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Overcoming politicisation with defence cooperation agreements: Why USAF EDI MILCON program advanced in Poland but stalled in Slovakia

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Abstract

Why did nominally similar US Air Force (USAF) European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) military construction (MILCON) programs advance in Poland but stall in Slovakia? We argue that defence cooperation agreements (DCAs) and their implementing arrangements (IAs) act as constitutive resources: they reconfigure dependence, raise the politicisation threshold, and amplify the payoff to routine buffering/bridging (bilingual deliverables, "key-points," and predictable escalation). A most-similar systems' comparison traces two country-level execution networks (USAF/United States European Command [EUCOM]/US Air Forces in Europe [USAFE], US embassy/office of defence cooperation, host-nation ministries/base commands). Evidence triangulates unclassified documents (2017–2020) and ten practitioner interviews (2021–2022) coded with a deductive scheme (Johnson's five resource dependence theory (RDT) foci, and buffering/bridging), followed by inductive pattern coding. In Poland, a mature DCA/IA stabilised roles (including liaison authority) and compounded boundary work, culminating in a first completion in spring 2019. In Slovakia, absent DCA/IA and routine design actions were reframed as sovereignty incursions; politicisation cascaded and the program halted in March 2019. We refine RDT by specifying legal architecture as a first-order resource and derive actionable guidance for alliance managers.

Keywords:

European deterrence initiative, resource dependence theory, interorganisational networks, defence cooperation agreement, alliance management

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Introduction

In June 2014, the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) launched the European Reassurance Initiative (later the European Deterrence Initiative [EDI]) to signal alliance cohesion and deter further Russian aggression following the annexation of Crimea. Among EDI's five pillars, the US Air Force (USAF) undertook an ambitious military construction (MILCON) program to upgrade host-nation infrastructure across Central and Eastern Europe to support rotational presence, prepositioning, and interoperability. Most country programs advanced, but one did not. The EDI MILCON program exists to convert high-level deterrence policy into actual basing and infrastructure that United States and allied forces can use. Whether those projects advance or stall is therefore not a bookkeeping detail; it is a question of readiness and credibility for NATO amid renewed Russian aggression. By comparing two nearly identical efforts that diverged sharply, the article shows which institutional features (a defence cooperation agreement [DCA] with clear implementing arrangements [IAs]) let routine execution survive domestic politics. The result is both a cleaner theory of alliance implementation and a practical guidance for managers who have to deliver concrete outcomes, not just agreements.

While the EDI MILCON program progressed in Poland, it stalled in Slovakia despite comparable aims, timelines, and implementing organisations. This divergence presents a clear puzzle: why did nominally similar, coeval USAF programs under the same strategic umbrella yield sharply different implementation outcomes?

The existing scholarship offers partial answers. Resource dependence theory (RDT) explains how organisations adapt to external constraints by acquiring and managing critical resources, altering boundaries, and deploying buffering or bridging strategies (Johnson, 1995; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Interorganisational network research shows how ties, role specialisation, and multilevel coordination shape collective performance under uncertainty (Moliterno and Mahoney, 2011; Podolny and Page, 1998). Security cooperation studies, meanwhile, underscore the importance of legal–institutional arrangements, such as DCAs and IAs, in structuring rights, obligations, and operating authorities among allies (Kinne, 2020; Raustiala, 2000, 2002). The alliance politics and management literature investigates conflicts of interest between partners, and how states sign cooperation agreements in part precisely to limit the ability of domestic politics to interfere with the chosen course of action (Abbott and Snidal, 2000; Fearon, 1997; Putnam, 1988; Snyder, 1997). Yet these literatures rarely speak to one another in the context of real time, multinational program execution, where legal instruments, network structure, and resource dependencies intertwine to produce success or failure.

This article integrates these strands to explain the divergent outcomes of the USAF's EDI MILCON programs in Poland (success) and Slovakia (failure). We argue that the presence (Poland) or absence (Slovakia) of a DCA functioned as a constitutive resource that conferred "structural rigidity" on the interorganisational network, enabling it to absorb shocks, coordinate across levels, and translate strategic intent into implementable projects. Where the DCA was missing or immature, other resources, such as communication capacity, host-nation relationships, office of defence cooperation (ODC) staffing, and senior-leader sponsorship became more fragile and more easily overwhelmed by exogenous political pressures. In short, legal arrangements were not merely contextual; they were causal in shaping the resource environment and the effectiveness of buffering/bridging moves predicted by RDT.

Empirically, we conduct a comparative case study of the Poland and Slovakia programs during fiscal years (FY) 2015–2019. The analysis draws on unclassified document review (official correspondence, schedules, and leadership briefings) and semi-structured interviews with USAF, United States European Command (EUCOM), ODC, and host-nation counterparts involved at strategic and operational levels. Treating the organisation (the EDI MILCON execution network in each country) as the unit of analysis, we apply Johnson's (1995) five RDT foci—resources, resource flows, resulting dependencies and power differentials, constraints, and leadership actions—to trace how critical resources were configured, which dependencies were formed, and how actors attempted to manage them via buffering (protecting boundaries) and bridging (spanning/reshaping boundaries).

Three contributions follow. First, we advance RDT by specifying legal instruments (e.g. DCAs and IAs) as first-order organisational resources in multinational public programs, not just background conditions. Doing so clarifies why otherwise sensible buffering/bridging tactics (e.g. adding linguists, formalising liaison protocols, issuing key-point memos, and drafting long-range development plans) can succeed in one setting, yet underperform in another: their payoff is conditional on a prior legal architecture that stabilises authority, access, and compliance expectations. Second, we join network scholarship with public administration practice by mapping how multilevel, intergovernmental teams (US Department of Defense [DoD] components, state/ODC, host-nation ministries, and implementing agents) actually reallocate roles and span boundaries under timeline and funding pressures, thus revealing predictable failure modes when nodal capacity (notably ODC) is under-resourced. Third, we derive actionable lessons for defence and foreign-assistance managers: sequence legal agreements before committing to accelerated design/construction timelines; invest early in bilingual communications and liaison capacity; and use long-range co-produced planning instruments to align host-nation land-use regimes, environmental responsibilities, and congressional line-item constraints.

Our preview of findings is straightforward. In Poland, an existing DCA (and iterative refinement via IAs) provided the legal scaffolding for direct liaison authority (DLA), iterative design reviews, and rapid troubleshooting, even amid political turnover. In Slovakia, absence of a mature DCA, coupled with rushed timelines and a politicised media environment, converted routine design actions into sovereignty controversies, swamped operational-level relationships, and culminated in a ministerial halt. Across cases, communication and ODC capacity mattered, but they mattered through the legal–institutional channel, where the DCA conferred authority and expectations, the same capacities amplified coordination; and if it did not, they could not offset macro-level constraints.

Thesis and Contributions

Comparing two near-identical USAF EDI MILCON efforts, we show that a DCA/IA functions as a constitutive resource: it clarifies authorities and escalation, raises the threshold for politicisation, and increases the returns to standard boundary work (buffering/bridging). Whenever this legal architecture is missing (Slovakia), routine steps are reframed as sovereignty incursions and coordination saturates; whenever it is present (Poland), the same steps proceed to completion. The payoffs are: (i) a refinement to RDT (legal instruments as first-order resources that condition boundary-work productivity); and (ii) practical guidance for alliance managers on legality of sequencing, staffing embassy nodes, and institutionalising bilingual communication.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. We synthesise RDT, interorganisational network theory, and legal–institutional perspectives to derive a simple analytical

framework. We then outline our comparative design and data. The findings section presents a structured, side-by-side analysis of resources, flows, dependencies, constraints, and leadership tactics in Poland and Slovakia. We close by discussing implications for theory and for the design and sequencing of large, multinational public programs (including ongoing Indo-Pacific initiatives) where success hinges on getting the legal architecture and network capacity "in place" before accelerating execution.

Literature Review

Interorganisational networks and transgovernmental cooperation

The EDI MILCON program is executed through a dense web of US defence actors, host-nation ministries, and implementing agents: an archetypal interorganisational network, rather than a single hierarchy or a spot market transaction (Hafner-Burton *et al.*, 2009). Networks are defined by actors, ties, and interdependencies; the ties of some nodes shape, and are shaped by, others (Kinne, 2013). This perspective directs attention away from isolated organisations ("trees") and towards the organisation of collective action ("forest") (Salancik, 1995). It also requires a multilevel lens: operational project teams, embassy liaisons, and strategic leadership interact vertically and horizontally, and explanations that stay at one level risk missing key coordination mechanisms (Moliterno and Mahony, 2011; Podolny and Page, 1998, pp. 58–60).

Two implications follow for this study. First, relationships and the capacity to maintain them are not incidental but constitutive of performance in multinational programs. Second, networks in this domain are often transgovernmental, linking specialised agencies directly across borders with limited mediation by foreign ministries (Raustiala, 2002). This is precisely the structure of EDI MILCON program, where ODC, USAF component commands, and host-nation technical offices interact routinely and repeatedly. Within such networks, formal legal instruments (e.g. DCAs) are not mere background; they shape who may coordinate with whom, on what terms, and with what authorities. That observation motivates the article's core intent: theorising legal instruments as a resource inside the network, not only a constraint on it.

Resource dependence theory in multinational public programs

The RDT explains how organisations survive by securing and managing critical external resources in settings of uncertainty and interdependence (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Five analytic foci structure the approach: (1) which resources matter; (2) how flows of those resources traverse organisational boundaries; (3) the dependencies and power differentials those flows create; (4) how dependencies constrain action; and (5) how leaders manage dependence (Johnson, 1995). Leaders do so through buffering (protecting and insulating organisational boundaries) and bridging (spanning or shifting boundaries) (Johnson, 1995). Subsequent work catalogues concrete tactics—including political action, formal interorganisational arrangements, and board-like oversight mechanisms among them—to reduce environmental dependence (Hillman *et al.*, 2009).

Three refinements adapt RDT to the context of EDI. First, criticality matters: not all resources are equally important. The theory distinguishes magnitude from criticality (how essential the resource is to core tasks, and how concentrated it is in the environment)

(Nienhüser, 2008; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Second, in multinational programs, the line between "environment" and "organisation" is blurred: boundaries are defined by patterns of interlocked or coordinated behaviours, not by formal charts (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Third, in transgovernmental settings, legal instruments (DCAs and IAs) can be conceptualised as first-order organisational resources that stabilise access, authority, and compliance expectations—altering the payoff to buffering/bridging tactics, such as bilingual communications support, liaison protocols, and long-range development planning (Raustiala, 2000, 2002, 2005; Kinne, 2020).

Legal–institutional architecture as a constitutive resource

Compliance and effectiveness research in international cooperation shows that formal instruments shape behaviour not only by prescribing rules but also by structuring the ongoing relationships among specialised agencies (Raustiala, 2000, 2002). In defence cooperation, DCAs delineate rights, obligations, processes, and authorities for basing, construction, environmental remediation, access, and information sharing; IAs localise these commitments for specific projects. In network terms, DCAs reconfigure the infrastructure of ties by legitimating DLA, clarifying role responsibilities, and reducing transaction costs for recurrent coordination. Consequently, DCAs function as structural rigidity within the network: they dampen shocks from domestic political turbulence and help translate strategic intent into operational execution. Whenever such an instrument is absent or immature, other resources, for example communication capacity, ODC staffing, and leader sponsorship, become more fragile and more easily swamped by exogenous pressures. This logic is consistent with both the RDT emphasis on managing dependence through boundary work (buffering/bridging) and with network accounts of how formal and informal rules shape tie formation and durability—albeit with emphasis on informal rules (Podolny and Page, 1998, pp. 60–62; also, Kinne, 2013, 2020; Moliterno and Mahony, 2011).

Alliance politics bridge

Our claim complements alliance-management work on commitment and domestic constraints: DCAs operate as hand-tying instruments that align host-nation decision rights with implementation and raise the domestic political costs of reversal (Fearon, 1997; Morrow, 1994; Putnam, 1988; Snyder, 1997). Legalisation—through obligation, precision, and delegation—allocates authority and structures expectations that stabilise cooperation (Abbott and Snidal, 2000; Raustiala, 2005). In this view, the agreement does not merely add resources; it constitutes the execution network, clarifying decision rights and escalation paths, so that boundary work (buffering/bridging) yields progress, rather than politicisation (Johnson, 1995; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Legalisation—via obligation, precision, and delegation—allocates authority and structures expectations that stabilise cooperation (Abbott and Snidal, 2000, pp. 421–424; Raustiala, 2005). Thus, a DCA/IA bundle constitutes the execution network—clarifying decision rights and escalation paths—so that RDT boundary work (buffering/bridging) yields progress, rather than politicisation (Fearon, 1997, pp. 69–71; Johnson, 1995; Leeds *et al.*, 2000; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Putnam, 1988, pp. 434–436; Rapport and Rathbun, 2021; Snyder, 1997).

From synthesis to expectations

Bringing these strands together yields clear expectations that guide the comparative analysis. First, transgovernmental relationships cannot be fully understood through the lenses

of classic RDT, emphasising resources and informal network ties. Presence of DCA—a legal instrument—leads to higher network resilience and execution speed. A mature DCA should correlate with faster problem resolution, more stable coordination across strategic/operational levels, and less susceptibility to politicisation of routine design actions.

Second, capacity of ODC is conceptualised as a pivotal node, because ODCs sit at the US–host-nation interface in a transgovernmental network; their staffing, mission clarity, and bilingual capabilities should mediate the returns to legal scaffolding, thereby amplifying benefits under a DCA and partially compensating (but rarely substituting) when it is absent.

Third, buffering/bridging tactics, such as direct liaison protocols, key-point memos, dual-language deliverables, and long-range development plans, may be only conditionally effective; they all are essential resources and strategies, but they should yield higher payoffs when legal–institutional scaffolding stabilises authority and expectations; without it, these tactics face diminishing returns.

By reframing the literature this way, the article speaks back to three communities. For RDT, it identifies legal instruments as a neglected class of resources in public and multinational programs, and specifies how they condition the effectiveness of buffering/bridging. For network scholarship, it shows how formal agreements alter network structure and affiliate durability in practice. For public administration and security cooperation, it clarifies why some multi-actor defence programs proceed while others stall despite similar funding, timelines, and stated strategic aims.

Theoretical framework

We treat each country's EDI MILCON execution network (USAF/EUCOM/US Army Corps of Engineers [USACE]/US Air Force Civil Engineer Center [AFCEC]–US embassy/ODC–host-nation ministries and base commands) as the organisation. Following RDT, organisational behaviour reflects how actors secure and manage critical external resources under uncertainty (Johnson, 1995; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). We operationalise RDT through Johnson's five foci and the buffering/bridging repertoire, and we specify how legal instruments (DCAs and IAs) enter the model as the first-order resources that condition the effectiveness of other tactics. We align evidence to Johnson's (1995, pp. 1, 5–7) five RDT foci.

Resources (what matters)

We define resources as inputs that the execution network cannot autonomously generate but must obtain or stabilise from its environment. For EDI MILCON program, the core set is: (1) legal scaffolding: DCA and IAs (access, environmental, information-sharing, and liaison provisions); (2) communication capacity: bilingual technical communication, dual-language deliverables, shared terminology/protocols, and "key-points" documentation discipline; (3) boundary nodes and staffing: ODC manpower/mission clarity, and availability of in-theater technical liaisons; (4) senior-leader sponsorship: timely engagement from DoD/embassy/Host Nation principals to unblock cross-boundary issues; (5) land/use and permissions: site access, easements/zoning equivalents, environmental constraints; and (6) temporal and fiscal resources: schedule latitude and obligation rules, and stability and timing of appropriations.

We hypothesise the DCA as a constitutive resource: it formalises authorities, legitimates direct ties, lowers transaction costs, and creates structural rigidity in the network.

Resource flows (how they move)

Flows occur through codified interfaces (e.g. DLA, IAs, letters of intent [LOI], long-range development plans [LRDPs]), routine artifacts [dual-language submittals, design review cycles], and convening structures [steering committees, and joint site visits]. Smooth flows mean faster mutual adjustment and fewer escalations; blocked flows manifest as mismatches in expectations, cascading rework, or politicisation of routine steps.

Dependencies and power differentials (what that creates)

Whenever access to a critical resource is concentrated (e.g. only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Ministry of Defence [MFA/MoD] can confer land/sovereignty permissions; only State/OSD can finalise DCA text), the network becomes dependent on that locus. Absence of DCA heightens dependence on ad hoc substitutes (personal ties, and NATO habits of cooperation), raising vulnerability to domestic politics. Thin ODC staffing increases dependence on overextended project managers or HN translators, amplifying miscommunication risk.

Constraints (how dependency manifests)

Constraints show up as: (a) legal ambiguity (e.g. lack of a shared rulebook may result in contested authority); (b) communication loss (terminology drift, translation error); (c) procedural friction (unclear land/environ responsibilities); and (d) politicisation shocks (media or party framing of technical steps as sovereignty threats). These tighten schedule windows and trigger risk-averse slowdowns or halts.

Leadership actions (how actors manage dependency)

Leaders deploy the classic RDT toolkit, buffering and bridging. The first, buffering (protect/insulate boundaries), may manifest in strategies, such as embedding linguists in contracts; requiring dual-language deliverables; standardising "key-points" memos signed at meeting close; shoring up ODC with dedicated MILCON liaison capacity; pre-clearing terminology (Automatic Data Processing [ADP]/Management Development Programs [MDP]/LRDP), that is strategies to insulate core activities of the program from external dependencies. The second, bridging (span/reshape boundaries), may manifest informalising DLA; co-producing LRDPs to align US/HN roadmaps and land-use plans; issuing LOI to clarify roles; creating steering committees (board-like oversight); and, when needed, political action (principal-level statements/op-edits/ministerials) to reset expectations. Critically, we propose that the payoff to these tactics is conditional on DCA status: with legal scaffolding, buffering/bridging compounds; without it, returns diminish and may even invert under politicisation.

Propositions

We derive three key propositions that structure both comparison and coding:

P1 (constitutive legality): The presence of a DCA/IA increases the system's capacity to absorb shocks by clarifying authorities, sequencing, and escalation paths.

P2 (conditional payoff to boundary work): Under a DCA/IA, buffering (linguists, bilingual deliverables, and "key-points" memos) and bridging (principal engagement and steering routines) yield increasing marginal returns; without it, returns diminish as politicisation increases.

P3 (network chokepoint): Embassy/ODC capacity mediates P1–P2: with a legal scaffold, extra ODC bandwidth translates into execution speed; without it, the node saturates and becomes a visible program liability (thin capacity invokes frictions even with a DCA).

These propositions are implemented as a deductive codebook with sub-codes for specific tactics, followed by pattern coding; interview and documentary evidence is then matched to the propositions in the findings. Operationalisation and coding details are provided in the below-mentioned section, "Methodology."

Methodology

Comparative case design and unit of analysis

We employ the most-similar systems design: two NATO allies received the EDI MILCON investments on a comparable timeline and under shared US/NATO governance, yet diverged in outcomes. The unit of analysis is each country-level execution network linking US Air Force actors (USAF, EUCOM, and US Air Forces in Europe [USAFE]), the US embassy/ODC, host-nation ministries and agencies, and implementing contractors.

Data and sources

We triangulate two streams of evidence. (a) Documentary: unclassified official correspondence, schedules, fact sheets, and public statements (2017–2020). (b) Semi-structured interviews: ten practitioner interviews (e.g. officers and civil engineers) conducted in 2021–2022 by phone or encrypted email; all interviews were conducted on a non-attribution basis and anonymised. Interview prompts focused on authorities, sequencing, and boundary-work practices (liaison, translation, and artifacts).

Analytical approach and coding

Analysis is theory-guided. We developed a deductive codebook anchored in Johnson's (1995, pp. 2, 5–8) five RDT foci—resources, resource flows, dependencies and power, constraints, and leadership actions—and the buffering/bridging repertoire. We coded interview memos and documents in a first pass, recoded in a second pass to consolidate themes, and built a cross-case matrix (Poland vs. Slovakia) and event timeline for process tracing and pattern matching. We maintained an audit trail of decisions, produced case matrices and timelines (Miles *et al.*, 2020), and conducted pattern matching and process tracing across sources.

Operationalisation

The outcome, execution effectiveness, is judged by (i) attainment and continuity of planned milestones on the documented timeline (e.g. senior leader meeting [SLM] and

initial engagements, site access, iterative design reviews, award, and start), (ii) time-to-first-award, and (iii) continuity (absence of a formal ministerial halt). Key conditions include legal architecture (presence/absence and maturity of a DCA and any IAs), ODC capacity (staffing, bilingual competence, and mandate clarity), communication discipline (embedded linguists, dual-language deliverables, and signed "key-points" memos), leadership escalation (number/timing of principal interventions), and land/environmental responsibility clarity.

We also operationalise two families of mechanisms. First, bridging and governance tactics—including DLA, co-produced LRDPs, and steering/board-like routines—are coded as sub-codes linked to legal scaffolding and leadership escalation. Second, politicisation episodes (media frames, parliamentary salience, and ministerial statements) are coded as constraints that compress schedule latitude and reconfigure authority claims. Finally, resource flows are captured via the presence, timeliness, and completeness of bilingual submittals, signed "key-points" memoranda, and documented design–review cycles, with blockages recorded as returned submittals or formal requests for clarification.

Use of interview material

Interview evidence appears in the section, "Findings," through attributed roles (e.g. ODC engineer, host-nation planner) and is tied to specific coded themes in the analysis matrices. To preserve non-attribution, we cite interview material in-text as "Interview, role" and cross reference it to coding tables themes. Interview evidence is presented through role-attributed paraphrases and selective verbatim quotations. See Appendix A for the interview protocol and Appendix B for the respondent index (on role-based non-attribution basis).

Data availability and ethics

Redacted interview memos, the codebook, and the cross-case matrix are stored on an encrypted university drive; access is provided to editors/reviewers under non-attribution assumption.

Audio recordings were not retained. The project involved professional experiences and organisational processes, and collected neither the sensitive personal data nor the classified or otherwise sensitive organisational data.

Findings

We compare the country-level execution networks for Poland (advanced) and Slovakia (stalled). Evidence combines the program timelines, official correspondence, and practitioner interviews, coded to Johnson's five RDT foci and the buffering/bridging toolkit. To separate timelines from conditions, Table 1 reports milestones in strict chronology for each country. Table 2 summarises the enabling constraints and boundary work that explain the divergence.

As Table 1 shows, both programs advanced through initiation and early design, but Slovakia crossed a politicisation threshold in early 2018 and never recovered, culminating in a ministerial stop in March 2019, whereas Poland proceeded to completion.

Table 1. Program chronology by country. Note. DCA: defence cooperation agreement; EDI: European deterrence initiative.

Milestone	Poland	Slovakia
Senior-leader and initial engagements	Senior leader meeting in May 2015, followed by base visits in November 2015.	Senior leader meeting and base visits in January–February 2017.
Requirements package submission	Requirements flowed through the FY 2015–2017 EDI ramp under established procedures.	The FY 2018 requirements package was submitted in December 2017.
Early contracting and design actions	Routine design and contracting actions proceeded in 2016–2017 understanding authorities.	In early 2018, a design–support solicitation was mischaracterised in the media, triggering crisis meetings.
Major political shock	Routine political turnover was managed within established channels.	A national shock in February 2018 intensified sovereignty framing and controversy.
Strategic communications and escalation	Principal engagement occurred as needed within the DCA and implementing-arrangement rulebook.	The US ambassador published an op-ed; elite contestation continued.
Program decision by the Ministry of Defence	No ministerial stop was issued.	In March 2019, the Ministry of Defence ordered a formal stop.
Physical outcome by 2019	The first project reached completion in spring 2019.	No construction started; the program remained halted.

In Slovakia, the FY 2018 package (December 2017) moved into design support when a USACE solicitation was mischaracterised in domestic media, reframing routine steps as sovereignty issues. Without a DCA/IA, matters that "normally" would sit in working groups escalated to principles amid rising salience and turnover (timeline through early 2018). As the Slovakia (SK) ODC put it, "in reality the Slovak political climate at the time … was not as pro-West as the current government …" and "EDI turned into a political pawn … they said, hey look America is infringing on our sovereignty … and that poisoned the well." In March 2019, the MoD issued a formal stop. AFCEC project correspondence concluded the following: "Opposing HN politicians used the accelerated designing as a scare tactic to effectively halt progression. Had a DCA been in place, the opposing political party would've had less 'ammo' to work with." Another AFCEC PM was blunter: "The rush to get designs in place contributed to sabotaging the effort. DCA establishment should have been a priority.

In comparison, Poland wasn't "easy." The Poland program also faced intra-US coordination frictions and limited ODC bandwidth; however, those issues were managed inside established authorities rather than repoliticising the execution. As the Poland (PL) ODC noted, "We are so disorganised on the Polish effort that it does make it a little difficult in Poland," with the office focused "mainly on FMS[1] and case development for FMS." When asked directly about how often the Polish ODC relied on the DCA in Poland, their response was "nope, not once," which is consistent with practice: IAs operationalise the DCA's authorities, and teams interact with the IA text during execution. Thus, the ODC quip is understandable, as the AFCEC PM often referred to IA: the implementing arrangement "is a legal document that provides granular detail in support of the overarching DCA … who is responsible for remediation… [and] protection of environmentally sensitive areas," assembled primarily in-theater (AFCEC supervisor).

[1] *Foreign Military Sales.*

Table 2. Conditions and boundary work that map to outcomes (not chronological). Notes. DCA: defence cooperation agreement; EDI: European deterrence initiative; LRDP: long-range development plan; IA: implementing arrangements.

Dimension	Poland	Slovakia
Legal scaffolding (DCA + IA)	A DCA was in force, and IAs were refined over time. This legal architecture stabilised roles and authorities.	No suitable DCA was in force for the EDI scope during the study period, and there was no implementing-arrangement anchor.
Direct liaison authority	Direct liaison authority was formalised in December 2015 with Office of Defence Cooperation oversight.	Coordination relied on ad hoc ties and lacked DCA-anchored liaison authority.
Planning instrument	A long-range development plan was adopted as the program matured, aligning United States, host-nation, and NATO roadmaps.	An LRDP was discussed and pursued but could not substitute for a missing DCA.
Buffering practices	Embedded linguists, dual-language deliverables, and signed "key-points" memos were institutionalised.	Similar practices were attempted but produced diminishing returns under politicisation.
Bridging and governance	Letters of intent, implementing-arrangement updates, and periodic principal engagement inside the rulebook provided predictable escalation.	Ambassadorial statements and meetings occurred but the lack of a legal anchor limited effectiveness.
Politicisation threshold	Legal scaffold raised the threshold for politicisation and dampened shocks.	Routine steps were reframed as sovereignty incursions, lowering the threshold for politicisation.
Net execution result (to 2019)	The program progressed to a first completion.	The program was stalled and formally halted.

Table 2 summarises conditions—legal scaffolding, liaison authority, planning instruments, and boundary-work practices—linked to divergent outcomes.

With a DCA/IA, routine boundary work (buffering/bridging) has predictable payoffs and escalation stays inside the rulebook. In the absence of that legal anchor, similar practices yield diminishing returns, as routine steps are reframed in sovereignty terms, aligning with the observed halt.

Table 3 and subsequent sections trace these rows with process evidence from documents and interviews, coded to Johnson's five RDT foci and to buffering/bridging practices.

Process tracing isolates three mechanisms that account for the divergence.

Constitutive legality

Across documents and interviews, respondents emphasised that the legal architecture did not merely constrain activity but created the authority needed to act. In Poland, the prior DCA formalised DLA, clarified roles and responsibilities (including information sharing), and provided predictable jurisdictional pathways. This legal scaffolding stabilised coordination and accelerated routine design steps consistent with work on how agreement form shapes organisational behaviour (Johnson, 1995, pp. 5–8; Raustiala, 2005, pp. 581–584). Respondents noted that, even when responsibilities occasionally had to be assumed across organisational boundaries, Poland's ODC could absorb and route those tasks within the

Table 3. Comparative analysis by Johnson's five RDT foci. Notes. RDT: resource dependence theory; DCA: defence cooperation agreement; LRDP: long-range development plan; ODC: Office of Defence Cooperation; IAs: implementing arrangements; LOIs: letters of intent.

RDT focus	Poland (success case)	Slovakia (failure case)
Resources (critical)	DCA and IAs; direct liaison; LRDP; ODC liaisoning; senior leader access.	DCA absent/immature; ODC stretched; communications capacity strained; political environment hostile.
Resource flows	Codified channels (direct liaison; signed "key-points" after meetings) enabled consistent transmission through HN bureaucracy.	Flows repeatedly blocked or diverted by politicisation and lack of shared rulebook; "tug-of-war" between operational progress and strategic drag.
Dependencies and power	DCA reduces dependence on ad hoc political cover; IA clarifies authorities (e.g. environmental responsibilities).	Without DCA, dependence on media/politics grew; ODC became a single choke point; NATO working ties held only at the operational level.
Constraints	Episodic delays handled via memoranda to ODC and senior-level engagement.	Legal ambiguity enabled sovereignty framing; domestic shocks (2018) hardened constraints and stalled DCA.
Leadership actions	Buffering: linguists, dual-language artifacts, signed key-points; bridging: formal letters/ LOIs, LRDP, emerging steering committee (board-like).	Buffering/bridging attempted (dual-language deliverables; LRDP push) but insufficient without DCA; ambassador's op-ed as political action could not offset legal vacuum.

rule set and resist politicisation pressures. By contrast, in Slovakia, ordinary coordination lacked a shared rulebook and became contestable, pulling senior officials into decisions that would otherwise have remained a routine.

Politicisation cascade (Slovakia)

An early public mischaracterisation of a contracting/design step was amplified by parliamentary debate and ministerial turnover, reframing technical design actions as a sovereignty threat. Without a DCA to anchor interpretations, escalations consumed managerial bandwidth and interrupted contracting. Respondents from the Slovak side described the political climate during the period as less receptive to the program and noted that EDI became a vehicle for domestic contestation. The environment further deteriorated following the widely reported killing of a journalist and subsequent political upheaval (Sirotnikova, 2020); opposition actors increased pressure to reject EDI as sovereignty infringement. Public statements—including an ambassadorial op-edit underscoring principles of defence cooperation—did not reverse this trajectory. As one AFCEC project manager put it in official correspondence, accelerated design was used as a scare tactic to halt progression and "had a DCA been in place, the opposing political party would've had less 'ammo' to work with."[2]

Communication discipline and ODC capacity

Poland's network invested in bilingual artifacts, signed "key-points" after meetings, and embedded linguists at critical interfaces—classic buffering tactics—while a staffed ODC

[2] *To preserve non-attribution, direct quotations from interviewees are minimised; here the quotation is derived from official correspondence and retained verbatim as a documentary evidence.*

transmitted credibility across organisational boundaries. LRDPs functioned as bridging devices that aligned host-nation and US horizons. In Slovakia, ODC staffing was thinner and translation practices more ad hoc; these efforts were diligent but could not offset legal ambiguity. Differences in land-use regimes (e.g. zoning versus easements and fragmented ownership) compounded the problem: Poland's legal scaffolding offered tractable routes through permissions and environmental responsibilities, whereas ambiguity in Slovakia raised transaction costs and stall risk.

Synthesis

Whenever a DCA is present, buffering (bilingual artifacts, embedded linguists, and structured meeting discipline) and bridging (DLA, LRDPs, and steering/board-like routines) compound to stabilise resource flows and insulate projects from politicisation. ODC capacity moderates these effects: thin staffing and unclear mandates increase reliance on improvised ties, especially under weak legal architecture. Consistent with this pattern, Poland moved to completion of the first project in spring 2019, whereas Slovakia formally halted negotiations in March 2019 (Spectator Staff, 2019).

Discussion

Implications for resource dependence theory

Our analysis suggested that legal instruments are not just resources but first-order resources. The comparative evidence underscores that DCAs are not mere background constraints but constitutive resources that shape the dependence structure of multinational public programs. In Poland, EDI program implementation was not seamless, but the DCA—iteratively supported by IAs—reduced environmental uncertainty, legitimised DLA, and stabilised expectations about roles (e.g. environmental responsibilities), enabling the network to convert strategic intent into concrete milestones. In Slovakia, the absence of a suitable DCA magnified dependence on ad hoc ties and left routine design actions vulnerable to sovereignty framings and politicisation, thereby culminating in a ministerial halt.

The analysis also suggested that, as important as buffering and bridging are, the return on them is conditional. Classic RDT tactics, such as buffering (in this case, strategies such as bilingual documentation, signed "key-points," and embedded linguists) and bridging (in this instance: DLA, LRDPs, and steering/board-like oversight), paid off in Poland because legal scaffolding conferred structural rigidity; the same tactics showed sharply diminishing returns in Slovakia in the absence of a DCA. This conditionality refines RDT's generic prescriptions by specifying when boundary work scales and when it stalls in transgovernmental settings.

Thus, the findings sharpen RDT's distinction between magnitude and criticality: resources such as communication funds and staff were important in both cases, but the critical resource—the one whose absence reconfigures all other dependencies—was the DCA. In effect, legality functioned as a meta-resource that determined the payoff to all other inputs (e.g. communication capacity, ODC staffing, and principal engagement): high in both criticality and magnitude, but not constitutive.

Implications for alliance politics and defence cooperation

The EDI MILCON program turns alliance promises into usable infrastructure in a deteriorating European security environment. Our comparison isolates a fixable lever—a DCA

with clear IAs—that prevents routine design/permits from being derailed by domestic politics. Thus, the study highlighted the gaps that can form between treaty context and operational authority. Alliance politics scholarship often treats formal agreements as macro backdrops; however, the cases also show they operate as micro-level operating authorities that enable recurrent, low-friction collaboration among specialised agencies (USAF, ODCs, and host-nation technical ministries). Where a DCA exists, it routinises cross-border coordination (e.g. direct liaison), reduces transaction costs for design reviews, and clarifies sensitive issues (land use and environmental remediation). Where it does not exist, even well-intentioned steps (e.g. soliciting design support) can be reframed domestically as sovereignty incursions.

The study also illustrated the variability of politicisation thresholds. The Slovak sequence demonstrates how much the lack of legal scaffolding lowers the threshold for politicisation cascades: an early media mischaracterisation, followed by a national shock and elite contestation, swamped operational relationships, and frozen progress. In the words of one of the respondents, "Opposing HN politicians used the accelerated designing as a scare tactic… Had a DCA been in place, the opposing political party would've had less 'ammo' to work with" (AFCEC PM, official correspondence). By contrast, Poland's legal architecture dampened similar shocks through predictable escalation channels and implementing arrangement updates, preserving momentum. For alliance managers, the lesson is that sequencing matters: secure or mature the DCA before compressing design and award timelines.

Finally, key nodes in transgovernmental relationships serve not only as implementers but also as credibility transmitters. ODCs guard at the interface of diplomacy and implementation. Their effectiveness in both is contingent on both resources and legal backing. Their staffing, bilingual competence, and mandate clarity condition whether allied commitments propagate intact through host-nation bureaucracies and publics. Under-resourced ODCs may become chokepoints, especially in the absence of a legal backing, such as DCAs; adequately resourced ODCs act as credibility transmitters that keep alliance promises legible and actionable.

Robustness

Three conceiveable alternative explanations do not overturn the observed mechanism. ODC capacity alone could be conceptualised as a driver of success or failure; our observations suggest that ODC capacity alone is conditional—without DCA/IA it saturates and does not reverse the stall. The outcomes cannot be explained with local politics alone either: routine turnover occurred in both settings; only Slovakia crossed a politicisation threshold. Finally, it is not likely that the outcomes were affected by funding cadence: both cases drew from the same EDI lines/windows and timing does not co-vary with divergence.

Conclusions

This study explains why nominally similar EDI MILCON projects succeeded in Poland but stalled in Slovakia. The answer matters because infrastructure delivery is the operational hinge between commitments on paper and forces on the ground at a time of Russian coercion and war. We identify the legal infrastructure—a DCA and its IAs—as the difference-maker that raises the politicisation threshold and keeps routine boundary work productive.

This comparative analysis accounts for divergent EDI MILCON outcomes by locating legal architecture at the centre of resource dependence specifically. Our main finding is that legal architecture reconfigures dependence. In Poland, DCA/IA raised the politicisation threshold and made buffering/bridging productive; in Slovakia, their absence enabled politicisation and the program was halted. DCAs and IAs act as first-order resources that enable classic bridging and buffering tactics; without them, politicisation thresholds are low and managerial attention is consumed by boundary disputes.

Accordingly, the main lesson learned is that managers should sequence legality before speed: legal structure is not a background—it reconfigures dependency. Attempting to "jump-start" design without a settled DCA/implementing-arrangement bundle creates vulnerability to conflict (even if routine and predictable) and fractures coordination. Boundary-work should be institutionalised: codify DLA, require bilingual artifacts and "key-points," and co-produce LRDPs to synchronise host-nation, NATO, and the US timelines. Finally, resource the pivotal node: staff ODCs with MILCON-fluent, bilingual officers, so that they operate as credibility transmitters rather than chokepoints.

The mechanisms identified here—constitutive legality, politicisation cascades, and credibility transmission—through ODCs are generalisable and apply to other alliance infrastructure programs as well as to civilian multinational projects. They concern how legal instruments shape interorganisational networks, not solely the defence domain.

The findings also have clear policy applications for DoD/EUCOM/USAFE. In particular, the detected importance of DCA/IAs suggests that sequencing is critical and that they should be treated as gating resources; as such, ideally an upfront planning window should be built to finalise them, and require bilingual deliverables and meeting discipline. For the US embassies/ODCs, create dedicated MILCON liaison billets and a bilingual document suite to transmit credibility, and embed predictable escalation inside the agreements. For host-nation ministries, use LRDPs and routine steering committees with published agendas and minutes to keep cross-boundary decisions predictable. Future theaters (e.g. the Indo-Pacific) should port these lessons and map legal-environmental responsibilities via LRDPs before accelerating design.

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Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study is available on request from the corresponding author.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. The authors read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

AI Use Disclosure

The authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT (model: GPT-5 Thinking) to assist with language editing, structural reorganisation, and reference formatting. The authors reviewed and verified all content and are solely responsible for the analysis, interpretations, and conclusions. No AI was used to generate or alter data, images, or figures.

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Appendix A. Interview protocol

Purpose. Elicit evidence on resources, flows, constraints, and leadership actions in EDI MILCON execution networks, and trace key decision episodes.

1. What was your job and what were your responsibilities?

2. Were you able to fulfill your responsibilities? Why or why not?

3. What resources did you need in place to execute successfully the USAF EDI MILCON program? Were those resources in place?

4. How would you characterise the flow of information and resources throughout the execution team?

5. What constraints did you encounter and how did you, the execution team, or other individuals, adapt to those constraints?

6. What could have occurred differently?

Appendix B. Respondent index

1. **Operational level: Slovakia (SK) AFCEC PM 1.** Initial project manager (PM) responsible for providing support to the programming activities, and for leading the design and construction stage for the USAF.

2. **Operational level: SK AFCEC PM 2.** Second project manager (PM) responsible for providing support to the programming activities, and for leading the design and construction stage for the USAF.

3. **Operational level: SK AFCEC PM 3.** Third project manager (PM) responsible for providing support to the programming activities, and for leading the design and construction stage for the USAF.

4. **Operational level: AFCEC supervisor.** Supervisor for all AFCEC EDI project managers, providing consolidated project information to senior leadership and guidance for the execution of the entire USAF EDI MILCON program in the design/construction phase.

5. **Operational level: EUCOM Program Manager (PgM).** Obtain and consolidate program information and updates from each service component (USAF, US army [USA], US navy [USN]), and provide to leadership and oversight committees.

6. **Operational level: Poland (PL)/SK USAFE PgM.** Planning and programming lead for the USAF responsible for leading the interorganisational team to establish fundamental requirements for scope and budget; interviewee managed both Polish and Slovakian programs.

7. **Operational level: PL/SK USAFE PgM.** Planning and programming lead for the USAF responsible for leading the interorganisational team to establish fundamental requirements for scope and budget; interviewee managed both Polish and Slovakian programs.

8. **Strategic level: USAFE Supervisor.** Supervisor for all USAFE planning and programming PgMs; responsible for consolidating and reporting USAFE program status for the entire USAF EDI program to leadership and EUCOM.

9. **Operational level: PL ODC.** Mid-level defence liaison to the US Embassy responsible for coordinating diplomatic issues with the appropriate HN or Embassy staff. Issues can include country clearance requests for authorisation to enter the country on official business, to facilitating resolution of design/construction issues on a project with the HN.

10. **Operational Level: SK ODC.** Mid-level defence liaison to the US Embassy responsible for coordinating diplomatic issues with the appropriate HN or Embassy staff. Issues can include country clearance requests for authorisation to enter the country on official business, to facilitating resolution of design/construction issues on a project with the HN.