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Seasoned Ministers, Active Allies: Defense Experience and Military Cooperation within Alliances

Fidelis Atnadu David

fad49@nau.edu

Northern Arizona University

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Abstract

Does individual experience shape how Allies cooperate within international organizations? Research on alliances often focuses on states' interests and capabilities, but when and how individual agents matter for alliance cooperation is less understood. I examine this by looking at how the experience of defense ministers, the state representatives who oversee national forces, helps explain whether allied states participate in the training exercises NATO organizes each year. I extend work on individual agents in international organizations to security cooperation, arguing that experience creates familiarity with national forces and existing military commitments, helping ministers decide which forces they can make available. Using over 2,200 Ally–exercise pairs across NATO exercises from 2016 to 2024, comparing the same Ally over time across different model specifications, I find that Allies whose defense ministers have more defense experience are more likely to take part in exercises, while experience elsewhere in cabinet and prior military service show no such relationship. The relationship holds in larger exercises but not smaller ones. This suggests that individual agents can shape cooperation in a multiplex world, and that experience can facilitate alliance cooperation, especially in exercises that ask the most of states.

Introduction

International organizations can create opportunities for states to cooperate, but individuals inside national governments still help determine whether those opportunities become actual contributions. Every year from 2015 to 2022, NATO held Dynamic Mongoose, its annual anti-submarine warfare exercise. Of the twelve Allies that took part at least once, Germany, Norway, and the United States participated in every edition (NATO, 2025, 2026a; NATO Allied Maritime Command, 2017). The other nine joined in some years and stayed away in others. This pattern is not unique to Dynamic Mongoose. Across the recurring NATO exercises in my data, in six of ten cases, an Ally that participated in an exercise at least once also skipped at least one other edition. Military capacity, threat, and alliance commitments matter for exercise participation, but these conditions usually change more slowly than participation from one exercise to another. Defense ministers also change over time. Some have managed defense before, while others have little or no previous experience in the portfolio. In Finland, for example, the Minister of Defense decides annually whether the Defense Forces will participate in international training and exercises (Ministry of Defense of Finland, 2025). When does the experience of a defense minister matter for an Ally's participation in multinational military exercises? What does this tell us about the role of individuals inside member governments in cooperation through international organizations?

NATO institutions allow Allies to continue cooperating as security conditions change (Wallander, 2000), while defense cooperation agreements shape the military activities states undertake together, including joint exercises (Kinne, 2024). These explanations focus mainly on institutions and relationships between states. They tell us much less about whether the experience of the national official responsible for defense also matters for participation. Research on international organizations has also shown that

individuals representing states can influence what happens within those institutions (Chelotti, 2024; Forster, 2024). Their personal traits matter less, however, when the state itself has to be committed (Chelotti, 2024). I focus on a different individual and a different part of cooperation. Once an international organization has already organized an activity, national officials still have to decide what their government will contribute. Studies of foreign policy appointments show that leaders make consequential choices about the individuals they place in important foreign policy positions (Malis, 2024). Research on ministers also finds that experience in the same portfolio can matter for what they accomplish once in office (Matthieß et al., 2026). I bring this insight to international cooperation by examining whether the experience of the minister responsible for defense helps explain whether a government takes part in cooperation already organized through the Alliance.

I argue that prior defense experience matters because participation in a multinational exercise has to be managed alongside the other demands placed on a country's armed forces. Ministers who have previously managed defense have already dealt with training, deployments, readiness, and other demands on the forces their government controls. They have also been exposed to multinational exercises, the officials involved in these decisions, and the role these activities play in alliance cooperation and readiness. Prior experience in defense therefore gives a minister knowledge of both what the government can contribute and why participation in multinational training matters. Defense ministers do not personally select every unit that takes part in an exercise, and military and civilian officials carry out much of the operational planning, but ministers remain politically responsible for whether their forces take part. I therefore expect Allies whose defense ministers have more experience managing defense to be more likely to participate in NATO multinational exercises. If experience managing defense is what explains this relationship, previous experience elsewhere in cabinet should not have the same relationship with participation.

I test this argument by matching NATO multinational exercises to information on defense ministers from WhoGov (Nyrup & Bramwell, 2020). This gives me a direct comparison between Allies deciding whether to participate in the same exercise while their defense ministers differ in how much experience they have managing defense.

The results show that Allies are more likely to participate when their defense ministers have more experience in the defense portfolio. Each additional year of defense experience is associated with a 1.6-percentage-point higher probability of participating in an exercise, while experience elsewhere in cabinet is not. The relationship holds across a wide range of checks, and ministers' future defense experience is not related to current participation. The relationship is also larger for exercises involving more personnel but is close to zero for deterrence activities. This suggests that defense experience matters most for larger multinational training exercises, where participation places the greatest demands on a country's forces.

This article makes two contributions. First, it brings the individual responsible for defense into the explanation of international cooperation. NATO can organize an exercise and bring Allies together, but

each government still has to decide whether to make its forces available. The results show that the experience of the minister managing defense is related to whether that government participates, so alliance cooperation depends not only on institutions and agreements between states but also on who manages defense at home. Second, this extends the study of individual influence beyond officials negotiating or representing states inside international organizations by showing that national ministers can also matter for whether states take part in cooperation an international organization has already organized, even when doing so commits the state's own forces. Individual agency in international cooperation therefore does not end once an organization has made its decisions; it continues inside member governments that decide what to contribute.

Alliance Cooperation and Political Leadership

Most studies on NATO burden sharing begin with military expenditure as the measure of what Allies contribute (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966; Oneal, 1990; Hartley & Sandler, 1999). Defense spending makes it possible to compare contributions across Allies and across years, but it does not show where those resources go or what Allies actually do with them. Becker and Malesky (2017) and Becker et al. (2025), for example, show that total defense spending can hide important differences in how Allies structure their defense portfolios across different priorities and spending categories. Other studies capture contribution in different ways. Cooper and Stiles (2021) focus on troop deployments to NATO operations, while Kimball (2024) examines contributions through NATO Centres of Excellence. An Ally can therefore appear to contribute more under one measure and much less under another. NATO burden sharing is therefore not only about how much Allies spend, but also about what they contribute and where those contributions are directed within the Alliance.

Allies do not contribute to NATO in the same way, and existing studies give different explanations for why. The collective-action literature begins with size, arguing that smaller members have stronger incentives to rely on security provided disproportionately by larger Allies (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966; Oneal, 1990; Sandler, 1993). This helps explain differences in how much Allies contribute, but it says less about why they contribute in different ways. Becker and Malesky (2017) show that strategic culture shapes which NATO priorities Allies emphasize in their defense portfolios, while Blankenship (2021) shows that Allied contribution is also shaped by bargaining between a patron and its Allies. Burden-sharing pressure is more likely to succeed when the patron can credibly threaten to reduce protection and when the consequences of losing that protection would be costly to the Ally. Alliance assurance can pull in the opposite direction. DiGiuseppe and Shea (2021) find that stronger signals of support can reduce incentives for members to maintain greater levels of their own military effort. Research on operations adds another part of the problem. Even where NATO members have agreed to participate in the same mission, national governments retain control over the forces they provide and the restrictions placed on those forces (Saideman & Auerswald, 2012). Gannon and Kent (2021) further show that a state may contribute a larger share of its available forces when doing so provides an opportunity to strengthen a security relationship. The amount of military capability available to an Ally therefore does not determine how that capability will be used.

The difference between having an institutional framework and actually using it is especially clear in research on defense cooperation agreements. Kinne (2024) examines agreements specifically designed to promote practical defense activities, including joint military exercises, training, peacekeeping, arms cooperation, and information sharing. Yet formally similar agreements generate very different amounts of subsequent cooperation. Why comparable formal arrangements lead to uneven military cooperation remains less clear. Research on treaty effectiveness has explained differences in what agreements produce in two main ways.

Defense agreements create opportunities for military cooperation, but they do not determine whether states will actually act through them. Even after an agreement is signed, governments still decide whether to join exercises, conduct military training, pursue arms cooperation, or participate in other defense activities. Existing studies explain this variation through domestic political conditions and through the design and depth of international agreements (Simmons, 2010; Von Stein, 2016; Dür et al., 2014; Mitchell & Zawahri, 2015). Kinne (2024) shows that the defense relationships surrounding an agreement also shape what follows. When two partners share defense ties with many of the same third states, their policies become closer, reducing the adjustment needed for later cooperation. This distinction is especially important in NATO. Membership gives Allies the same institutional setting, but it does not make participation in each multinational exercise automatic. Some Allies join an exercise while others do not, even when they face the same opportunity to participate. Explaining this difference requires looking beyond membership itself to what makes an Ally more likely to participate when NATO organizes an exercise.

Recent work on multinational exercises has examined how states use these activities beyond military training. Wolfley (2021) argues that exercises are instruments of military statecraft used to manage strategic relationships and uncertainty. Kuo and Blankenship (2022) show that exercises and alliances can perform complementary functions, as exercises allow states to respond to military challenges while alliances place institutional constraints on their partners. Exercises can therefore do more than bring military forces together for training. They can also allow governments to demonstrate military cooperation and respond to security challenges without relying only on a new formal alliance commitment.

Other research is less concerned with what a particular exercise signals and instead looks at how these relationships develop over time. States that have exercised together are more likely to do so again, and common exercise partners can create additional opportunities for cooperation (Galambos, 2024). This repeated activity can also become part of a wider security structure. Schmidt (2026), for example, shows how the growth of multinational exercises has become tied to the organization of U.S. security relationships across regions. Existing research has therefore told us a great deal about why states exercise together and how those relationships form and persist. It tells us much less about the members that do not participate when the same exercise is already available to them.

The exercise literature has said much less about variation among Allies within the same activity. Existing studies explain why states use multinational exercises, how exercise relationships form and persist, and what these activities can signal or accomplish (Wolfley, 2021; Kuo & Blankenship, 2022; Galambos, 2024; Schmidt, 2026). Galambos (2024), for example, shows that previous exercise ties and common partners make later cooperation more likely. Yet once NATO has organized a particular exercise, its members still differ in whether they take part. Two Allies can face the same activity and the same Alliance setting while one participates and the other does not. Military capacity, geography, security exposure, and previous participation may explain some of this variation. What has received much less attention is whether differences in the defense ministers responsible for these national decisions also matter for participation.

Alliance research has only recently begun to look below the state when explaining differences in defense behaviour. Fuhrmann (2020), for example, shows that NATO heads of government with prior business experience spend less on defense than leaders without that background. Fuhrmann and Kim (2026) return to this finding by asking whether the pattern reflects who enters business in the first place or what people learn from that experience; their evidence is more consistent with socialization. Prior experience can therefore become one source of variation among leaders operating within the same alliance setting. A related literature on international organizations reaches the individual level through state representatives and administrative staff. Negotiation outcomes can vary with the characteristics of the people representing states, while expertise and experience may give some representatives influence beyond what would be expected from their country's material position alone (Panke et al., 2021; Forster, 2024). Eckhard et al. (2026) extend this question to implementation, showing that project performance also varies with the composition and knowledge of the staff carrying out IO programs. But these studies have focused mainly on heads of government, state representatives, and IO personnel. They tell us much less about ministers responsible for a particular national portfolio and whether experience accumulated in defense matters when governments decide to take part in international military cooperation.

Defense ministers are more directly involved in these decisions because they oversee the ministry responsible for military policy and the use of national defense resources. This includes the forces and capabilities that governments make available for multinational military activities. Research on these officials is still more limited than work on heads of government. Malis (2024) shows that leaders make strategic choices when appointing foreign and defense ministers because appointees can change the advice leaders receive, the domestic political consequences they face, and the range of policies available during international crises. The focus, however, is on appointment: why leaders choose particular ministers and how those choices affect crisis decision-making. A separate literature on ministerial performance asks whether prior experience changes what ministers can accomplish after appointment. Matthieß et al. (2026) find that prior ministerial experience increases the likelihood of pledge fulfilment and that experience in the same ministry is especially advantageous in most of the countries they examine. Experience in another ministry does not provide the same consistent advantage. This is an important distinction because it separates general experience in government from experience accumulated within the portfolio responsible for carrying out a policy.

But these literatures have not been connected very far in the study of alliance cooperation. We know why Allies differ in defense spending and other military contributions, how patron pressure and assurance affect Allied effort, and why formal defense relationships sometimes produce more practical cooperation than others. We also know increasingly more about why states exercise together and why those relationships persist. At the individual level, research shows that the previous experiences of leaders, representatives, and ministers can matter for policy and implementation. What remains unclear is whether prior experience in the defense portfolio is associated with the decision to make national military resources available for a particular act of international cooperation. In the context examined here, the question is whether Allies whose defense ministers have more experience in the portfolio are more likely to participate when NATO has already organized the multinational exercise.

Defense-Minister Experience and Multinational Exercise Participation

Participation in a multinational exercise begins with an opportunity for cooperation, but it still requires a national decision to contribute. NATO may organize a multinational exercise, but that does not mean every Ally will take part. Participation still depends on whether individual governments make their forces available. It cannot make each member commit forces to every activity. Governments still have to determine whether personnel and capabilities can be made available alongside existing deployments, training requirements, readiness demands, and other national priorities. Two Allies may therefore possess forces capable of participating in the same exercise and still make different decisions about whether to take part.

Defense ministers occupy an important position in this process because they oversee the national portfolio through which military resources are managed and defense commitments are carried out. They do not personally select every unit or make every operational decision. Military staffs and civilian officials perform much of that work. But these decisions still move through a ministry in which political priorities have to be reconciled with military requirements and available resources. Malis (2024) similarly shows that the choice of foreign and defense ministers can matter because different appointees alter the advice available to leaders and the policy choices they face. What prior defense experience provides becomes important when a government has to decide whether its forces can be committed to a multinational exercise.

Prior defense experience provides two advantages that should matter for this decision. First, it gives ministers knowledge accumulated from previously managing the same portfolio. Defense ministries contain information that is difficult to acquire immediately after entering office: the readiness of national forces, existing deployments, capability limitations, procurement and personnel constraints, and the procedures through which international commitments are assessed. A minister returning to the portfolio is not encountering these issues for the first time. Previous experience provides a basis for understanding what the country can realistically contribute and which constraints are likely to limit participation. Research on ministerial performance provides related evidence that previous experience

can improve what ministers accomplish in office and that experience in the same ministry can be especially useful (Matthieß et al., 2026).

Second, prior experience gives a minister familiarity with the institution through which these commitments are made. A newly appointed defense minister does not enter office without military advice or an established bureaucracy. The ministry already contains officials who know the forces, existing deployments, and the procedures used for international military cooperation. What the new minister lacks, compared with someone who has held the portfolio before, is experience working through that system: knowing which parts of the ministry carry particular responsibilities, how military advice reaches the political level, and where a proposed commitment is likely to encounter constraints. A minister who has managed the portfolio before has already worked through these relationships. When a NATO exercise requires a new participation decision, that experience should make it easier to determine what contribution is feasible and how it can be carried out.

This matters even among Allies that possess the military capacity to participate. For example, take two Allies deciding whether to participate in the same NATO exercise. Both may have suitable forces and both may be politically willing to contribute. In one country, however, the defense minister has previously dealt with questions of force availability, competing military commitments, and the officials responsible for making national forces available. In the other, the minister is encountering these questions for the first time. Having a larger military or spending more on defense does not mean an Ally will contribute more to a particular exercise. What matters is whether the government can turn that capacity into an actual contribution when the exercise is being planned.

Military size, defense spending, geography, and security exposure shape what an Ally could contribute and why it might want to participate. But participation still depends on whether the government can make personnel, equipment, or other military assets available for that exercise. A minister with prior experience in the defense portfolio should be better positioned to make this decision because the minister already knows which officials are involved, how the defense institution works, and the constraints that determine what can actually be committed. That experience should make it easier to move from available military capacity to an actual exercise contribution. I therefore expect:

Hypothesis 1

The more prior defense-portfolio experience a defense minister has, the more likely the Ally is to participate in a multinational military exercise.

Defense Experience and General Cabinet Experience

But prior defense experience may not be what is driving this relationship. Ministers who have spent more time in government may simply be better at navigating political and administrative decisions regardless of where that experience was acquired. Previous cabinet service can provide familiarity with executive decision-making, relations among ministries, budgetary politics, and the procedures through which

government policy is approved. If these general political skills are what matter for exercise participation, prior service in another ministry should provide much of the same advantage as prior service in defense.

There are reasons, however, to expect the portfolio in which that experience was accumulated to matter. Cabinet experience outside defense can teach a minister how government works without providing experience with the military institution through which exercise participation has to be carried out. A former minister of finance or transport may understand cabinet bargaining and administrative procedure while having little previous exposure to military readiness, force availability, existing deployments, relations between civilian and military officials, or NATO defense coordination. Defense experience combines general ministerial experience with prior exposure to these particular problems.

This is also what distinguishes accumulated defense experience from political seniority alone. A minister returning to defense does not simply bring another year of cabinet service. The minister returns to officials, procedures, and policy problems already encountered in the same portfolio. Matthieß et al. (2026) make a similar distinction in their study of pledge fulfilment. Ministers with previous experience tend to perform better, but experience in the same ministry provides an additional advantage in most of the countries they examine. Experience can therefore be useful not only because a politician has served in government before, but because previous service occurred in the institution responsible for the policy being implemented.

For multinational exercises, this difference should be especially relevant when a government has to determine what military contribution is feasible. General cabinet experience may help a minister navigate government, but it does not provide the same prior knowledge of national forces or the ministry responsible for committing them. Experience accumulated in the defense portfolio should therefore have a stronger effect on exercise participation than experience accumulated elsewhere in cabinet. This leads to the second expectation:

Hypothesis 2

Allies should be more likely to participate in multinational military exercises when their defense ministers' prior ministerial experience was accumulated in the defense portfolio rather than in other cabinet portfolios.

Research Design and Data

To test the hypotheses, I use event-level data on NATO multinational exercises and I match each Ally's participation to the minister recorded in the July WhoGov snapshot from the year before the exercise. I code the exercises from NATO annual reports, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), and other official NATO sources covering 2015–2026 (NATO, 2025, 2026). These records identify exercises such as Dynamic Manta, Saber Junction, and Combined Resolve and the Allies reported as participants. Each observation is an Ally–exercise. I include only exercises with complete participant lists because the analysis compares Allies that participated with Allies that did not participate in the same exercise. The exercise sample contains 2,762 Ally–exercise observations from 94 exercises and

32 NATO Allies between 2015 and 2024. Allies enter the sample in the year they join NATO, so Finland enters in 2023 and Sweden in 2024. I begin in 2015, the first full year after NATO adopted the Readiness Action Plan, and end in 2024 because this is the last year with sufficiently complete NATO and SHAPE participant lists for the exercises used in the analysis.

Dependent Variable 1: Exercise participation.

The first dependent variable is exercise participation, measured at the Ally–exercise level. I code participation directly from NATO annual reports, SHAPE reporting, and other official NATO sources (NATO, 2025, 2026a, NATO Allied Maritime Command, 2017). An Ally is coded 1 when it is identified as participating in or contributing to the exercise and 0 when it does not appear on a complete Allied participant list. I only code an Ally as a non-participant when the source provides a complete participant list, which helps ensure that an unlisted Ally is actually a non-participant rather than missing from the report. Where the available source identifies only some participating states, I leave the remaining Allies unresolved rather than code them as non-participants. The measure therefore captures whether an Ally takes part in the same multinational activity faced by the other Allies in that exercise. Information on the number of personnel, equipment, and other national contributions is not reported consistently across exercises, and thus I do not weight participation by the size of the contribution. Across the 94 exercises with complete participant lists, about 32 percent of eligible Allies participated in the median exercise (Appendix Figure A4).

Dependent Variable 2: Annual participation share

As an alternative outcome, I aggregate the same exercise coding to the Ally-year and measure the share of complete-list exercises in which an Ally participates during a year. I divide the number of exercises in which the Ally is coded as participating by the total number of complete-list exercises for which the Ally was eligible in that year. The measure ranges from 0 to 1 and uses the same NATO and SHAPE coding as the event-level dependent variable. Unlike the main analysis, this measure does not compare Allies within the same exercise, so I use it only as an alternative outcome.

Independent Variables

Prior defense experience. The main independent variable is prior defense experience. I code this using WhoGov, which identifies cabinet ministers, the portfolios they hold, and characteristics such as party affiliation, age, and gender (Nyrup & Bramwell, 2020). For each exercise in year (t), I match each Ally to the minister responsible for defense in the preceding July WhoGov snapshot. I then count the number of earlier annual WhoGov observations in which that same minister had already held the defense portfolio. A minister who served in defense, left the portfolio, and later returned therefore keeps that earlier experience in the measure. I use this measure because the argument concerns experience already gained from managing the defense portfolio rather than only the length of the minister's current spell in office. I separately use consecutive defense experience in a robustness test to examine whether the

relationship is driven by uninterrupted tenure in the portfolio. For Iceland, I leave defense experience missing because the country does not have a separate defense ministry and the foreign-affairs minister serves as the defense-responsible official. I do not code Iceland as zero because Iceland does not have a separate defense portfolio. Coding it as zero would mean that the minister had no prior defense experience, when there is no separate defense ministry in Iceland from which that experience could be measured.

Other cabinet experience. I separately measure the experience a minister had in cabinet outside the defense portfolio. WhoGov records previous cabinet service across portfolios, so I subtract prior defense experience from total previous cabinet experience. For example, if a minister appears five times previously in cabinet and two of those observations are in defense, I code two as prior defense experience and the remaining three as other cabinet experience. This keeps the same cabinet experience from entering both measures. The comparison helps test H2 directly: whether the effect comes specifically from experience in the defense portfolio or from having prior cabinet experience more generally. If general cabinet experience is what matters, experience in other portfolios should have a similar effect. If previous experience in defense matters specifically, prior defense experience should have the stronger relationship with exercise participation. Matthieß et al. (2026) make a related distinction in their study of ministerial experience, showing that previous ministerial service can improve policy performance while experience in the same ministry provides an additional advantage in most of the countries they examine.

Control Variables

To account for alternative explanations for multinational exercise participation, I include controls for (1) military capacity, (2) defense effort, (3) economic conditions, (4) frontline and other security conditions, (5) prior exercise participation, and (6) characteristics of the defense minister. Earlier specifications also account for alliance experience and geography. These controls distinguish minister experience from differences in the forces and resources Allies possess, the security conditions they face, their previous participation in multinational exercises, and other characteristics of the minister that may be related to prior experience.

Military capacity. I measure military capacity using the size of an Ally's armed forces because states with larger militaries have more personnel and military units that can be made available for multinational exercises. The data come from NATO's defense expenditure tables and measure total military personnel in thousands (NATO, 2026a). I log the variable because military size varies considerably across NATO members. This measure is different from defense spending as a percentage of GDP. Military personnel capture the size of the force potentially available for an exercise, while defense spending captures the resources a government commits to defense.

Defense effort. Military expenditure as a percentage of GDP accounts for differences in the resources Allies devote to defense and also comes from NATO's defense expenditure data (NATO, 2026a). Defense spending is a standard measure of Allied effort in the burden-sharing literature (Fuhrmann, 2020; Becker

et al., 2025). I keep it separate from military personnel because a state can devote a comparatively large share of GDP to defense without maintaining a correspondingly large military. Including both measures therefore accounts separately for defense effort and the personnel capacity available for exercise participation.

Economic conditions. Logged GDP per capita accounts for differences in national wealth, while GDP growth captures annual economic conditions that may affect the resources available for military commitments. These measures come from the World Bank's World Development Indicators through the Quality of Government dataset (World Bank, 2024; Teorell et al., 2026). GDP per capita is logged because of its skewed distribution.

Frontline status and security conditions. Allies on NATO's eastern flank may have stronger incentives to participate because they face a more immediate security environment and are directly involved in NATO's forward defense posture. I code frontline status 1 for Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, and 0 for all other Allies. The coding follows NATO's map and description of its eastern-flank Forward Land Forces (NATO, 2026b). This control helps account for the possibility that Allies facing greater eastern-flank exposure both participate more frequently and place greater political importance on the defense portfolio. I also retain the terrorism index from to account for annual security pressures that may affect the demands placed on national military resources (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025; Teorell et al., 2026). These variables are controls rather than central explanations for exercise participation.

Prior exercise participation. I measure previous participation using an Ally's exercise participation rate in the preceding year. Allies that participate regularly may already have military routines, relationships, or recurring commitments that make subsequent participation more likely. Including the lagged measure helps distinguish ministerial experience from persistence in an Ally's own exercise behavior. It is also different from years in NATO: the former captures what an Ally recently did, while the latter captures how long it has belonged to the Alliance.

Minister age and gender. I use minister age and gender from WhoGov (Nyrup & Bramwell, 2020). Older ministers have had more time in politics and more opportunities to serve previously in cabinet or in the defense portfolio. I control for age so that prior defense experience is not simply capturing the longer political careers of older ministers. I also control for gender. Matthieß et al. (2026) account for both age and gender when examining whether previous ministerial experience affects policy implementation.

Prior military service. I also account for whether the minister previously served in the military. This matters because military service can give a minister defense experience even when the minister has not previously held the defense portfolio, and this could also shape participation in multinational exercises. I measure prior military service using Paths to Power, which records the occupational and educational backgrounds of cabinet ministers (Nyrup et al., 2025).

I use the occupational indicator for whether the minister previously served as a military officer or soldier. A former officer may enter the defense portfolio with previous knowledge of military organizations and the constraints facing the armed forces even without having served previously as defense minister. This is different from experience acquired while managing the defense portfolio. A minister can have several years of defense experience without having served in uniform, while a former officer may have no previous experience running the ministry. I therefore add prior military service in the final specification to examine whether the relationship with defense experience remains after accounting for this different source of military experience. Ministers outside the coverage of Paths to Power are left missing rather than coded as having no prior military service.

Alliance experience and geography. Years in NATO accounts for differences in how long Allies have operated within the Alliance (NATO, 2026b). Allies with longer membership have had more time to become familiar with NATO planning, procedures, and multinational military activity, which may also affect participation in exercises. Years in NATO is different from lagged exercise participation: the former measures time spent in the Alliance, while the latter records an Ally's actual participation in the previous year. I also include coastline status because access to the sea may affect opportunities to take part in maritime exercises. Years in NATO, coastline status, and frontline status are included in the specifications without country fixed effects. Coastline and frontline status do not vary within countries, while years in NATO increases mechanically with time. These variables are therefore not separately estimated once country and activity fixed effects are included. Appendix Table A1 reports summary statistics for the main estimation sample.

Figure 1 shows whether ministers with more prior defense experience tend to serve in Allies with larger militaries, higher GDP per capita, greater security exposure, or higher prior exercise participation

Model Specification

I estimate linear probability models because exercise participation is coded 1 or 0 and the coefficients can be interpreted directly as changes in the probability of participation. Activity fixed effects are included throughout, so the comparison is among Allies facing the same exercise. The preferred specification adds country fixed effects, other cabinet experience, minister age and gender, lagged participation, and the military, economic, and security controls described above. Prior military service is added in the final model. Standard errors are clustered by Ally, with two-way clustering by Ally and exercise used as a robustness test.

Governments that retain more experienced defense ministers may also differ in ways that make participation in NATO exercises more likely. Country fixed effects account for persistent differences among Allies, while activity fixed effects hold the exercise itself constant. Lagged participation and the time-varying controls account for recent exercise behavior and changing national conditions. These steps cannot eliminate all selection into ministerial experience, so I interpret the estimates as associations rather than causal effects. I also re-estimate the models using consecutive defense experience, alternative measures of military capacity, earlier minister timing, controls for minister and

party changes, and leave-one-country-out specifications. I also use future minister experience as a placebo test. If prior defense experience is what matters for exercise participation, experience a minister gains only after an exercise should not explain whether the Ally participated in that exercise. I report this test in Table 2.

Results

Figure 2 shows how exercise participation relative to each Ally's average varies with the defense minister's prior experience in the portfolio. When defense ministers had four or more years of prior experience in the portfolio, Allies participated about 5.0 percentage points more often than their own averages. From three years of experience, the difference was about 2.1 percentage points, and the estimates for zero to two years were close to or below the Ally average. In Table 1, I examine whether this pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 1 after accounting for differences across exercises and including the controls.

Table 1 presents the initial linear probability models of Allied participation in multinational exercises. Model (1) presents the baseline specification, which includes prior defense experience, the military capacity of Allies (size), defense expenditure, and GDP per capita. Model (2) extends this specification by adding years in NATO, frontline and coastline status, while Model (3) adds terrorism as a proxy for security conditions and economic growth. Model (4) adds experience in other departments, ministers' age and gender, and prior exercise participation. Model (5) includes country fixed effects. Model (6) includes the defense minister's prior military service.

Table 1
Defense-Minister Experience and NATO Multinational Exercise Participation

Prior defense experience	**(M1)**	**(M2)**	**(M3)**	**(M4)**	**(M5)**	**(M6)**
	0.020* **	**0.019*** **	**0.021*** **	**0.016*** **	**0.016*** **	**0.017*** **
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Other cabinet experience				0.000	-0.004	-0.004
				(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Log military personnel (t − 1)	0.089***	0.084***	0.076***	0.050***	-0.336***	-0.329***
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.018)	(0.011)	(0.113)	(0.112)
Defense expenditure, % GDP (t − 1)	0.052	0.024	0.018	0.019	0.045	0.057
	(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.015)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Log GDP per capita (t − 1)	0.117***	0.128***	0.137***	0.088***	-0.083	-0.150
	(0.021)	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.030)	(0.152)	(0.179)
GDP growth, % (t − 1)			0.007	0.005	0.004	0.004
			(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Global Terrorism Index (t − 1)			0.014	0.009	-0.013	-0.009
			(0.014)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Years in NATO		0.000	-0.000	-0.000		
		(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)		
Frontline Ally		0.045	0.053	0.029		
		(0.054)	(0.056)	(0.034)		
Coastline state		0.158***	0.164***	0.110***		
		(0.039)	(0.047)	(0.032)		
Minister age				0.001	0.000	0.000
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)

Note: The dependent variable is participation in an individual NATO multinational exercise. Standard errors clustered by Ally in parentheses. * p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p < .01.

Prior defense experience	**(M1)**	**(M2)**	**(M3)**	**(M4)**	**(M5)**	**(M6)**
	0.020* **	**0.019*** **	**0.021*** **	**0.016*** **	**0.016*** **	**0.017*** **
Female defense minister				0.030	-0.042	-0.041
				(0.026)	(0.030)	(0.036)
Prior exercise participation (t − 1)				0.346***	-0.076	-0.088
				(0.088)	(0.089)	(0.091)
Prior military service						-0.021
						(0.035)
Activity fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Wild bootstrap p-value	0.008	0.001	< .001	0.007	0.011	0.015
Observations	2,456	2,456	2,369	2,358	2,358	2,266
Allies	31	31	30	29	29	29
Exercises	87	87	87	87	87	87
Mean VIF	1.29	2.10	2.27	2.39	1.13	1.16
R^2	0.278	0.289	0.288	0.304	0.327	0.330
Adjusted R^2	0.250	0.261	0.258	0.273	0.290	0.290

Note: The dependent variable is participation in an individual NATO multinational exercise. Standard errors clustered by Ally in parentheses. * p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p < .01.

For Hypothesis 1, I expected that the more prior defense experience a minister has, the more likely an Ally is to participate in multinational exercises. All models include activity fixed effects to account for differences across exercises. Table 1 provides support for this hypothesis. In Model (1), prior defense experience has a coefficient of 0.020 and a standard error of 0.006. The estimate changes little as I add controls in Models (2–4), including the defense minister's age and gender in Model (4). Depending on the model, an Ally is estimated to be 1.6 to 2.1 percentage points more likely to take part in an exercise for each additional year of its minister's prior defense experience.

In my preferred model, Model (5), I add country fixed effects so that I can compare the same Ally over time while accounting for differences across exercises. The coefficient for prior defense experience is 0.016 with a standard error of 0.005, which corresponds to a 1.6-percentage-point increase in the

estimated probability of participation for each additional year of prior defense experience. When I account for prior military service in Model (6), the coefficient for prior defense experience remains similar at 0.017, with a standard error of 0.006. This is consistent with my argument that experience managing the defense portfolio helps ministers determine which forces their country can make available for an exercise. Ministers who have already managed deployments, training requirements, and readiness demands may be better placed to determine which forces their country can make available for an exercise.

For Hypothesis 2, I expected Allies to be more likely to participate in exercises when their defense ministers had gained more of their cabinet experience in the defense department. In Model (5), prior defense experience has a coefficient of 0.016 and a standard error of 0.005, while experience elsewhere in cabinet has a coefficient of − 0.004 and a standard error of 0.004. This implies that one year of prior experience in defense in place of a year elsewhere in cabinet is associated with a participation probability about 2 percentage points higher. Two ministers can have the same amount of cabinet experience, but the minister who has spent more of that time in defense is more familiar with the department responsible for making forces available and with the interoperability requirements of multinational exercises. This is consistent with my expectation that where ministers gained their cabinet experience matters for exercise participation, because prior service in defense gives them experience deciding which forces can be made available alongside existing military commitments.

Model (5) is further illustrated in Fig. 3. Compared with zero years of prior defense experience, one year corresponds to an estimated increase of 1.6 percentage points in the probability that an Ally participates in an exercise. At six years, the estimated increase is about 9.7 percentage points.

I use annual participation share as an alternative dependent variable to examine whether the relationship also holds when each Ally contributes one observation per year. Figure 4 shows that Allies joined about 43 percent of eligible exercises in years when their defense ministers had four or more years of prior experience in the portfolio, compared with about 36 percent in years when their ministers had none. The average share was between 34 and 36 percent for the zero-, one-, and two-year groups and about 38.5 percent for the three-year group.

Additional Analysis

I also use future minister experience as a final placebo to see whether experience gained only after an exercise predicts whether the Ally participated in that exercise (Table 2). The coefficient on future experience is close to zero and not statistically significant, while the estimate for prior defense experience remains unchanged.

Table 2
Future Defense-Minister Experience and Current Exercise Participation

Prior defense experience	**(M1)**	**(M2)**	**(M3)**
	0.016* **		**0.016*** **
	(0.005)		(0.005)
Future defense experience (t + 1)		0.000	-0.002
		(0.008)	(0.007)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ally fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Exercise fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,358	2,358	2,358

Note The dependent variable is participation in an individual NATO multinational exercise. Future defense experience is the defense minister's prior defense-portfolio experience in the following year. All models include the controls from Table 1, Model 5. Standard errors clustered by Ally in parentheses. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

To see whether the result depends on how I specify the model or which exercise years I include, I estimate 45 specifications that vary the fixed effects, controls, and sample period (Fig. 5). Prior defense experience is positive in 44 of the 45 specifications and statistically significant at the 5 percent level in 32. The median estimate across specifications indicates that each additional year a minister previously spent in the defense portfolio increases the probability that an Ally participates in an exercise by 1.4 percentage points. In Model (5) of Table 1, the increase is 1.6 percentage points.

I also check that the result is not coming mainly from exercises after 2021. Using only exercises before 2022, prior defense experience is positive in 14 of the 15 specifications in Fig. 5. The only exception is the exercise fixed-effects model without controls, where the estimate is about − 0.003 and not statistically different from zero. I also divide the sample into 2016–2021 and 2022–2024 in Appendix Table A2, columns 5–6. An additional year of prior defense experience increases the estimated probability of participation by 1.2 percentage points in the earlier period and 3.6 percentage points in the later period; the estimates are statistically significant at the 5 and 10 percent levels, respectively.

To check whether the result depends on any one Ally or on how prior defense experience is measured, I re-estimate the analysis after leaving out each Ally one at a time and using two alternative measures of ministerial experience. I also test whether prior defense experience matters more for participation in larger exercises and whether the same relationship appears for deterrence activities.

In the appendix, I ask how much the result changes when I leave out individual Allies or measure a minister's defense experience differently. I then examine whether experience matters more for some exercises than others and whether it is also associated with participation in deterrence activities.

In Appendix Table A2 (columns 1–4), I examine whether the relationship between defense minister experience and exercise participation holds when I allow for separate trends across Allies, cluster standard errors by Ally and exercise, use a logit model, or exclude exercises held in 2020–2021. The coefficient for prior defense experience falls from 0.016 in Model (5) to 0.012 with Ally-specific trends and rises to 0.018 when I exclude 2020–2021. It remains at 0.016 with two-way clustering, and the logit estimate is also positive. These results are consistent with my argument that the experience an individual minister brings to the defense portfolio matters for how Allies cooperate through multinational exercises.

In Appendix Table A3, I examine whether the relationship between a minister's defense experience and participation depends on how I measure experience, which activity Allies are asked to join, or whether I measure participation at the exercise or Ally-year level. The coefficient remains positive when I use the log of one plus years of prior defense experience. When I count only consecutive years in the portfolio, the estimate is positive and less precise. Among exercises with reported personnel, the coefficient is 0.027 for exercises involving at least 4,000 personnel and − 0.008 for smaller exercises (column 3). This pattern is consistent with my argument that experience in the defense portfolio can matter when ministers must decide which forces they can make available alongside existing military commitments. In Appendix Table A3 (column 4), I find little evidence that Allies take part in deterrence activities more often when their ministers have more experience in the defense portfolio. When an Ally has already committed forces to a deterrence activity, its defense minister may have less room to decide whether those forces take part.

I also examine how often each Ally takes part in exercises over the course of a year, using the annual participation share shown in Fig. 4. In Appendix Table A3 (column 5), one additional year of prior experience in the defense portfolio corresponds to an estimated increase of 1.9 percentage points in the share of eligible exercises an Ally joins that year, after accounting for Ally and year fixed effects.

I also examine whether the relationship between defense minister experience and participation varies with exercise size (Appendix Figure A2). For exercises involving at least 4,000 personnel, one additional year of prior defense experience corresponds to a 2.7-percentage-point increase in the estimated probability of participation. For smaller exercises, the estimate is − 0.8 percentage points, and its confidence interval includes zero. Prior defense experience may be especially useful when a large exercise requires ministers to coordinate contributions from several branches of the armed forces.

To see whether the result is driven by a change in the party or minister holding the defense portfolio, I re-estimate the model controlling for both and then again after excluding each minister's first year in office. Prior defense experience remains positive and statistically significant in both tests (Appendix Table A4).

Appendix Figure A3 shows the same pattern across Models (4)– (6). The estimates for prior defense experience are positive, and their confidence intervals remain above zero, while the estimates for experience elsewhere in cabinet are close to zero and their confidence intervals include zero

Conclusion

This article shows that Allies whose defense ministers have more experience in the portfolio are more likely to participate in NATO multinational exercises. NATO plans and coordinates multinational exercises, but the personnel and military units used in them remain under national authority. Governments decide whether to provide these forces when they may also be needed for national training, deployments, readiness, and other defense priorities. Defense ministers oversee the portfolio in which these demands are managed. Ministers who have previously held the defense portfolio are familiar with these demands, with the civilian and military officials involved in decisions over national forces, and with NATO as the institution through which these exercises are organized. The findings therefore show how individual agents can matter for cooperation in the international system through the decisions they help their governments make about participation in alliance activities.

Across the exercises examined, Allies are more likely to participate when the minister responsible for defense has more experience in that portfolio. This relationship is specific to defense experience. Experience elsewhere in cabinet does not show the same relationship, making political seniority alone an insufficient explanation. Prior military service also does not account for the pattern. What separates the ministers associated with higher participation is that they have previously managed the same portfolio in which decisions about military training and the availability of forces are made. Defense ministers therefore matter not because they negotiate the exercise inside NATO, but because they oversee whether their government provides the forces needed to participate. This shows that individual influence in international cooperation can come from national ministers as well as from officials working inside the international organization.

This changes where we should look for individual influence in international cooperation. Much of the attention to individuals around international organizations naturally falls on leaders, diplomats, delegates, or officials working inside the organizations themselves. Yet cooperation does not end when states agree to create an institution or when an organization schedules a common activity. Member governments still have to act on many of those arrangements. NATO can organize an exercise, but it cannot decide for an Ally whether its forces will participate. That decision remains with the national government and is handled through the defense portfolio. The evidence shows that Allies are more likely to participate when the minister responsible for defense has more experience in that portfolio.

These findings connect research on political appointments with research on ministerial experience. Leaders decide who occupies important foreign-policy positions (Malis, 2024), but what ministers can do once appointed may also depend on the experience they bring to the portfolio (Matthieß et al., 2026). I show that this matters for international cooperation because defense ministers oversee the portfolio

through which governments decide whether national personnel and military units will be made available for NATO exercises. Allies whose defense ministers have more experience in the portfolio are more likely to take part in these exercises, which NATO organizes to improve interoperability and readiness (NATO, 2014). This extends the study of individual influence in international organizations to national officials and brings a decision made in national capitals into the special issue's discussion of how individuals shape cooperation.

The focus of the study is to show how individual agents can influence cooperation through the multinational training programs NATO organizes. However, there are other ways defense ministers may influence cooperation in an alliance. Future research can extend the study of individual agents' influence on international cooperation, particularly in alliances, by examining other contributions such as the deployment of troops to alliance missions. Exercises involve committing troops and equipment and covering the cost of training forces to operate together. Similar demands may apply when governments deploy troops to alliance missions. These deployments can therefore provide another way to examine whether defense ministers' experience influences how Allied states cooperate in the international system.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Fidelis Atnadu David designed the study, compiled and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

Data Availability

The data and replication materials underlying this article will be deposited in a public repository upon acceptance and made publicly available at the time of publication

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Figures

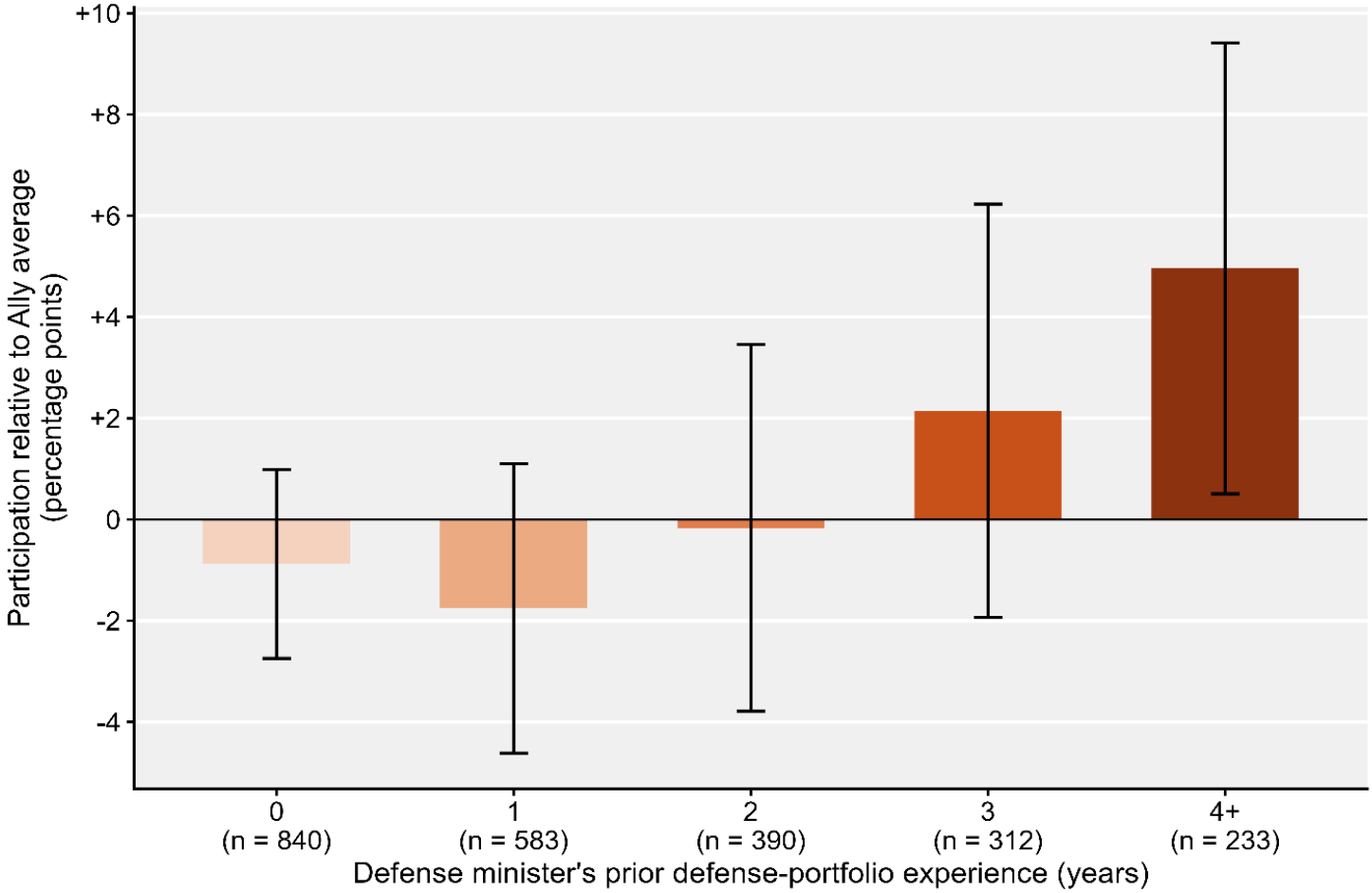

Figure 2

Exercise Participation Relative to Each Ally's Average by Prior Defense Experience. Note: Zero indicates no difference from the Ally's average participation. The number of Ally–exercise observations in each experience group is shown as *n*.

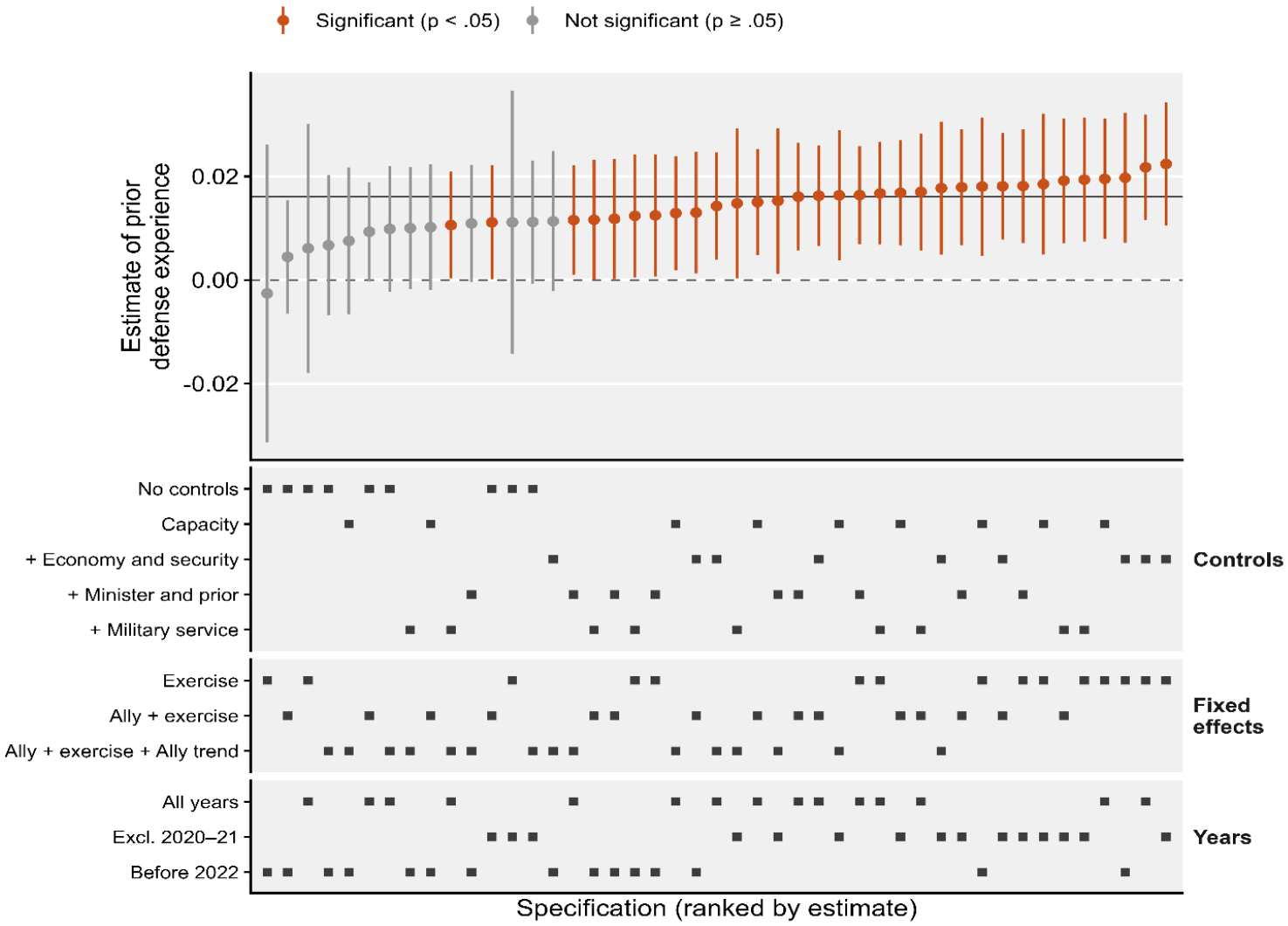

Figure 5

Prior Defense Experience and Exercise Participation Across 45 Specifications. Note: Squares show the controls, fixed effects, and exercise years included in each specification. Vertical lines show the confidence intervals, and the horizontal line shows the estimate from Table 1, Model (5).

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- Appendix.docx