiroli, 2004, p. 126). While this does not lead to a contemporary territorial dispute, it still increases historical adversity against Russia. Central European states, while in support of NATO membership, see more gains and purpose in European co-operation.

NATO after the Cold War: New member states with varying governments

Though the American government initially had a prudent approach toward NATO-ascension by post-communist countries in the early 1990s, the US attitude changed due to two reasons. One, the foreign policy of President Clinton was considered too aimless going into the 1994

Presidential Election, and the president wanted to be ahead of Republican pressure by presenting his own NATO enlargement plans (Schimmelfennig, 2009b, p. 239-240) Second, communist parties started to win elections in former Soviet satellite states, due to the disappointment of the population with the slow speed of democratic reforms and Western support for this process (Lubecki, 2021, p. 40-41). The newly independent nations found that Article 10 of the north Atlantic Treaty, which states that 'any European state can be invited' was not honoured, while countries already part of NATO had concerns that it would be too early to let these vulnerable democracies ascend unconditionally to the alliance (Gilluly, 2018, p. 2-3).

Domestic political is a crucial determent of economic success and political stability in the years after. This variation can be seen within various groups of post-communist states. The relative greater economic success of Estonia compared to the other Baltic states, Lithuania, and Latvia, lies in its liberal governments and relatively lower influence of pro-Russian political actors (Norkus, 2007, p. 27). Bulgaria and Slovakia both experienced initial opposition to NATO membership, with illiberal Russia-oriented governments in the 1990s (Lubecki, 2021, p. 34). Though direct links with troop contribution are not found in the literature, states with liberal governments allowed for more trade and co-operation with other liberal states, allowing them to invest the gains from this trade in their defence training and modernisation. While there have been NATO states, such as in Spain in 2004, where dramatic political shifts from one side of the spectrum to the other lead to a sudden decrease in contributed troops and support for NATO operations (Gillespie, 2007, p. 42), there are no examples of post-communist NATO members where this played a part during the early period of operations: most of their anti-West governments were already out of power by the early 2000s. In the 2010s, some nationalistic governments – such as in Poland and Hungary – opted to invest more in homeland security instead of expeditionary forces (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022, p. 48).

To answer the question when a nation would be considered fit for NATO membership, the existing NATO states created the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which allowed them to set some rules for the new members to adequately integrate the countries into the alliance (Gilluly, 2018, p. 3). In these guidelines, some indicators can be found as to why new NATO members should be better equipped and motivated, such as a pledge to devote enough resources to their national defence 'to be able to meet the commitments of membership'. This would require new states to make significant troop contributions to NATO operations, while existing member states did not have such an obligation. Consecutive American governments have held the impression that European states were 'free riding' on the American military power and protection (Jakobsen, 2018, p. 490-491). Such intentions have also been openly discussed by the new countries, such as Polish military officers that wanted 'presence of US troops' with disregard for their own military contributions and political reform (Lubecki, 2021, p. 35). However, among the newer member states, the adherence to American pressure is related to the trust in either a deepened European on the one side, or a broader transatlantic co-operation on the other. While Central European states consider co-operation within Europe to be preferable to deepened Trans-Atlantic linkage, states that are closer to Russia have a foreign policy strategy that relies more on the protection by the 'Atlantic-oriented' countries (Pavlíčková & Bartoszewicz, 2020, p. 346). This group, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and The Netherlands, has historically always committed more to NATO-led operations in terms of political support and troops (Jakobsen, 2018, p. 495).

The MAP also had conditions that improve the domestic stability: one requirement states that the control of the armed forces must be democratic and that there are commitments to the rule of law and human rights (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 1999). Most countries also used other methods to appease Western governments, such as buying relatively expensive American

weaponry to replace their Soviet-era arsenal instead of ordering weapons from European manufacturers (Missiroli, 2004, p. 124). These weapon purchases from American manufacturers are part of the third factor that determines the contribution to these operations, that being the pressure the US exerts on governments to commit to NATO. To be a part of the alliance, the weaponry needs to be up to the standards of the other countries, meaning most of the Soviet-era arms had to be replaced. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Romania and Bulgaria, among others, started to disarm parts of their defence due to European and international disarmament treaties and maintenance costs: when the war in Afghanistan started, both states were pressured in donating these weapons to the United States, to use these arms in the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (Faltas, 2008, p. 90). For countries that have less available funds to modernise, the United States have set up programmes to finance and develop the defence industries, in exchange for deepened co-operation in NATO operations. This has been done in Bulgaria and Albania since 2018, with the US helping to optimise defence budgets, to make the Bulgarian government able to buy modern equipment and replace their Soviet-era weaponry (Nikolov & Peterson, 2021, p. 125). In exchange, they would participate more in NATO-led operations.

Not just troops: specialisation and modernisation

NATO has a structure wherein member states could specialise in certain fields of defence, such as Hungarian engineering squads or Romanian light infantry (Missiroli, 2004, p. 123).For existing NATO member states, guidelines for a two percent spending of the national GDP on defence were created, but only in 2014 this was converted into a binding pledge (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2024). This pledge has more specific guidelines on which the budget should be spent, not only on the training and deployment of troops. Only 1/3rd should be reserved for this, while 1/3rd would be destined for maintenance and the final 1/3r for research

and development. This gave the relatively weak new member states more incentive to also modernise their defence apparatus (Pavlíčková & Bartoszewicz, 2020, p. 336).

The amount of room to modernise and research is not just related to willingness. Two factors determine the level of modernisation possible in these states: whether there was independent statehood prior to the 1990s, as well as the economic development and political stabilisation in their post-communist era. States that emerged from the Soviet Union – the Baltics – and Yugoslavia – Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia – that went on to join NATO, did not inherit an army, and as such had to build the military infrastructure from the ground up (Trapans, 2002, p. 81-82). These states also happen to be some of the smallest in the alliance, meaning that in terms of people and resources there is little chance of fending off a significant external threat on their own, even though they experience some of the most visible aggression by their neighbours, Russia, and Serbia respectively (Trapans, 2002, p. 84). Due to their shorter period of independence, the worldwide financial crisis in 2008 also had a bigger impact on these countries' ability to invest in defence, as there was little prior experience with managing economic trouble (Szerencsés, 2019, p. 105). While they held a weak position, most of these countries did actively participate in the NATO-led operations, as they would gain a relatively more relevant perception by the bigger allies (Szerencsés, 2019, p. 100-101).

Among the countries that were existing satellite states during the Cold War, not every country has had the same economic development and room to invest in defence. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, had peaceful handovers of power from the communist parties to the opposition, and started to work on cooperative defence investments as early as February 1991 in the so-called 'Visegrad Group' (Zold, 2002, p. 14-15). Slovakia, while having been part of Czechoslovakia before 1991, did not reform as quickly, which can primarily be attributed to economic factors. Slovakia ended up with the short end of the stick in terms of viable economic factors after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, having mainly inherited heavy industry as

opposed to the more investment-friendly medium-sized industries of the Czech Republic (Koyame-Marsh, 2011, p. 74). The early efforts to modernise and internationally integrate the Hungarian, Polish and Czech armies lead to a more efficient initial co-operation with the West, and as a result, the Visegrad Group countries were the first post-communist nations to ascend to NATO in 1999 (Zold, 2002, p. 17-18). This, in turn, allowed these armies to participate in the NATO peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, already leaving a positive impression for existing members and learning in practice to be an efficiently contributing NATO ally.

While the Visegrad countries were able to follow through on modernisation, other future NATO states had a more difficult time reforming. Romania, as well as Albania, experienced violent dissolutions of the communist governments, leaving the state, economy, and the military in poor condition (Lubecki, 2021, p. 34-35). Bulgaria, Slovakia, Albania and Romania also inherited a flawed defence policy from Warsaw Pact times, where there was a focus on maximising the number of soldiers, as opposed to maintenance and investment (Missiroli, 2004, p. 123-124).

Theory

In this section, I will go categorise the countries from the literature review into different clusters, and link theoretical expectations of each of these.

Four different post-communist NATO states

Judging from the literature, while every post-communist NATO member may contribute more to the alliance, not every member has had an equal chance to maximise their efforts. While pressure from American governments and change of governments play a role in every country in varying ways, for the other factors – threat perception and modernisation – four quadrants can be theorised. Countries with a higher threat perception have experienced more aggression by Russia in the past, while countries with a lower threat perception have not seen their territorial integrity threatened by their former Cold War ally. With regards to modernisation, the

capacity to develop and specialise an army is closely related to the stability of a country. Specialisation, in turn, helps to offer troops more efficiently – while the number of troops contributed is expected to be lower, the work the fewer troops offer is more specialised. Armies that have invested less their development would, especially if their threat perception is high, compensate their goodwill they would want to offer to NATO by sending higher troop numbers. There are two types of countries have had difficulty modernising their armies. Some countries only formed in the 1990s, either violently or in a peaceful manner, being formerly part of the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia. The other group includes countries that have had a very unstable transition to their post-communist statehood: either having anti-democratic and corrupt governments long into the 1990s or having a violent turnover from a communist system to a parliamentarian democracy. Most of these countries were left with a military industry that was not aligned with NATO standards, only having heavy arms and ill-trained troops.

Not every group is equal in size. Only one country meets the criterium of a high threat perception and a modernised army: Poland. Poland is expected to have contributed a lot of troops to NATO-led operations, which is also revealed by American foreign policy calling Poland an important ally as early as 2001 (Dunn & Zaborowski, 2003, p. 63-64). Poland holds a greater adversity towards Russia, with the country sharing a border with the highly militarised Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. But not only do they mistrust Russia, they also had not been convinced – especially during their early NATO years – that the new found Western allies would come to their aid, as they were not reinforced during the start of World War 2 in 1939 (Osica, 2002, p. 23). The United States, aware of these concerns, were quick to ask Poland for assistance after the attacks of 9/11, validating their importance to the NATO security sphere ever since (Osica, 2002, p. 24). However, after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, Polish politicians – seeing their fears of threats confirmed – decided that there should be more attention to regional defence, proposing a Territorial Defence Force in 2015 (Furgacz, 2017, p. 223). This

suggests a tipping point in threat perception: when the threatening actor executes hostile actions too proximate to the home country, in this case the bordering nation of Ukraine, countries may be inclined to invest more in their home security, likely having to withdraw resources from operations abroad to defend their own territory. Instating homeland troops is done for multiple reasons, including deterrence and the political popularity of such an idea to the electorate (Furgacz, 2017, p. 224-225). In the years following the Crimean annexation, Poland also successfully advocated the importance of stationing troops at the eastern NATO border to other member states, possibly influencing the overall troop numbers for all countries in other operations such as Afghanistan (Furgacz, 2017, p. 228-229).

Hungary and the Czech Republic, the second group, are expected to contribute less to foreign operations, relative to member states with a high threat perception. The Czech Republic, like other Central European states, have a more passive attitude to NATO: they think of of NATO and the European Union as the provider of hard and soft security guarantees respectively (Beršnak et al., 2020, p. 26-27). It is passive in the sense that both the Czech Republic and Hungary did not act on the changing security environment (after the annexation of Crimea), but only increased their defence spending after explicit American requests to do so (Pavlíčková & Bartoszewicz, 2020, p. 347). Instead of sending more soldiers to an operation, these modern armies feel they can put their military industry to better use by delivering high-tech weapons or training specialised forces. Poland also holds this specialisation in high regard but spends significantly more on its GDP to maintain a rotatable and significant army force (Dunn & Zaborowski, 2003, p. 67).

Third, some countries perceive the threat Russia poses as existential, but lack economic capacity and a sizeable population to reform their military. This group includes the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They are inclined to contribute what they can to military operations to prove their relevance to the NATO alliance, which they perceive as crucial to the

survival of their state. One must note these states also prove their worth by their strategic position neighbouring Russia, so their contribution to the NATO-led operations would be less decisive in determining their worth to the alliance (Lubecki, 2021, p. 46). The fourth and final group includes countries with a low threat perception and little capacity to modernise their armed forces. The perception follows from their relatively small relevance for Russia as a direct target, while also having had stability issues after their inception. This includes most countries on the Balkan, both on the Western (North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro) and Eastern (Bulgaria and Romania) side. These countries were the slowest to ascend to NATO due to a multitude of political, economic, and military reasons.

Table 1 gives an overview of the different categories. The colours will correspond with the tables that are generated in the analysis. These clusters have been coded into the dataset to be able to filter for these countries when visualising the data. I have also made another variable that divides all post-communist and non-post-communist countries.

Table 1. Post-communist NATO members along different dimensions of threat perception and army modernisation

	High Threat Perception	Low Threat Perception
Has modernised	Poland	Czech Republic Hungary
Has not modernised	Estonia Latvia Lithuania	Bulgaria Croatia Montenegro North Macedonia Romania Slovenia Slovakia

Expectations

In short, based on the above observations, it is expected that post-communist nations contribute more to NATO-led operations. States with a higher threat perception would contribute more troops, as they consider their security guarantee by NATO of higher importance, while states with a higher level of modernisation can contribute their troops in a more specialised way. This results in the following two hypotheses:

H_1: Countries with a higher threat perception contribute more troops to NATO-led operations, until a certain point where the threat is too imminent and the number of troops decreases.

H_2: Countries that have more room to modernise their armies, contribute less troops to NATO-led operations.

This would mean that the first category (Poland) would have a fluctuating contribution in troops over time, as the country has a high threat perception but also has had the room to modernise. The second group would contribute a relative lower number, as their threat perception is low and they also have had room to modernise. The third group, the Baltic States, would contribute a relatively high number due to the combination of threat perception and not a lot of room to modernise and specialise, resulting in having to prove their worth with troop numbers until the theorised tipping point after 2014. Finally, the fourth group would have an average troop contribution: while countries would fulfil their commitments to the operations due to the pursued relevance within NATO, it would not overcompensate for their security perception as this is lower than usual.

Method

I have created a dataset to analyse the numbers behind the expectations above. One limitation in the availability of the data is that troop numbers are only available from 2007 onwards, since NATO did not publish these figures before that year. However, these still include 14 entries per

country. The dataset is split into two parts: the contributions during International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation, with data from 2007 until 2014, and the following Resolute Support Mission (RSM), which took place between 2014 and 2021. To make sure troop numbers are comparable, I also entered the population of a country and divided the number of troops with the population in a certain year, multiplied by 100.000. This leads to a variable of troops contributed per 100k population.

Case Selection

Aside from the countries in Table 1, there are several other post-communist states that have contributed troops to the operations in Afghanistan. These include the countries in Table 2. To summarise the categorisation, I made the Venn-diagram in Figure 1. The colours are differentiated from the clusters in Table 1, since these are not the same categorisations.

Table 2. Non-NATO Post-communist nations, participating in NATO-led operations

Country	ISAF or RSM
Armenia	Yes
Azerbaijan	Yes
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Yes
Georgia	Yes
Kazakhstan	No
Moldova	No
Mongolia	Yes
Ukraine	Yes

Figure 1. Venn Diagram of different countries participating in ISAF and RSM missions.

Figure 1. Venn Diagram of different countries participating in ISAF and RSM missions.

The Venn diagram shows the following groupings:

Non-European:
Australia, Bahrain, El Salvador, Jordan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Tonga, United Arab Emirates

Non-European ∩ Post-Com: Mongolia

Non-European ∩ NATO: Canada, United States

European, non-NATO: Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland

European, non-NATO ∩ Post-Com: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Ukraine

Post-Com ∩ NATO: Albania, Poland, Czech Rep., Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia

NATO: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom

Methods and operationalisation

For this research, I have composed a database based on multiple sources. I will first explain the sources and the relevance of these variables. The variable of the troop contribution during NATO operations in Afghanistan – is derived from the NATO databases. One entry per year is entered for every country. Since some countries have had more capacity to contribute troops, I have included the population of each country by year using United Nations data, whereafter I computed a variable of the troop contribution per 100,000 population.

For investment in defence, I used NATO data on defence investment from 2007 until 2021. Another variable had some more difficulty however, the expenditure on defence R&D. I derived this from the same NATO sources, but these numbers only include NATO countries after their

ascension, which means that 2007 until 2009 are missing for Croatia and Albania, while for North Macedonia and Montenegro, several years are missing.

The GDP for each year is derived from World Bank data. This GDP variable is also used to compute the percentage of the GDP spent on defence. Finally, I have also included some dummy's, such as whether the country was part of NATO in specific year (not every country that contributed to NATO operations was part of NATO, either because they were not European (Singapore, Bahrain, Tonga, United Arab Emirates and Mongolia) or that they aspired to be a NATO member and therefore contributed, such as Ukraine and Georgia). I also made a dummy for each of the four quadrants.

Analysis

In this section, I will go over how the data compares between each of the groups and substantiate causal patterns for the higher or lower number of contributed troops.

Contributed troop numbers to ISAF and RSM

Table 3 shows, in descending order, the mean contribution of a country to the ISAF or RSM mission per 100k population. Each post-communist country is made bold, each NATO member (before 2021) is underlined, while the countries from the different clusters are coloured in accordance with Table 1. The dotted red line indicates the mean of all countries combined. Notably, most post-communist countries are in the top half of the table: the countries with low modernization are clustered higher, apart from Slovenia, while modernized armies from Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary rank lower.

Table 3. Descriptives on troops contributed to ISAF and RSM missions (per 100k population)

Country	Mean number of troops	Min. number of troops contributed	Year of minimum	Max. number of troops contributed	Year of maximum	Years of contribution	Completed both operations (2007-2021)
Tonga	30,73	0,00	2014	51,36	2013	4	No
Georgia	22,31	0,03	2008	41,20	2013	13	No
United States	9,32	0,74	2021	28,92	2010	14	Yes
United Kingdom	7,42	0,69	2016	15,14	2010	14	Yes
Denmark	6,40	1,59	2015	13,51	2010	14	Yes
Estonia	5,97	0,15	2014	12,14	2013	14	Yes
Canada	5,24	1,62	2011	8,60	2010	6	No
North Macedonia	4,80	0,81	2021	8,85	2009	14	Yes
Albania	4,61	0,35	2014	9,86	2011	14	Yes
Romania	4,44	1,37	2014	9,28	2011	14	Yes
Mongolia	4,23	1,38	2018	7,36	2014	11	No
Montenegro	4,23	2,68	2015	6,32	2012	10	No
Croatia	4,20	1,84	2014	7,17	2011	13	No
Bulgaria	4,11	1,15	2015	7,93	2011	14	Yes
Norway	4,10	0,80	2017	12,42	2009	14	Yes
Armenia	4,05	1,36	2009	4,52	2013	11	No
Lithuania	3,72	0,47	2015	7,86	2009	14	Yes
Latvia	3,59	0,11	2021	8,99	2010	14	Yes
Italy	3,42	1,38	2015	6,65	2012	14	Yes
Australia	3,32	0,31	2021	7,04	2010	14	Yes
France	3,20	0,14	2014	6,24	2011	7	No
Netherlands	3,16	0,18	2014	13,06	2009	14	Yes
Germany	3,01	1,04	2015	5,92	2011	14	Yes
Czech Republic	3,01	0,49	2021	5,96	2011	14	Yes
Bahrain	2,97	0,00	2014	7,76	2012	2	No
Poland	2,59	0,47	2016	6,53	2010	14	Yes
Slovakia	2,48	0,46	2021	6,09	2011	14	Yes
Sweden	2,21	0,12	2014	5,33	2010	14	Yes
Luxembourg	2,16	0,00	2014	17,75	2010	14	Yes
Hungary	2,05	0,08	2021	5,87	2012	14	Yes
Belgium	2,03	0,30	2014	4,75	2011	14	Yes
Slovenia	1,98	0,10	2014	3,91	2009	14	Yes
New Zealand	1,74	0,00	2014	5,38	2010	14	Yes
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1,68	0,05	2009	2,18	2013	12	No
Finland	1,48	0,36	2021	2,90	2011	14	Yes
Iceland	1,46	0,58	2017	3,21	2007	10	No
Spain	1,32	0,02	2017	3,43	2012	14	Yes
Jordan	1,15	0,00	2009	7,11	2013	6	No
Portugal	1,08	0,10	2015	2,08	2019	14	Yes
Azerbaijan	1,04	0,25	2018	1,18	2007	14	Yes

Singapore	0,95	0,00	2008	0,74	2011	3	No
Greece	0,45	0,04	2015	1,40	2011	14	Yes
South Korea	0,43	0,00	2014	0,71	2011	3	No
United Arab Emirates	0,40	0,00	2008	0,41	2010	6	No
El Salvador	0,33	0,00	2014	0,39	2011	3	No
Ireland	0,24	0,15	2015	0,16	2007	8	No
Austria	0,15	0,01	2014	0,20	2018	14	Yes
Malaysia	0,09	0,01	2014	0,16	2011	3	No
Ukraine	0,06	0,02	2014	0,05	2012	11	No
Switzerland	0,03	0,03	2007	0,03	2007	1	No

Out of all 18 post-communist nations, only Ukraine did not participate for ten years or longer, likely due to the conflict in the Donbas region after 2014. Georgia, which also has had territorial disputes with Russia, participated significantly since 2008, after their direct conflict with Russia. In terms of troop numbers, post-communist countries on average are on the higher side of contributions made. When sorted for maximum number of troops contributed in a year, the post-communist countries also rank higher than most others, with the not modernised countries ranking higher than the modernised ones (the second cluster ranks below average in terms of the mean of all maximums).

Aside from the individual countries, I also generated the mean number of troops contributed per different categories, which are presented in Table 4. This includes the mean contribution between 2007 and 2021 for all countries, the mean contribution for post-communist countries, the mean contribution for members and non-members of NATO, and finally for each of the four clusters. I also generated these numbers for only the period after 2014, for two reasons. One, the Resolute Support Mission had a different size and scope than the RSM operation. Second, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March of 2014, posed a new security threat on the European continent, which may have influenced the number of troops that have been sent back home.

**Table 4. Mean Troop Contribution (per 100k population) in ISAF and RSM operations**

	2007-2021	2007-2014	2014-2021
All countries	3,59	5,19	1,99
Post-communist countries	4,18	5,59	3,03
Cluster One	2,49	4,50	0,71
Cluster Two	2,50	3,57	1,57
Cluster Three	4,37	7,73	1,44
Cluster Four	3,65	5,50	2,08
Non-post-communist countries	3,09	4,91	0,90
NATO countries	3,47	5,77	1,39
Non-NATO countries	3,79	4,34	3,14

The decline in troop numbers from the ISAF to RSM operation is steeper for groups with a higher threat perception (cluster one and three). Cluster Four, though the number is a little smaller than half of the ISAF operation, still contributes more than the average overall. All post-communist countries, aside from Poland, contribute more than non-post-communist countries during the RSM, but only the Baltic States perform better during the time of the ISAF operations.

In short, it can be noted that post-communist nations contribute more on average. The first cluster behaves as expected: during the ISAF operation, Poland contributed significantly more than during the Resolute Support Mission, as the threat perception for their own soil increased beyond the tipping point after 2014. For the second cluster, it can be noted that the countries contribute fewer troops than the NATO average during the ISAF mission, while slightly above the NATO average during the RSM. The third cluster has experienced the steepest decline in contributions after 2014, which could also be explained by the increased threat perception beyond the tipping point. Finally, the fourth cluster shows the most consistency, not performing too far from the NATO average during all different parts of the operation. The individual countries, apart from Slovakia and Slovenia, all rank above the mean of the total in terms of troops contributed. The third cluster has a somewhat skewed image, since Estonia has contributed significantly more than Lithuania and Latvia.

Aside from the minimum and maximum, the question remains what would be the variation within the different clusters. The boxplot in Figure 2 shows that the third cluster has the highest variation. The clusters with higher modernisation have a smaller variation, as well as the lower maximum. Judging from the quadrants, the second cluster is the most consistent in its division of troops. The fourth quadrant has a slightly higher total variation, though the middle fifty percent (the second and third quadrant) appear to be in the middle of the total variation. The four quadrants in this group seem roughly equally divided.

Figure 2. Boxplot of the division of the number of troops contributed between the four clusters.
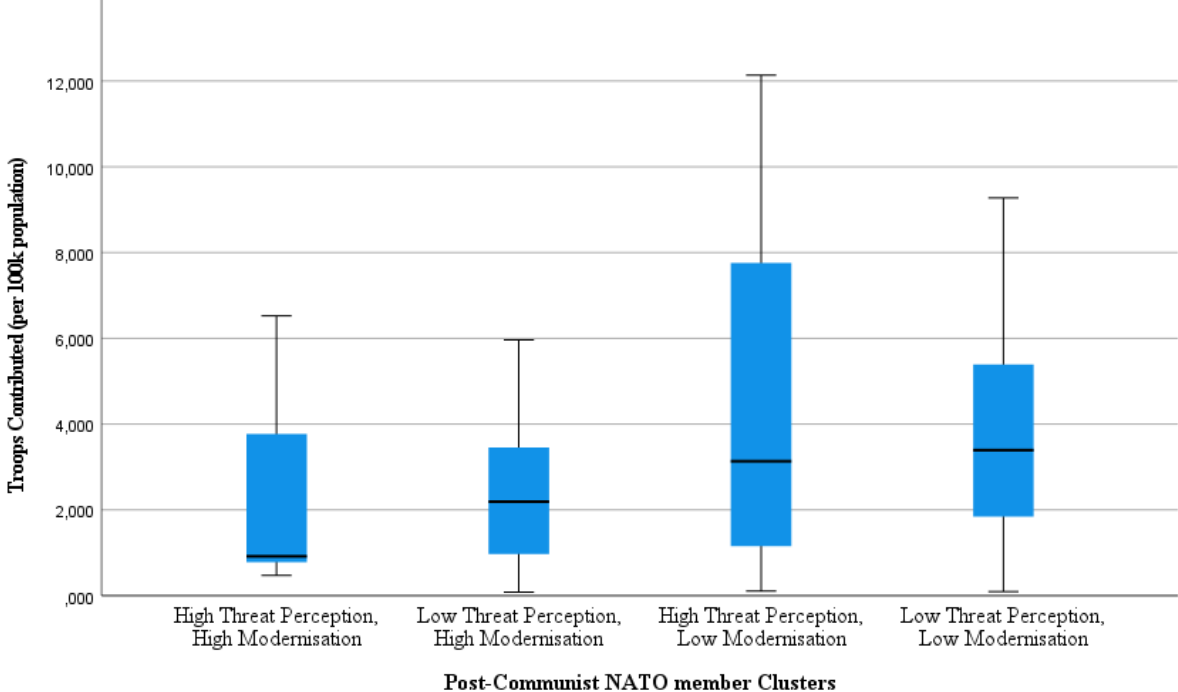
in Table 3. These results show that the countries in the second cluster have a higher mean investment on R&D, as to be expected, as well as a lower ranking for countries in the fourth cluster. Defying expectations, however, are the Baltic countries. These invest relatively a lot in R&D, while their army did not have a lot of room to modernise in the theoretical expectations. In the cluster-specific chapter, I will go over the possible explanations for this.

Table 3. Descriptives on investment in Defence R&D (as % of total defence expenditure)

Country	Mean % of investment in defence R&D	Min. % of investment	Min. Year	Max. % of investment	Max. Year
Estonia	38,9	31,0	2012	47,7	2014
United Kingdom	38,0	31,6	2016	41,6	2009
United States	35,1	28,2	2010	41,3	2007
Denmark	34,9	25,8	2007	40,7	2012
Hungary	34,2	25,5	2019	44,4	2012
Canada	34,1	29,5	2017	37,8	2007
Norway	31,7	28,4	2009	35,3	2011
Germany	31,1	24,1	2008	37,1	2021
Latvia	29,3	24,3	2016	39,2	2007
Czech Republic	27,6	21,9	2012	31,1	2010
Netherlands	27,3	22,4	2021	30,3	2007
Lithuania	23,1	20,0	2021	27,8	2019
Slovakia	22,6	18,0	2019	29,5	2007
France	22,4	16,9	2012	26,7	2019
Bulgaria	22,2	9,7	2021	31,2	2007
Poland	22,0	16,6	2009	26,6	2016
Slovenia	20,4	16,4	2014	28,2	2007
Spain	19,8	16,1	2019	26,6	2011
North Macedonia	19,5	16,3	2015	23,7	2021
Luxembourg	17,9	11,0	2007	22,5	2013
Belgium	17,6	15,1	2009	25,1	2021
Croatia	17,6	13,3	2021	21,8	2014
Türkiye	17,0	12,9	2021	21,6	2009
Albania	16,6	7,3	2013	23,9	2017
Montenegro	13,8	10,9	2013	17,8	2016
Portugal	12,7	8,4	2017	18,1	2021
Greece	12,7	5,8	2021	18,5	2012
Romania	12,1	9,1	2013	16,7	2015
Italy	11,2	6,2	2015	13,3	2009

Ultimately, the question remains how these variables relate. Do countries with less investment in R&D send more troops? And do countries that do invest in army modernisation send less troops? I have made two plots in Figure 3 and 4 to categorise this. Figure 3 compares post-communist countries with non-post-communist countries, while Figure 4 compares the different clusters from the theory. When it comes to the difference between the group of post-communist countries and non-post-communist countries, there is not a clear visual sign that post-communist countries either contribute more troops or spend more or less on their total defence expenditure.

Figure 3. Scatter plot of share of expenditure on defence R&D as % of total by troops contributed to ISAF and RSM missions, filtered by post-communist countries
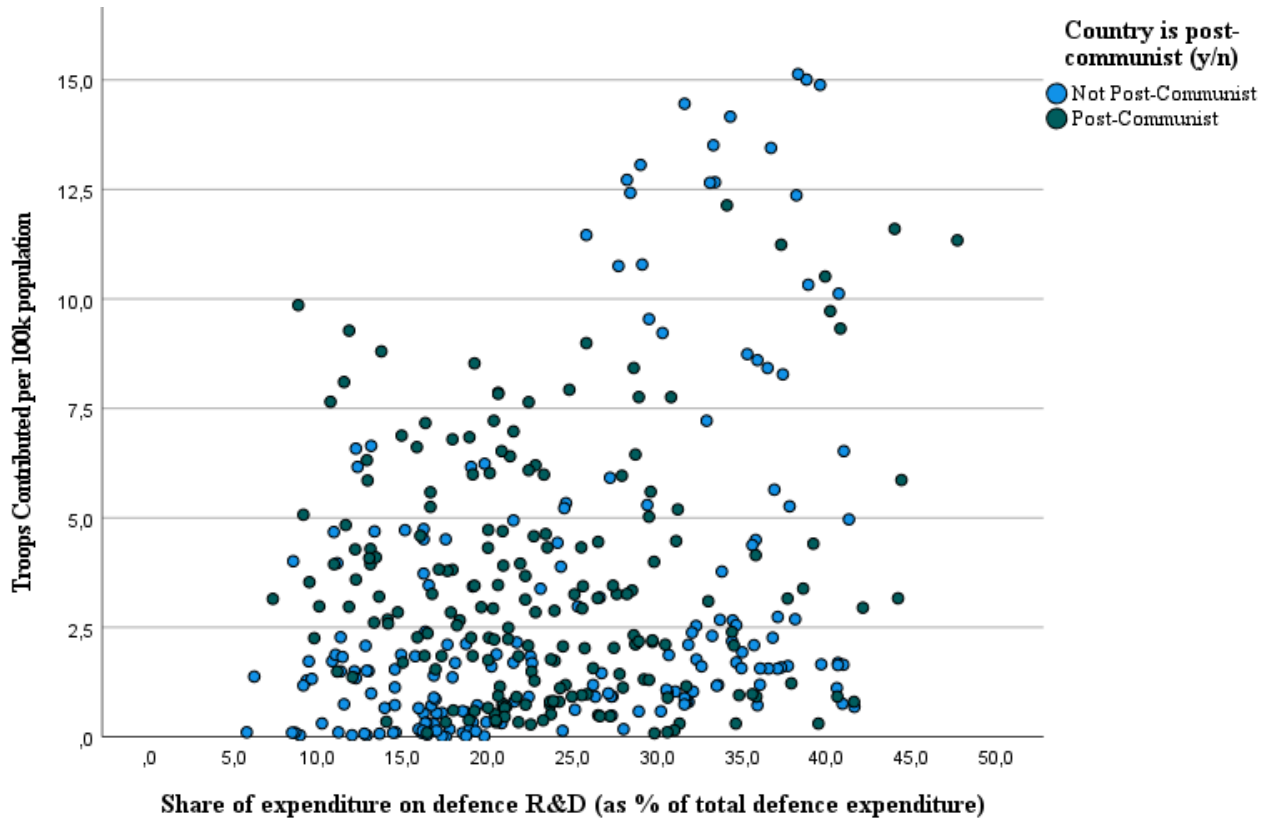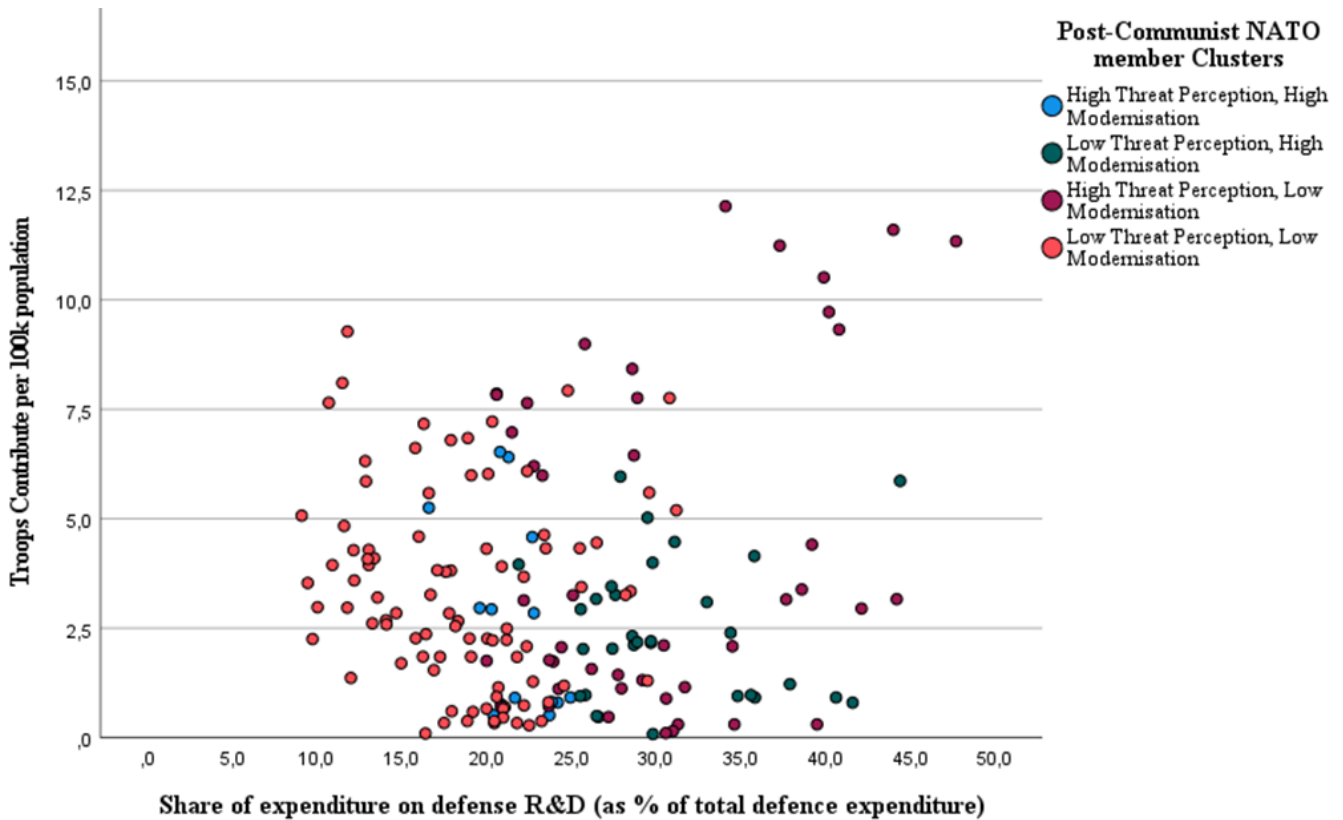

Figure 4. Scatter plot of share of expenditure on defence R&D as % of total by troops contributed to ISAF and RSM missions, filtered by post-communist clusters

However, when only looking at the different clusters, there are some clearer divisions. The fourth cluster ranks low on both defence R&D, as well as most entries of troop contributions. Meanwhile, countries in cluster two rank relatively lower in terms of troops contributed, while ranking above average in their expenditure on defence R&D. The first cluster, only consisting of Poland, ranks quite low in both regards, while the third cluster ranks relatively high for both variables (though when looking at the tables, the higher values are mostly Estonian, while Latvia and Lithuania score relatively lower in this regard). Similar results are seen in the boxplot in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Boxplot of the division of the expenditure on defence R&D between the four clusters.
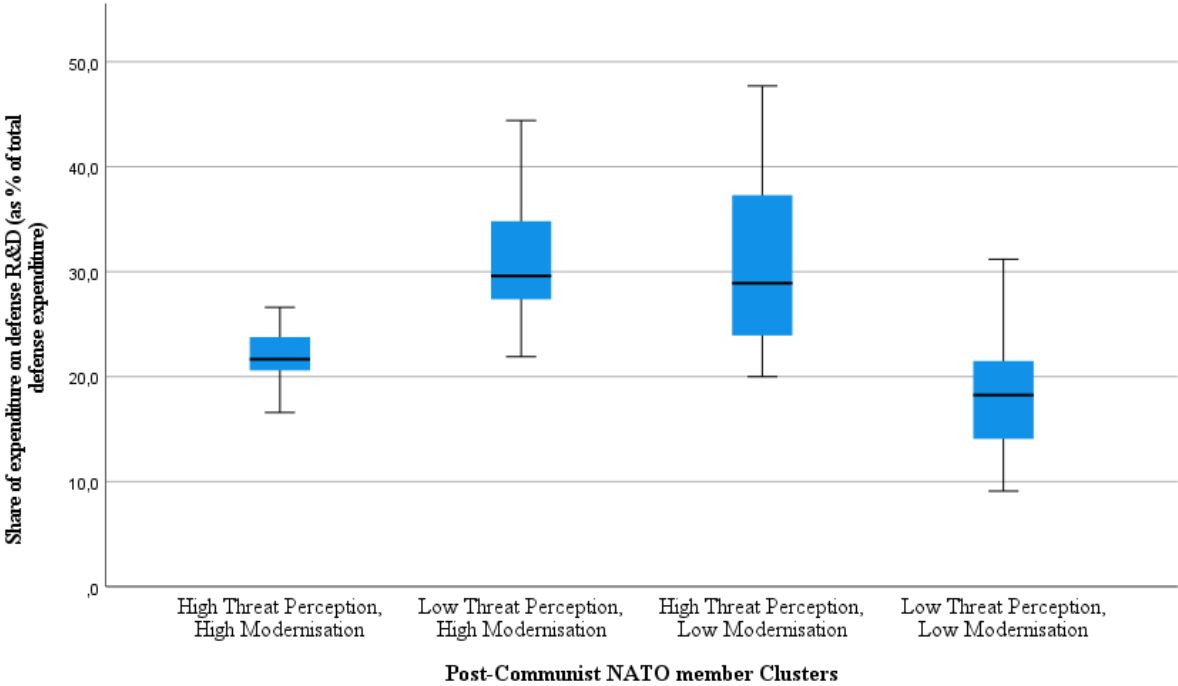
Finally, the temporal division can be visualised with a line graph. Figure 6 and 7 include graphs on the troop contribution and defence expenditure over time. All lines follow a similar pattern with regards to their troop contribution per 100k population, with some slight differences in starting positions (the third cluster is significantly higher than the second cluster at the beginning of the data, but they get more aligned during the RSM era).

Figure 6. Line Graph of Troops contributed per 100k population per post-communist NATO cluster (2007-2021)
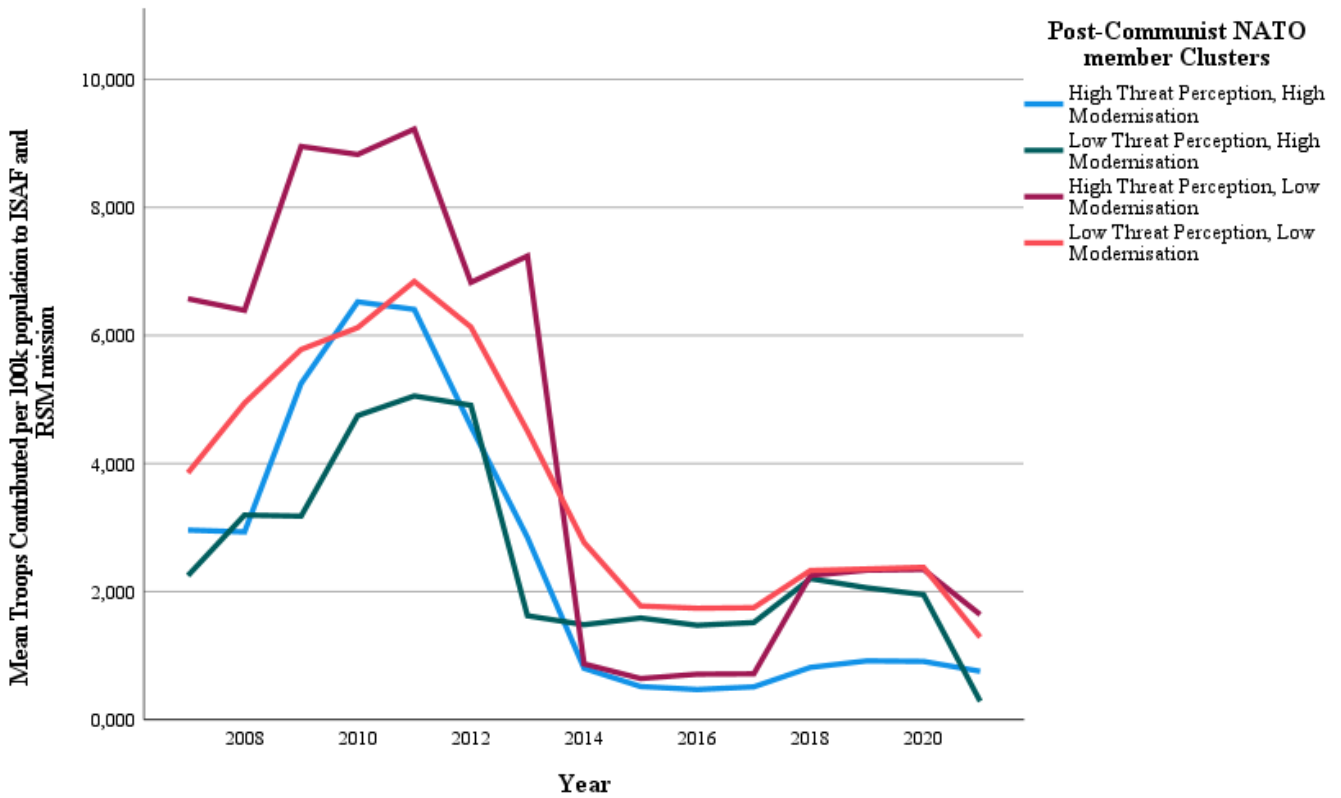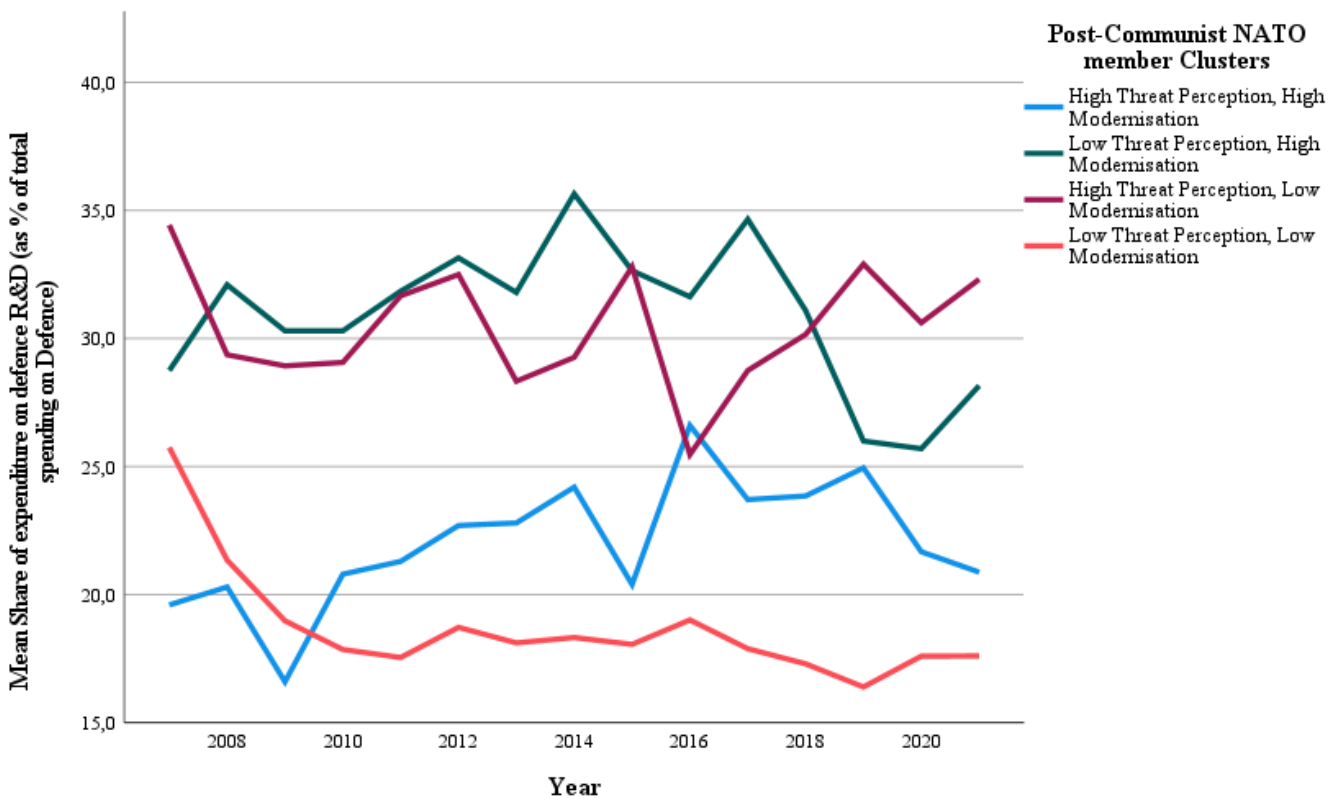

Figure 7. Line Graph of investment in Defence R&D (as % of total expenditure of defence) (2007-2021)

With the amount spent on Defence R&D, it becomes clear that Cluster One increases their spending relatively, while others have either decreased (Cluster Two and Four) or returned to the original level over time (Cluster Three). These are relative numbers, meaning that the absolute amount spent on R&D may not have lowered or even increased if the amount of money spent on defence in general is increased. Overall, when regarding the numbers in Afghanistan, it is true that countries that have a low threat perception and a higher level of modernisation do contribute less troops to NATO-led operations. For the other countries, these expectations do not hold up. Countries with a low threat perception and a low level of modernisation do not necessarily contribute less troops; however, there is some variation in their contribution. Meanwhile, countries with a high threat perception and low modernisation do contribute more troops than average, but have also more capability than theorised to invest in defence R&D. Finally, Poland, which comprises the whole first cluster, has an average contribution in troop numbers and an average investment in defence R&D, implying the threat perception and modernisation has little effect on their troop deployment.

Cluster-specific causal patterns

To substantiate the data, I will try to explain some causal patterns that could be derived from literature and reports on the participation in NATO-led operations by the countries included in the analysis.

Cluster-specific causal patterns – Cluster One

Judging from the boxplot in Figure 4 and the line graph of Figure 6, it is visible that the Polish contribution has a high fluctuation for one country, between 1 and 6,5 troops per 100k population. Looking at how this develops over time, in Figure 5, it is visible that the Polish contribution took a sharp downturn around 2012, with it stabilizing around 2015 and slightly increasing moving forward to the end of the mission. The high contribution of Poland and its usefulness are embedded in its early ascension to NATO, and particularly the *Partnership for*

Peace Program ever since 1994, since this NATO-aligned organization trains militaries to adhere to NATO standards and protocols (Jakubiak, 2020, p. 36). Poland could therefore from 2007 onward, when the ISAF operations started, use their army to train local police forces, protect and reconstruct civilian infrastructure and elevate the level of effectiveness of the Afghan military (Jakubiak, 2020). The reforms of the Polish Armed Forces were completed around 2006, replacing obsolete Cold War equipment with NATO standards as well as reducing the number of heavy military divisions and swapping them with more specialised and modern ones (Piekarski, 2014, p. 84-85).

The initial high number of troops in the first years of the measurement, was a result of Poland fully committing to Afghanistan and withdrawing most of their troops from Iraq (Stępień, 2017, p. 231). The factor of American pressure comes into play here: since Poland has a higher threat perception, the country is described as relatively more compliant with US needs, compared to other Central European nations (Kulesa & Górka-Winter, 2012, p. 223) So when the United States asked Poland to commit more troops to ISAF, they did so without question, together with offering more priority to development aid to Afghanistan (Stępień, 2017, p. 234). This can also be seen in Table 6, as the Polish contribution is higher than average. However, the development aid programme had some shortcoming in its implementation, as Poland was ill-experienced in offering this aid but could offer military assistance was not worked out too well, meaning that later they committed to offering troops instead of simultaneously offering other aid (Stępień, 2017, p. 236).

This is an important detail of comparing troop contributions, namely the way troops are applied in the operation: some of the bigger countries which may have contributed less troops took more specialist individuals to non-combat areas, where they trained local Afghan police to retain the imposed security framework when their soldiers would leave the country (Marton & Hynek, 2012, p. 556). Poland has somewhat of a unique position as a country that had a

specialized military, like traditional Western European allies, but also the mindset of Central European nations to appease the United States, as a show of gratitude for the security guarantee offered (Marton & Hynek, 2012, p. 542). However, the domestic support for such an operation was not too high, so the Polish military implemented a rotation system that meant soldiers would only be dispatched for six months: this meant that while numbers while high, actual professionalization of the armed forces was limited (Stępień, 2017). The eventual decline and rise in contributed troop numbers could also be explained by the renewed focus on threats on Polish territory, such as Russian aggression in 2014, which lead to the creation of the Territorial Defence Force (TDF). Resources had to be devoted to set up this new branch of defence, possibly reducing the number of troops in Afghanistan (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022, p. 49). The focus became even more prominent on national defence after 2016, when the nationalistic PiS party entered government, which avidly enlarged the plans for the TDF (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022, p. 48). A final factor is that, around the same time, the armed forces officially were trained enough to be up to NATO standards: when lessons were learned by participating in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Polish military returned to their country with a much more capable military to defend their home soil in case of a potential threat (Piekarski, 2014, p. 100).

Cluster specific causal patterns – Cluster Two

The Czech Republic, at its peak, contributed almost as many troops per 100k population as Poland did, as seen in Figure 6. Even though they also reduced the scale of their operation around 2013, they did not withdraw as many troops as Poland did. This can be attributed to the perception on who should protect Czech Republicn soil when it comes to a conflict within Europe. The Czech Republic, like other Central European states, has a perception of NATO and the European Union as the provider of hard and soft security guarantees respectively (Beršnak et al., 2020, p. 26-27). Czech ambitions in Afghanistan have focused more on co-operating with

Figure 8. Line Graph of investment in Defence relative to GDP (in %) (2007-2021)

the armies of their European partners, namely Germany, instead of focusing on relations with the United States. This did change a bit after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, which specifically opposed the free riding within NATO on American security guarantees, which the Czech Republic was also guilty of. In terms of expenditure, together with the annexation of Crimea and the agreements within NATO on defence spending that followed, there have been incentives for the Czech Republic – as well as Hungary - to invest more in defence, but it still barely reaches one percent, let alone the two percent norm, as can be seen in Figure 8 (Beršnak et al., 2020, p. 32).

Cluster specific causal patterns – Cluster Three

The Baltic states have shown some deviations from the theoretical expectations in terms of its level of modernisation. Not necessarily in terms of troop contribution, as countries with a higher threat perception would be inclined to put in more effort into participating in NATO to gain their security guarantees. One commonality for the Baltics is the presence of designated

territorial defence forces, like the TDF in Poland. These were all set up in reaction to the changing security environment, as well as the change in governments that followed, which had more attention for domestic defence. The Estonian Defence League (EDF) was setup in 2016, also in reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea (Veebel et al., 2020, p. 24). One key difference is that the Estonian state does not supply its territorial force with soldiers, rather it offers the chance to fit-for-service volunteers to own a weapon and receive training (Veebel et al., 2020, p. 24). The Latvian defence forces are the only one without a conscription model, being an entirely professional army (Andžāns & Veebel, 2017, p. 30). While they focussed more in international military missions policy-wise than Estonia, with the Estonian policy being more diversified between domestic and international security, the capacities are much weaker due to a smaller economical size and lower political stability (Andžāns & Veebel, 2017, p. 39). Lithuania has the Domestic Support Forces since 2012, this time in reaction to the Russian invasion of Georgia. Unlike Estonia and Poland, this is a division of the armed forces as a professional army, meaning relatively more money is required to maintain it. While the country tried to also uphold their contribution to operations in Afghanistan as good as they could, the creation of these domestic forces did have an impact on the resources they could contribute to operations abroad (Šlekys, 2017, p. 47).

As can be seen in Figure 9, Estonia has a higher contribution than the other two Baltic countries. This is in line with Estonian foreign policy, where participation in Afghanistan was seen as a high priority to prove their value to NATO, which even made Estonia the largest per capita contributor in 2009 (Mölder, 2014, p. 65).

Figure 9. Line graph of Individual contributions of Cluster Three countries to ISAF and RSM missions per 100k population


Economically, Lithuania and Estonia would have had the same starting position after independence in terms of its potential, but Estonia attracted a lot more foreign investment during the 1990s due to its privatization policies, which Lithuania as well as Latvia did not follow at the same pace.

Coming back to the army modernization, this is an area where the Baltic states seem to differ again due to the political and economic reasons. While Lithuania at its peak invested around 27 percent into defence R&D, Estonia had a minimum percentage of 31 percent (as seen in Table 3). However, in the latter years of the Afghanistan operations, Lithuania has increased their defence budget the most (Szymański, 2017, p. 12). Latvia had more difficulties in adjusting its budgets due to economical setbacks (Szymański, 2017, p. 14).

Cluster specific causal patterns – Cluster Four

Figure 10. Line graph of Individual contributions of Cluster Four countries to ISAF and RSM missions per 100k population
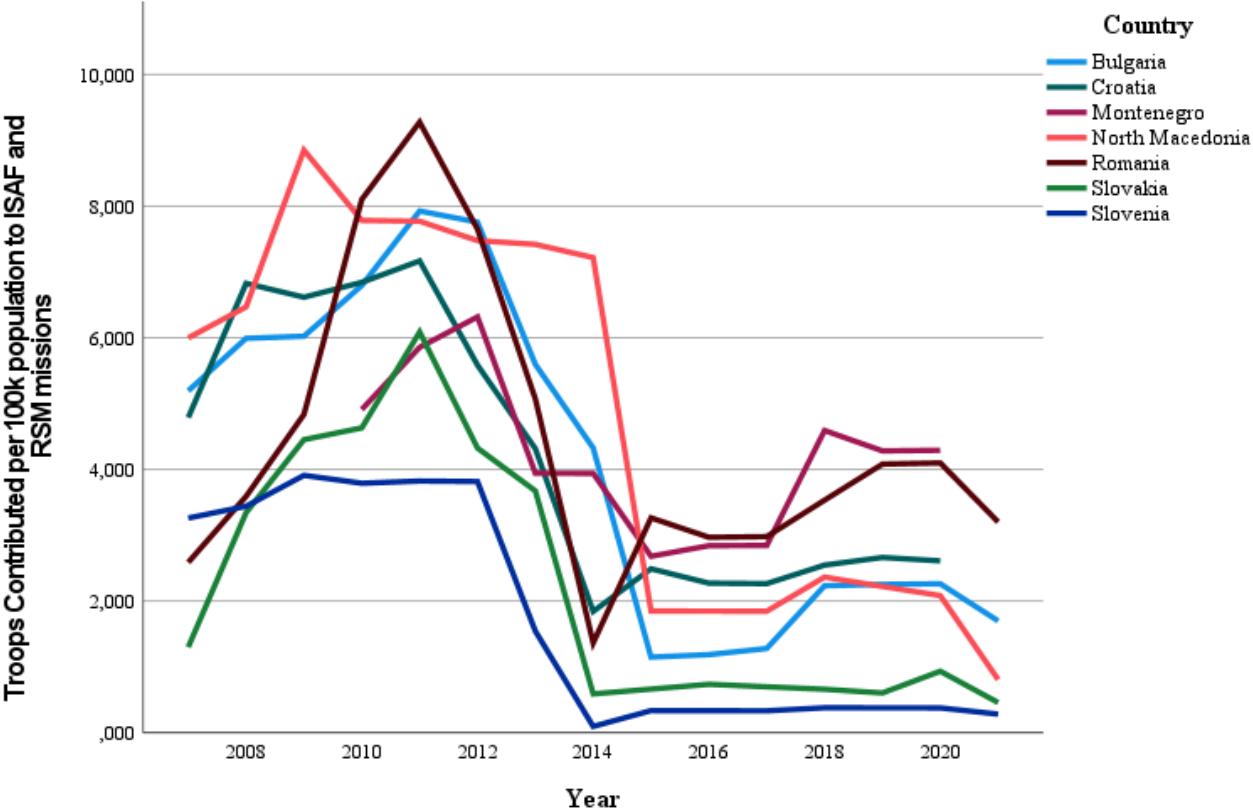
Cluster four includes the most heterogenic collection of states, meaning that not one explanation fits. One commonality is the preference for non-combat roles, such as the training of local police, instead of sending actual combat units (Vuga, 2014, p. 4). In Figure 10, Most of the countries follow a similar pattern. For the smaller states in this group, such as Slovakia, Slovenia, and North Macedonia, it is often the case that the deployment of troops is limited due to a small population, which in turn leads to dispersion of the troops these countries have over different operations globally (Korba, 2009, p. 44). The priority for NATO operations could be a result of the systemised ascension process the post-2004 allies have experienced, with the MAPs which were introduced in 1999 (Šimunović, 2015, p. 179). This framework included more binding commitments to the alliance. While modernisation of the arsenal and investment in R&D may have lagged, the operational structure of these not-modernised armies was influenced extensively by the usage of these MAPs. However, as discussed before, there have

been programmes for several for these countries set up by the United States to replace their Soviet-era equipment with more effective weapons at favourable prices, in exchange for more participation in international operations.

Conclusion and discussion

One thing stands clear from this analysis: troop contribution is relatively higher for post-communist countries than for 'old' NATO allies. They rank among the highest contributors. Ultimately, post-communist countries prove to offer more troops in general, but the effect of defence modernisation and threat perception creates some variation. Though the applied research method limits the assessment of statistically quantifiable correlations, judging from the analysis, there are events such as increased threat perception and investment in modernisation programmes that happen at the same time as the increase of troops contributed. While more modernisation seems to lead to less troop contribution, due to the other contributions that could be made instead of boots on the ground, the data on threat perception shows fewer clear effects on the contributed troops.

While the data shows that generally the distinction between threat perception and room for modernization influences the position of post-communist countries in terms of troop contribution, there are some specific factors at play which had not been considered before the analysis. One thing is the more systemized ascension of post-2004 NATO member states: since they had to adhere to a more specific plan than Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary, the countries in the third and fourth cluster have modernised more than initially expected.

This thesis offers a clear overview of the factors that influence troop contribution to the NATRO led operations in Afghanistan. However, data on other operations, such as in Iraq and Libya, are too limited to analyse based on public sources. There are also clear signs that changing security environments are more influential on post-communist in terms of the troops they contribute and

how radical they formulate their defence policy. The conflict in Ukraine has, most likely, put this policy in a whole new perspective, and if data would be made available on other operations than Afghanistan – which ended in August of 2021 – new research could bring to light the implications the War in Ukraine has had on both financial and troop contributions to these operations.

Further research can use this data and theorise different clusters and comparisons, such as a comparison of all post-communist countries, not only NATO members, that have contributed troops with the non post-communist states. While relative numbers offer the fairest comparison, it must be noted that some of these countries have very small populations compared to bigger NATO states, meaning that the numbers could get skewed in their favour in terms of actual troops offered. Future research could deepen the notions on the actual effectiveness of the troops contributed based on a more qualitative research approach. Since most of these armies are non-conscript armies, you can only deliver as much troops as people want to join the armed forces in a country. Despite this. the ratio between the expenditure on Defence R&D and troop contribution did offer the impression that the groups were clustered between these two variables.

While this thesis focused on the four post-communist countries that ascended to NATO during Afghanistan operations, this study did not dive into a comparison with non-communist states and had a limited scope on non-NATO post-communist states. Especially countries like Georgia and Mongolia have contributed plenty of troops relative to their population, for which the motives could be investigated in further research.

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