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Assessing EU Member States' Political Will in 2025

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a pivotal juncture for the European Union (EU), intensifying debates about its capacity to act as a strategic actor amid renewed great power rivalry, shifting U.S. priorities, and a fragile international order. In this context, the concept of EU strategic autonomy – long debated but inconsistently pursued – gained new urgency. This thesis explores whether EU member states, specifically France, Germany, and Poland, are substantively advancing the Union’s strategic autonomy in response to these security challenges. The research draws on a multi-theoretical framework, combining liberal institutionalism and strands of realist thought – classical, neorealist, and neoclassical – to interpret member states’ motivations, institutional behavior, and policy outcomes. Using qualitative document analysis and a comparative case study approach, the thesis investigates post-2022 national defense developments, EU-level initiatives like the *Strategic Compass* and *Readiness 2030*, and shifting transatlantic dynamics. Findings reveal mixed results. France and Poland have shown strong leadership in defense investment, albeit with diverging strategic orientations: France advocates for EU-centered autonomy, while Poland remains firmly committed to NATO and U.S. leadership. Germany, despite announcing a historic *Zeitenwende*, has been slower to act, though recent signs point to more robust military reform. At the EU level, initiatives like joint procurement and industrial coordination mark important steps, but their success depends heavily on national commitments. Overall, while the EU is making incremental progress toward strategic autonomy, structural dependencies on NATO, diverging national security cultures, and political constraints continue to limit its development. The thesis concludes that a more capable and autonomous EU is possible – but only through sustained coordination, long-term investment, and strategic clarity among its core member states.

Keywords

European Union – Strategic Autonomy – Political Will – EU Security and Defense Policy – NATO – Russia-Ukraine War – Liberal Institutionalism – Realism

Resümee

Der russische Einmarsch in die Ukraine im Jahr 2022 markierte einen wichtigen Wendepunkt für die Europäische Union (EU), der die Debatte über ihre Fähigkeit, als strategischer Akteur zu agieren, angesichts der erneuten Rivalität zwischen Großmächten, der sich ändernden Prioritäten der USA und einer fragilen internationalen Ordnung intensiviert. In diesem Zusammenhang hat das Konzept der strategischen Autonomie der EU, das seit langem diskutiert, aber nicht konsequent verfolgt wird, neue Dringlichkeit erhalten. In dieser Arbeit wird untersucht, ob die EU-Mitgliedstaaten, insbesondere Frankreich, Deutschland und Polen, die strategische Autonomie der Union als Reaktion auf diese sicherheitspolitischen Herausforderungen substanziell vorantreiben. Die Untersuchung stützt sich auf einen multitheoretischen Rahmen, der liberalen Institutionalismus und Stränge des realistischen Denkens – klassisch, neorealistisch und neoklassisch – kombiniert, um die Motivationen, das institutionelle Verhalten und die politischen Ergebnisse der Mitgliedsstaaten zu interpretieren. Mithilfe einer qualitativen Dokumentenanalyse und eines vergleichenden Fallstudienansatzes untersucht diese Arbeit die nationalen Verteidigungsentwicklungen nach 2022, Initiativen auf EU-Ebene wie den *Strategischen Kompass* und die *Europäische Verteidigungsbereitschaft 2030* sowie die sich verändernde transatlantische Dynamik. Die Ergebnisse zeigen gemischte Resultate. Frankreich und Polen haben bei den Verteidigungsinvestitionen eine starke Führungsrolle übernommen, wenn auch mit unterschiedlichen strategischen Ausrichtungen: Frankreich setzt sich für eine EU-zentrierte Autonomie ein, während Polen fest an die NATO und die Führungsrolle der USA gebunden bleibt. Deutschland hat trotz der Ankündigung einer *Zeitenwende* langsamer gehandelt, obwohl die jüngsten Anzeichen auf eine robustere Militärreform hindeuten. Auf EU-Ebene stellen Initiativen wie die gemeinsame Beschaffung und die industrielle Koordinierung wichtige Schritte dar, deren Erfolg jedoch stark von den nationalen Verpflichtungen abhängt. Insgesamt macht die EU zwar schrittweise Fortschritte auf dem Weg zu strategischer Autonomie, doch strukturelle Abhängigkeiten von der NATO, unterschiedliche nationale Sicherheitskulturen und politische Zwänge schränken ihre Entwicklung weiterhin ein. Die Erkenntnisse der Untersuchung deuten darauf hin, dass eine fähigere und autonomere EU möglich ist – allerdings nur durch nachhaltige Koordinierung, langfristige Investitionen und strategische Klarheit unter den Kernmitgliedstaaten.

Schlüsselwörter

Europäische Union – Strategische Autonomie – Politischer Wille – EU-Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik – NATO – Russland-Ukraine Krieg – Neoliberaler Institutionalismus – Realismus

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Introduction	6
Chapter 1: Methodology and Theory	8
<i>Methodology.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Research Question	8
Rationale or Purpose.....	8
Research Design	9
Data Collection	11
<i>Theoretical Framework.....</i>	<i>12</i>
Neoliberal Institutionalism.....	13
Realism	17
Chapter 2: The History of Strategic Autonomy.....	23
<i>EU's Security- and Defense-related Developments before the Strategic Autonomy Debate.....</i>	<i>23</i>
The Establishment of the CFSP (1993)	23
The Establishment of the ESDP (1999).....	24
The Establishment of the CSDP (2009)	25
<i>EU's Strategic Autonomy Debate Throughout the Years</i>	<i>27</i>
Strategic Autonomy in the Realm of Security and Defense (2013-2017)	28
Strategic Autonomy after Brexit and the Election of Trump (2016-2019)	29
Strategic Autonomy widened to other EU policy areas (2020-2022)	31
Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Attack on Ukraine (2022-2025)	31
<i>The Relationship between Strategic Autonomy and NATO.....</i>	<i>35</i>
Bandwagoning.....	35
Burden Sharing in NATO	36
Chapter 3: Results – In-Depth Analysis of EU Member States since the Russian Invasion in 2022	38
<i>The Definition of Strategic Autonomy considered in Member States' In-Depth Analysis.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>In-Depth Analysis of Case Study Examples</i>	<i>39</i>
France.....	39
Germany.....	43
Poland.....	47
Conclusion	51
Bibliography.....	54

Introduction

The European Union (EU) was created as a means to facilitate peace through economic cooperation and even though the idea of a Common Foreign and Security Pillar (CFSP) was introduced with the treaty of Maastricht in 1992, it was abandoned again in 2009. Today in 2025, the re-emergence of great power politics in light of a crumbling world order towards a new multi-polar order requires the EU to reassess its strategic role in the world. Amid the disputation of the international rule of law, enhanced instrumentalization of economic pressures and major technological transformation, there is a certain risk attributed to the EU's ambitions to continue to rely on cooperation with third partners (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 2). In regards to security, the EU is facing two challenges in particular: an immediate security challenge at its Eastern Border ever since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and a continuation of the United States (US) foreign policy prioritization of China in the Indo-Pacific. It is under these conditions that the EU must circumspect.

Regardless of its eventual outcome, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has prompted EU member states to fundamentally rethink the European security landscape (Thomson et al. 2023, 2485). Although the US and European allies have maintained a collective effort to counter the Russian aggression – by means of sanctions against Russia and substantial military and financial support for Ukraine – Washington is increasingly signaling its unwillingness to take on Europe's security burden in the long term. Strategically, this gradual withdrawal of security guarantees can be traced all the way back to Obama's 2012 "Pivot to Asia", which marked a shift in US foreign policy priorities toward China in the Indo-Pacific. While the US does not appear intent on completely abandoning the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), its commitment has notably decreased since the Trump administration took office. This shift became very apparent during the 2025 Munich conference, where Vice President JD Vance dismissed European concerns about Russia, instead criticizing Europe's political culture and the "threat within" (McLeary et al. 2025). In essence, the US is signaling to European leaders that it is time to assume greater responsibility for security on its own continent.

For the EU it has been a long time coming – while the Union was able to foster peaceful economic integration under the security umbrella of the US after the cold war had ended, the development of its security and defense policy had been neglected, not least because of strong beliefs in

normative aspirations to make the world a better place. Decades later, they were taken aback by the invasion of Russia and quickly found themselves in a scramble for security in a world that they could not have imagined (or did not want to imagine). In the 2000s, the EU primarily focused on civilian crisis management and other non-military, non-defense-related activities. Although the Lisbon treaty of 2009 rejuvenated the Union's ambition to mature into a strategic actor, these aspirations largely failed to translate into concrete outcomes. In 2016, discussions about strategic autonomy resulted in a more active foreign policy agenda (EUGS), but the EU remained hesitant to develop collective defense and security capabilities. The momentum of strategic autonomy peaked in 2021 with the release of the "Strategic Compass" – a policy document aimed at positioning Europe as a security provider – just shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (EEAS 2022, 4). In response to the invasion, Germany's chancellor declared a *Zeitenwende* – a watershed moment for Europe in its commitment to rearm. France, a long-time proponent of strategic autonomy, announced a shift toward a "wartime economy" and Poland, already a significant military spender, pledged further increases of its defense budget while underscoring the importance of NATO.

The thesis' aim is to work out the history of strategic autonomy in the context of the EU leading up to the Ukraine war in 2022 and consequently, EU member countries' (France, Germany and Poland) positions in regards to strategic autonomy, the development of national efforts to take on a bigger role in defense and security and countries' positions on the relevance of NATO. The research is thereby supposed to contribute to a greater understanding of countries' ambitions and action towards gaining strategic independence. What is to be explored in this thesis is if the EU and its member states are actually willing to enter into a new era of security and defense amid the re-emergence of the Russia problem, i.e., if the ambitions of the respective countries France, Germany and Poland turn into effective action to move the EU closer towards becoming a strategic actor. The thesis does this by exploring turning points and crucial developments in the countries' paths since 2022, while keeping in mind that they are part of a bigger whole (the EU), and that their foreign policy choices and willingness to further invest into defense and security matters when it comes to the EU's maturation into a strategic actor.

Chapter 1: Methodology and Theory

Methodology

Research Question

To what extent has European countries' willingness to pursue an autonomous collective defense mechanism change after the Russian Aggression in Ukraine in 2022?

Rationale or Purpose

The multi-case study provides an in-depth exploration in light of challenging geopolitical shifts since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The academic contributions in the field of strategic autonomy literature have been limited to some degree and research on this topic mostly engages with issues of defense and its relationship to the US or NATO (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 1). While this thesis will engage with some aspects concerning the transatlantic partnership, it will mainly focus on reviewing EU member states' positions on strengthening Europe's autonomous defense and security capabilities. By way of comparison, the multi-case study analysis with inductive reasoning is set out to produce interesting empirical narratives and provide a basis for new hypotheses in the field of strategic autonomy research, thereby contributing to academia in an impactful and novel way.

Furthermore, to answer the research question in a novel way, the analysis will be done in a multi-disciplinary manner, namely of Political Science or International Relations Theory and History. The focus on the former discipline is rooted in the nature of the research phenomenon, deploying theories of IR, and the latter will be included by making a historical analysis of the EU's defense- and security-related past, focusing on the integration of systemic, domestic and transnational levels of analysis.

By analyzing the EU member states' ambitions to gain more strategic autonomy and its implications for the future, this thesis shall not only contribute to academia but also provide diplomats and similar practitioners with a better understanding of countries' positions since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Research Design

The thesis will follow a qualitative approach of multi-case study analysis. The method of case study analysis allows to look at a specific phenomenon in great detail (Thomas 2021, 4) and can be interpreted as a holistic approach to data analysis. As Foucault was quoted in Burchell (1991, 77), the research of a single thing (in this case multiple cases) works best if looked at from multiple different angles. He calls it the “polyhedron” of intelligibility, meaning that any phenomenon best not be studied only from one point of view, but multiple. In studying complex social, cultural and historical phenomena, the number of viewpoints “is not given in advance and can never properly be taken as finite” (Burchell 1991, 77). Thomas (2021, 6) reiterates Foucault’s point, stating that by looking at one thing from multiple directions, a three-dimensional view can be achieved, i.e., a more well-rounded and balanced point of view of the situation can be established. This is exactly what makes a case study valuable, as it looks at one phenomenon from multiple angles (Simons 2009, 21) and undertakes an in-depth exploration of the particularities of a certain policy, program, project or system with the goal of achieving an in-depth understanding of a certain subject matter while writing a thesis. As Merriam (1988) states, case studies are holistic descriptions of single phenomena. They are also particularistic, descriptive and heuristic in nature while mainly based on inductive reasoning in their approach.

The thesis deploys an inductive mode of reasoning that aims not at testing pre-existing theories in the literature about the phenomenon studied (= deductive approach), but rather, at generating new hypothesis (Bryman 2008, 366). The inductive approach is described as theory-building on the basis of observations made from empirical data (Lamont 2021, 42), in this instance from findings of the multi-case study analysis. Inductive reasoning is helpful insofar as it can shed light on complex relationships of certain phenomena to consequently come up with new theoretical propositions (Lamont 2021, 43).

The case study analysis in this thesis is of instrumental and evaluative nature. The case studies examined are serving a particular purpose and therefore act as a tool for finding answers to a bigger overarching theme (Thomas 2021, 129). Instrumental purpose can be differentiated from intrinsic study purpose which is more “curiosity-driven” without an ulterior motive. In contrast, study designs with intrinsic purpose highlight the case itself as the main interest (Stake 2005, 445). Furthermore, the purpose of the research question can be considered to be one of evaluation (Thomas 2021, 130). In evaluation, the research question is framed in a way that allows the researcher to find out more about a certain process – in this case: about the development of countries’ positions on defense and security and potential changes thereof after the invasion of

Ukraine in 2022. Thomas holds that “evaluative research is carried out to find out what the change has led to. Have things got better or worse – or just stayed the same” (Thomas 2021, 130). By asking the question what has changed after 2022, the purpose of this thesis is to find out what has changed (if at all) and how it has changed.

One limitation of the case study method described in the literature, is the possibility of selection bias (Lamont 2021, 218), meaning that the findings of this thesis will have limited credibility in regards to generalizations as countries could differ in their approaches. The multiple case study analysis does not presuppose to achieve the collection of representative samples (Thomas 2021, 187) and due to the nature of the type of methodology approach, generalizations are not possible. Due to the limitations of doing an in-depth analysis, it would not be possible to review all EU member countries’ positions however. A further limitation of this methodology is that on the one hand, the case study analysis is criticized for being “less scientific” than quantitative methods. On the other hand, when compared to quantitative studies, only case studies can “close in” on situations and test views that are connected directly to the phenomenon (Flyvbjerg 2006, 235). Moreover, the case study analysis may be fallible due to personal preconceptions towards reinforcement of a certain bias rooted in human psychology (Diamond 1996, 6).

The multiple case study analysis offers the possibility not only to look at a single case but to look at multiple with the advantage of comparing cases with each other (Thomas 2021, 187). The focus is on finding out about differences between the studied cases that are subject to the analysis. Moreover, multi-case or collective analysis are also used to gain a collective understanding of a certain phenomenon (Stake 1995, 3), meaning that the analysis of multiple parts of a whole can contribute to a better overall understanding of the studied topic. Stake (2006, 4) holds that the cases which are analyzed in these instances share a certain characteristic or condition and make good exemplars of the multi-case study analysis as members of a group.

In the case of this thesis, I will be focusing on a multi-case analysis of France, Germany and Poland, and their positions towards gaining more strategic autonomy since the Ukraine war in 2022. Together they form the so-called Weimar triangle. The case study approach provides opportunity to make a multi-layered analysis of an already well-defined phenomenon, strategic autonomy, and applies it to the three countries chosen as case examples. Furthermore, the case study approach allows considerations of national, transnational and transatlantic aspects to establish a well-rounded analysis of what has transpired in these countries since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. I have chosen these countries specifically for their representative qualities. France and Germany, since

Brexit, have been the two remaining powerhouse countries (forming the new E3 together with Italy), displaying leadership “in shaping many of the EU policies” (Müller and Esch 2020, 1053). Poland was chosen as a representation of the Eastern Block and Baltic state countries whose outlook on security questions in the EU have traditionally been different.

Data Collection

The thesis is based on the collection of qualitative data in the form of archival- or document-based research, digital research as well as statistical sources since research in International Relations is very much reliant on the collection of documents, be it treaties, policy reports or media reports (Lamont 2021, 98). Archive-based documents are oftentimes, but not always, subject to research done by historians. They are useful sources that can give behind-the-curtain insights into causal mechanisms of policy processes (Larson 2017). The types of documents used will be primary sources such as original policy statements, research reports or speech transcripts, as well as secondary source material with reference to primary sources (Lamont 2021, 99). The digital research will stem from renowned media outlets such as the New York Times, Foreign Affairs, The Economist, Politico and the like as well as from Digital Archives. Statistical data from sources such as the German Marshall Fund or the Kiel Institute for World Economy will also be taken into consideration.

In the literature of data collection there is a distinction between “evidence” and “data” when collecting information relevant to the research. “Evidence” is supposed to support a certain hypothesis or pre-conceived notion of a theory about a certain phenomenon (Thomas 2021, 204). In a multi-case analysis however, it is not necessary to collect “evidence” to prove a certain proposition (e.g., as it would be for a deduction-driven research design). Since this thesis deploys an inductive research approach, the collection of information will mainly be “data” driven. Thomas (2021, 204) describes that by heading into the research project without a well-defined theory about the outcome of the study, the “data” collected “will gather around ideas which emerge as the study progresses”.

The following chapter will address the theoretical framework used in this thesis which will be the basis upon which the results of the in-depth, multi-case analysis can be interpreted.

Theoretical Framework

The thesis applies multiple paradigms of International Relations Theory that are different from each other in nature and are supposed to represent different lenses through which the study of phenomena covered in this thesis can be looked at.

Liberal institutionalism is the first important paradigm in regards to the analysis of relevant factors and interplaying variables described in this thesis. First and foremost, this international relations theory gives reasons for states' motivation to cooperate in international institutions such as the EU. To understand, for instance, the previous successes of the EU and its accompanying efforts in the realm of strategic autonomy, liberal institutionalist theory is an appropriate framework to make sense of what has compelled member states to cooperate on a transnational level. While the strategic autonomy development of the EU is still in its early phases of development and has not risen to the promises that were set out for it (yet), strategic autonomy is a development within the confines of the EU and therefore must be studied as such. Member states of the EU do not only make decisions within the framework of their own national jurisdiction but can also advocate for change on an institutional level, thereby pushing the boundaries of what can be achieved as single entities only.

The theory of realism is another important line of thought contributing to considerations of this thesis. The three strands of realism that will be elaborated on in this theoretical part of the thesis are classical realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism. The paradigm is added as a means to complement this thesis' focus on the developments of becoming more strategically autonomous, under the assumption that there are external threats, case in point being Russia, both to the EU and NATO countries as a whole, and its member states in particular. The development of more well-rounded defense and security capabilities of European states, in part, is also motivated by the fact that European security in the 21st century is still guaranteed by the US. Realist theory addresses variables such as power and security that help explain why the EU ought to develop their own defense capabilities to protect itself in a more independent way in the face of decreased US military commitment in 2025. Furthermore, it is clear that the concept of neoclassical realism contributes to a full understanding of foreign policy choices that are trivial in understanding what this thesis sets out to explore, namely the varying positions of Germany, France and Poland when it comes to the development of (collective) autonomous military capacities.

Neoliberal Institutionalism

The Origins of Political Liberalism

Liberalism in an individualistic sense means the belief in the value of freedom but in political theory it is often associated with republican as well as commercial liberalism (Keohane et al. 2011, 161). Republican liberalism argues that democracies are more peaceful than other forms of government and also more accountable to its citizens (Griffiths 2011, 27). In democratic forms of government, policy-makers find it more difficult to pursue policies in the interest of elites. While it is true that democracies do not go to war with each other, it remains unclear if they simply do not do so because they are democratic. One of the most plausible explanations of the peace phenomenon between democratic like-minded states, according to Griffiths (2011, 28), is culture. The interaction between democracies' leaders is characterized by compromise and negotiation and can be explained by shared values. Democracies seem to want to resolve disputes in a similar way that citizens of these countries would, i.e., in a peaceful manner (Griffiths 2011, 28). As Spiro (1994, 81) states, there is not much evidence showing that democracies would have reason not to fight each other – although they might fight for common goals, e.g., for the values of democracy and freedom and thereby make the world more peaceful (Griffiths 2011, 29). Keohane et al. (2011, 161) add that democratic states may act peacefully towards one another but not towards undemocratic states.

Commercial liberalism is about the promotion of trade and commerce, by which states will develop some interdependency and therefore be less tempted to use force against each other. Economic interdependence can provide economic benefits and contribute to unite people because “territorial control becomes dissociated from political power” (Griffiths 2011, 29). Keohane et al. (2011, 161) hold that cooperation does not automatically equal harmony, meaning that even though an open economic environment is defined by mutually rewarding exchange that foster incentives for non-violent behavior, harmony is not guaranteed. They write: “Cooperation is not automatic, but requires planning and negotiation. It is a highly political process inasmuch as pattern of behavior must be altered – a process that involves the exercise of influence” (Keohane et al. 2011, 161). Furthermore, influence can be gained through the use of resources, e.g., by using economic resources under conditions of interdependence with other actors.

Neoliberal Institutionalism

Building on the political theories of commercial and republican liberalism, neoliberal institutionalist theory asserts that states to a large extent depend on agreements with institutions in multiple ways

(Keohane et al. 2011, 157-158). Arrangements with institutions affect the elements of flow of information and opportunity to negotiate, the ability to make reliable commitments while monitoring other states' compliance and expectation about the rigidity of prevailing international agreements. The extent to which states cooperate with each other depends on the strength of established institutions and varies throughout history (Aggarwal 1985, 31). Neoliberal institutionalists believe that international agreements are difficult to obtain and sustain, and very much depend on rules, be it formal or informal ones – strong institutions for instance have rules that are clearly specified and adhered to on a regular basis. From a normative perspective, liberal institutionalists argue that institutions have the potential to positively contribute to the future of humankind (Keohane and Martin 1995, 40).

The theory of liberal institutionalism does not try to explain how institutions cause peace in instances where state interests are clearly opposed and it does not concern itself with the question of how institutions contribute to reconciliation between states that are in great conflict with each other, e.g., in the security realm (Keohane 2005, 6). Instead, the theory tries to make sense of cases where cooperation between states does work and why it might not work even if states have mutual interests. Theorists hold that the neoliberal institutionalist perspective is applicable to the state system if two conditions are true: (1) states must have mutual interests and (2) there must be a substantial effect on state behavior in regards to the degree of institutionalization (Keohane et al. 2011, 158). The authors come to the conclusion that in the international world order both conditions apply and that cooperation between states is possible, but depends on the institutional arrangement, i.e., the effectiveness of institutions. Keohane's central argument is that cooperation can continue under the right conditions, e.g., on the basis of interdependence and complementary interests, while institutions play a role insofar as they affect the patterns of cooperation between states (Keohane 2005, 9). Keohane and Martin (1995, 40; 48), in an essay directed at Mearsheimer's critique of liberal institutionalist theory, mention that NATO and the EU can be considered as empirical evidence when it comes to successful institutionalization.

In cases where each side has both incentives to cooperate and not to cooperate, liberal institutionalists draw parallels to the prisoner's dilemma and coordination of actions. The prisoner's dilemma demonstrates that two rational, self-interested actors are better off cooperating with each other than not cooperating with one another (Keohane 2005, 68). International Relations scholars such as Helen Milner (1992, 468) reaffirm the claim that, instead of just relying on themselves, states on both sides can benefit from cooperating with each other by following behavior directed towards mutual policy adjustments resulting in a better outcome. The coordination of actions refers

to the problem of multiple equilibria (Keohane and Martin 1995, 45), meaning that there are usually multiple outcomes of cooperation. Disagreements between states about the form of cooperation is viewed as a hindrance, while institutions can function as “constructed focal points” to make different outcomes of complex situations more prominent (Keohane and Martin 1995, 45). The biggest threat to common goal-oriented cooperation in the prisoner’s dilemma scenario is cheating (Oye 1985, 1). If one or the other side decides to breach a promise that had been made to another party, cooperation will fail even if all parties would have been better off by cooperating. This is especially true because there is no supranational governance in international relations. To minimize the problem of cheating, liberal institutionalist theory claims that establishing rules can help deter states to behave in a non-cooperative manner (Keohane 1988, 380).

Some theorists of liberal institutionalism address situations in which security concerns do not play a prominent role and concentrate mostly on the economic dimension as well as on the dimension of environmental protection (Levy et al. 1992, 12). They divide the world into two realms: the security dimension and the political economy dimension, and state that liberal institutionalism mainly focuses on the latter. Lipson for instance holds that when it comes to economic cooperation in the international sphere, “cooperation can be sustained among several self-interested states” (Lipson 1984, 18). The issue of security in the international realm, and how to view war and peace, are not addressed in these instances. Other scholars however, such as Keohane and Martin (1995, 43) or Axelrod and Keohane (1985, 227) and Baylis et al. (2022, 232), think that liberal institutionalism is applicable to both the security and political economy dimension. Baylis et al. (2022, 232) believe that cooperation between states through international organizations can, to some degree, reduce conflict and competition. More specifically, Keohane and Martin (1995, 44) formulate the following argument: the logic of realism is based upon worst-case analysis and more information diminishes the risk that the security dilemma poses. If states could secure more information of the other party, e.g., by working together more closely, it would be possible to follow policies that are more beneficial to both sides. From their point of view, the institutionalist theory is therefore also applicable to the security realm because it caters to one of the problems set out in the realm of realism: information gathering (Keohane and Martin 1995, 44). The authors state that: “[...] if institutions can provide useful information, realists should see them as significant. The logic of institutionalist theory is directly applicable to security problems as realists define them” (Keohane and Martin 1995, 44).

Liberal institutionalists are not opposed to the realist claim that the international state system is one of anarchy (Axelrod and Keohane 1985, 226). They do however offer a somewhat different

perspective on the world compared to Mearsheimer's realism, which Keohane and Martin (1995, 41) call a rather grim outlook on international politics, and argue that cooperation is not as difficult to achieve than realists think it is. They argue that, even if the international system is lacking a functioning centralized international authority regime, states, in some cases, will cooperate to realize common goals anyways (Oye 1985, 1). They will do so by establishing their own international regimes and by engaging in bilateral and multilateral negotiation to realize their own interests (= the rationality approach). According to rationality theory, states will evaluate possible outcomes, rank preferences and ultimately act in a way that maximizes their expected utility.

Liberal institutionalists also accept the realist assumption that the system is based on self-interest of states (Keohane 1988, 380). As Keohane holds: "International cooperation does not necessarily depend on altruism, idealism, personal honor, common purposes, internalized norms, or a shared belief in a set of values embedded in a culture" (Keohane 1988, 380). If the international state system is full of actors that are trying to maximize their own gains, then institutions and rules can lead to long-term gains through cooperation. In this regard, international institutions are valuable because they provide possibilities to contribute to the fulfilment of states' fundamental interests (Keohane et al. 2011, 159). Even if these fundamental interests are autonomous, institutions can enable states to take action in ways that would otherwise not be possible. Even though behavior of states is not always completely malleable to fit the institutions' objectives, it can be affected to some degree (Keohane et al. 2011, 159). Effective institutions usually start with sets of norms and principles before developing rules (Levy et al. 1992, 33) and processes in institutions, such as negotiations about joint regulation, foster the natural development of opportunities for coalition-building within the institution. It is argued that the chances of effective rule-making are amplified when there are ongoing negotiation processes that help lay the groundwork (Levy et al. 1992, 33).

Realism

The particularities of realist theory vary across realist branches but there are some core assumptions that unite them (Lobell et al. 2009, 14). Firstly, the theories are all tied to philosophical writings of Thucydides and Sun Tzu of the fifth century BCE (Lobell et al. 2009, 14), as well as Machiavelli and Hobbes (Benner 2018, 11). Moreover, the assumptions that realists share in their understanding of realist theory are for one, a rather pessimistic view on human nature and its inability to change with “a rejection of teleological conceptions of politics or notions of an “end of history” (Lobell et al. 2009, 14). Secondly, realists assume a skeptical view towards projects that work towards a more peaceful order in the international system (Doyle 1997, 43) and lastly, realists hold that morally correct behavior of states is the result of interests that are of material nature or power-driven (Carr and Cox 1964, 64-65). Others such as Gilpin (1984, 290) summarize core assumption across all strands of realism as the following: humankind lives in an anarchical world where morality and justice are the exceptions, power therefore is everything. The second assumption according to Gilpin is that political life is founded upon groups, i.e., in a social reality, where human beings confront each other over scarce resources as members of groups and not as individuals. The third assumption is that even though power and security are not the only objectives of people, they are the primary factors of motivation (Gilpin 1984, 290).

Classical Realism

One of the founding fathers of international relations and main proponents of classical realism is Hans Morgenthau. He proposes that human nature is at the core of power politics (Kunz 2010, 192) and he derives his realist explanation from writers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes, which all draw parallels between human nature and politics (Benner 2018, 12). According to Morgenthau, the international political landscape ought to be studied in a realistic way, i.e., as it really is and not as scholars would like it to be – which to him is power-driven politics that are rather conflict-oriented (Schuett 2007, 54). Political realism, and more specifically, Morgenthau’s understanding of the concept of power, is also partially rooted in Sigmund Freud’s theory about fundamental human drives (Schuett 2007, 58). His understanding of human beings and their basic instincts are akin to Freud’s, since to him, man is egotistical as well as intrinsically lustful of power. Morgenthau calls human beings’ desire for power “animus dominandi” and considers its existence to be unconditional (Morgenthau 1946, 200). He states that even in cases where nations would not seek out power or even renounce it, the individual will inevitably be confronted by it and its accompanying moral deficiencies.

Another core proposition of Morgenthau and like-minded realists is that states defend their interests in a system that is characterized by anarchy, assuming that interest, for state actors, is defined as power (Morgenthau 1985, 5). To Morgenthau, power is the single most indispensable tool to realize states' interests. Morgenthau defines power as being "anything that establishes and maintains the control [...] power covers all social relationships which serve that end, from physical violence to the most subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another" (Morgenthau 1985, 8). It also covers domination of one over another in regards to discipline through moral ends or constitutional safeguards. Morgenthau's and others' (e.g., Raymond Aron's) definition of power are criticized for being somewhat vague and all-encompassing, i.e., not defined in a concise enough way (Kunz 2010, 192). At the same time, it seems that classical realists do have a common understanding that power is context-dependent and can best be understood as a social phenomenon.

Neorealism or Structural Realism

Neorealists or structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz are different from classical realists in that to them, power can be a useful tool in international relations but not a means to an end itself (Waltz 1988, 616). Waltz proposes that different from Morgenthau's idea of a "rational" politician, security is the paramount quality to attain – with power being the means to achieve it. Statesmen will try to attain some power, as it is sensible to have some of it but ultimately, the underlying motivation of states is security, according to Waltz (Waltz 1988, 616). Furthermore, neorealism emphasizes the element of structure in the international system (Waltz 1988, 617). It is argued that structures can affect outcomes as well as actions of states, while the lust for power does not suffice to explain why nations go to war. The theory of neorealism thereby focuses on unit-level and structural-level of analysis (Waltz 1988, 618). The levels of unit interact with the levels of structure which together can lead to explanations of phenomena in the international state system. Waltz further elaborates that "Structural Realism presents a systemic portrait of international politics depicting component units according to the manner of their arrangement. For the purpose of developing a theory, states are cast as unitary actors wanting at least to survive, and are taken to be the system's constituent units" (Waltz 1988, 618).

The nature of the international system's structure according to neorealists, like with classical realists, is one of anarchy. Neorealists contend that because there is no central governing force in the state system, states must provide for their security from potential external threats (Waltz 1988, 619). Relations between state actors are therefore tense, suspicious and best described by the security dilemma (Herz 1950, 157). The phenomenon describes the continuous drive to acquire

more power due to the fact that concerns of security from attackers are a given in an anarchic world. Ironically, measures that enhance one's own security reduce that of others – further exacerbating the dilemma. Different from classical realists such as Morgenthau, neorealist thought does not contend that an intrinsic sense for power suffices to explain why states go to war (Waltz 1988, 620). While it is true that in an anarchical system, war will exist if every nation lusts for power, it will also exist if every state tries to secure their own safety.

Mearsheimer's offensive realism introduces a reformulation of structural realist theory and renders Waltz's theory one of defensive realism in comparison (Toft 2005, 381). Similar to Waltz's understanding of realism, Mearsheimer holds that structure is a key element in effectively studying the international state system. He breaks down realism into five core assumptions (Mearsheimer 1994, 10): the international world order is anarchic, states possess offensive military capacities to hurt each other and can potentially lead to mutual destruction while adding that "even if there were no weapons, the individuals of a state could still use their feet and hands to attack the population of another state" (Mearsheimer 1994, 10), a state can have benign intentions but one can never be certain that another state will not be using its military capacities for the worse because of lack of information (see security dilemma), the main motivation of states is survival and states are rational actors that think about survival in the state system in a systematic way and lastly, states strategically choose those strategies which seem to give them the best chance at survival in the international state system. Mearsheimer theorizes that under all these assumptions, states' best survival strategy is trying to maximize their power to the point of achieving hegemony (Toft 2005, 383). Because there can only be one hegemon in the state system, states fiercely take part in security competitions, meaning that the ultimate intention of states in an anarchic world must be power maximization. He contends that attaining this goal of being the global hegemon is impossible due to the fact of power projection across large masses of land and more specifically water which, still, will not hold back states from making efforts to achieve hegemony (Schmidt 2004, 541). Another aspect of Mearsheimer's thought is a strong focus on military power, especially in the form of territorial expansion. He defends this argument by stating that military might can be seen as the "ultimo ratio" in world politics (Mearsheimer 2001, 56). Different types of military forces contribute in varying degrees to the power of a state – here Mearsheimer provides a varying account of different types of power such as sea power, airpower, land and nuclear power (Mearsheimer 2001, 83-137). The focus on military might makes offensive realism susceptible to criticism – such as being blind to other forms of power exertion, e.g., economic coercion (Toft 2005, 284). Nevertheless, Mearsheimer adds an important element to Waltz's account of realism by creating a reliable way of measuring national power while stressing that power competition between states is much more

acute than originally described in defensive realism (Schmidt 2004, 542). What both Waltz and Mearsheimer's theories are lacking however, is the consideration of individual perception that shape international and domestic levels of analysis in the struggle for power.

Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realists try to address this missing link by retaining some of the core neorealist assumptions about power, i.e., they agree that "the struggle for power between states is not merely a logical outcome of a biological will to power (Schmidt 2004, 547). They do however expand neorealist's assumptions about the international state system by posing that there are intermediary variables at the state and individual level. According to Rose (1998, 146-147), a state's ambition in foreign policy is shaped by relative material power capacities – which is based on previously stated neorealist arguments. The neoclassical argument adds that the effect of material power capabilities is more complex than neorealists assume it to be, due to intervening unit-level variables such as perceptions of politicians. Neoclassical realism thereby includes both structural elements in an international system that is determined by power as well as self-interests of states (Baylis et al. 2022, 550), and provides an added emphasis on elites and political leaders that influence decision-making in the foreign policy domain to previous realist assumptions while holding onto or expanding some of the core propositions of realist thought. To fully understand behavior of states, according to neoclassical realists, it is therefore essential to include how politicians' perceptions as well as domestic state structure play a role in the translation of systemic pressures (Rose 1998, 153).

Neoclassical realist thought also assumes that anarchy is somewhat difficult to assess, i.e., it is difficult for states to know if security at a certain point is a given or not. Rose (1998, 153) holds that it is difficult to make a security assessment since the interpretation of the status quo is subject to problematic and incomplete evidence because state actors are essentially prisoners of their subjective rules of thumb. The perception of state actors does not only vary because human beings operate based on heuristics, it could also be the case that perceptions are different due to the way in which power is calculated (Schmidt 2004, 545). In neoclassical realism, the subjective element also has an effect on the concept of power which is subject to change, depending on the state-actors' perception (Wohlforth 1993, 2). There is no objective reality regarding the distribution of power, meaning there cannot be a direct connection between it and states' actions – which is why it is clear to Wohlforth that systemic pressures must be translated through unit-level variables. Schweller (2004, 164) reaffirms the view that there are domestic intermediary forces in politics that influence responses to external forces in multiple ways.

The pursuit of power, according to neoclassical realists, is characterized not as something that is sought out to be maximized but rather, something that can be used to control and shape a state's environment (Schmidt 2004, 546). Zakaria holds that instead of power, states seek out to maximize influence (Zakaria 1999, 19). Power still plays a role in that the more power a state perceives, the more its interests increase. The neoclassical realist argues that if state actors perceive a relative increase in power ("state-centered realism"), they will try to take greater influence as well as control of the political environment around them (Zakaria 1999, 42). If on the other hand, perceived power becomes less, then interest and ambition are taken aback. According to Zakaria (1999, 42), this approach is different from Waltz's proposition in which states expand their political interests when there is an increase in threats ("defensive realism"). In classical realism, states are always looking for possibilities to enhance their power capabilities in comparison to other states while oftentimes taking advantage of weaker states.

This traditional understanding of power is shared by some neoclassical realists, e.g., Schweller (1994, 104), but also isn't by others. Schweller (1994, 104) holds that in some cases, it is possible that a revisionist state-coalition with greater power than the status-quo-coalition will take military action against other nations. Other neoclassical authors such as Brooks (1997, 462) however, take on a different perspective on power. From their point of view, state actors do not have an insatiable desire to exercise power over others and pursue power because it can lead states to maximize their interests (Brooks 1997, 462). From Brook's point of view, power is perceived as a mechanism which states use to achieve their goals, meaning that state power is used as the result of careful calculations and not just for the sake of it. Gilpin takes a similar stance, stating that although power can be the main driving force (see Hitler or Stalin), it is mostly instrumental and viewed as a necessity to achieve other goals, e.g., liberal ideals or purposes of security (Baldwin 2008, 6).

Furthermore, Zakaria adds an important observation on the effect of states' societies (and strengths thereof) on power since they affect national resources used for foreign policy purposes – he calls it state power, "a function of national power and state strength" (Zakaria 1999, 38). State power reflects a government's ease of achieving its purposes, i.e., the power which state actors can extract for achieving their ends. Rose (1998, 147) agrees with Zakaria, stating that the analysis of power must take into account the strength of states' societies which can have an effect on the allocation of resources in regards to foreign policy means. He holds that states with "gross capabilities but different state structures are likely to act differently" (Rose 1998, 147). The element of varying domestic structures contributes to the neorealist understanding that states do not solely function

as units in the state system (Schmidt 2004, 545). If power of states can be measured, it should therefore also include state-society relationships.

One of neoclassical realism's main flaws is that while it does well in explaining foreign policy outcomes, it lacks in addressing the structural components of international relations. Moreover, it is criticized for attempting to conceptualize a theory that claims to be able to separate domestically-driven and internationally-driven pursuit of political interests (Nicholas 2010, 119). Lastly, it is difficult to conceive that systemic pressures can be completely separated from domestic ideas.

The following chapter will make an assessment of the literature landscape regarding strategic autonomy development – when the idea of it first started, into which forms it has developed over time, and what variables play an important factor in assessing its relevancy.

Chapter 2: The History of Strategic Autonomy

The beginnings of the debate around EU's strategic autonomy can be traced back to the 1990s when, following the Balkan crisis, there were first discussions about Europe's autonomous security capabilities in the case of US detachment (Fiott 2022, 1). The instabilities of the Western Balkan region at the time and European countries' inability to manage the crisis independently made the further development of the EU security body a priority (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 3). The (Common) European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) of the EU was later introduced during the Saint-Malo summit in 1998 (and consequently founded in 1999), which led to some circumspection from the side of the US (Fiott 2022, 1). The Clinton administration at the time was eager to point out that the EU under no circumstances shall implement security capabilities without keeping the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in mind (Statement to the North Atlantic Council by Madeleine Albright 1998). Albright, former US Secretary of State, warned the EU neither to discriminate against non-EU members nor to create a duplication of existing efforts under NATO. The EU, following US distrust, decided to err on the side of caution and did not follow up on developing independent military capabilities. At the same time, the US upheld its security guarantees under NATO which granted the EU the necessary security it needed (Georgopoulos 2007, 202). The following chapter provides a more detailed analysis of what has transpired from the early 1990s up until the late 2000s.

EU's Security- and Defense-related Developments before the Strategic Autonomy Debate

The Establishment of the CFSP (1993)

The treaty of Maastricht or Treaty on European Union (TEU), entering into force in 1993, first established a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as one of the three new pillars of the treaty (Trybus 2006, 670). What is noteworthy is that the CFSP did not share the same supranational elements of the first pillar which handled matters of continued economic, social and environmental integration, meaning that EU legal principles such as direct effect and supremacy could not be applicable to the dimension of foreign policy and security (Trybus 2006, 670). The CFSP pillar also did not include a defense policy (yet). The direct consequence of that was that the CFSP body did not have any structures and capacities of defense which some attributed to NATO and the role that it had traditionally played in defending the European continent (Georgopoulos 2007, 202).

The integration of an operable defense mechanism within the capacities of the EU were furthermore hindered by multiple intergovernmental frameworks that clashed with the proposed vision of the Maastricht treaty (Trybus 2006, 672). One of the loudest voices within the EU, opposing the further development of a collective defense mechanism within the Union, was the United Kingdom (UK). It was especially keen on emphasizing the importance of existing partnerships with third parties such as the US (Keohane 2004, 2) – disregarding the notion of having a “Fortress Europe” that ignored military ties to the US and risked that smaller EU member states would have to spend money on uncompetitive European production industries to advance their abilities of defense.

The Establishment of the ESDP (1999)

It was not until the Franco-British Saint-Malo declaration in 1998 which introduced the ESDP security and defense initiative. The initiative was eventually adopted at the Cologne European Council summit in June of 1999 and included 15 EU member states (Trybus 2006, 670; Bickerton et al. 2011, 3). Spear-headed by UK’s prime minister Tony Blair and France’s president Jacques Chirac, there was a sense of urgency in Europe to respond responsibly to the failures of the Kosovo intervention during the late 1990s as Saint-Malo addressed the pressing need to handle security hazards in the EU’s neighborhood more effectively in the future (Georgopoulos 2007, 203). It sought after doing so, by building upon EU’s autonomous capabilities backed by credible military action. Scholars such as Howorth (2004, 174) recognize that the establishment of the ESDP at the Saint-Malo Summit was born out of compromise between France and the UK. In fact, the two sides had very different understandings about where the development of the ESDP was supposed to be headed. To the UK, the ESDP development was a step towards safeguarding NATO and to France, it was the only plausible step towards becoming a stonger actor on the international stage (Howorth 2004, 174). London did not consider the French to be serious about gaining autonomy and Paris knew it could take advantage of the UK’s position, being the pivot between the EU and the US.

At the consequent Helsinki European Council meeting in December of 1999, the so-called “Headline Goal” was formulated by which “Member States must be able, by 2003, to deploy within 60 days and sustain for at least 1 year military forces of up to 50,000-60,000 persons capable of the full range of Petersberg tasks” (European Parliament 1999, para 28). While European leaders in Helsinki agreed upon developing countries’ military readiness, they fell short of the Helsinki “Headline Goal” and consequently launched a new “Headline Goal 2010” or “Battle Group Initiative”, while also creating the European Defense Agency (EDA) in 2004 (Bickerton et al. 2011,

6). The new “Battle Group Initiative” only aims at deploying 1.500 troops instead of the 50.000-60.000 from the original “Headline Goal” (Bickerton et al. 2011).

One year after the European Council meeting in Helsinki, there was further significant progress made on non-military crisis management at the Nice summit in 2000 (Simon 2001, 155). The summit did not only discuss internal development but also made coordinated efforts between the EU and other international institutions such as the OSCE and NATO. While the operability of the ESDP in the defense realm can be questioned, it did establish some permanent military structures and abilities to roll out peacekeeping operations. Eight years later, in 2008, the EU had been engaged in 13 peacekeeping missions across three continents in countries such as Macedonia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia and Afghanistan, just to name a few (Trybus 2006, 670-671; Bickerton et al. 2011, 4). Bickerton et al. (2011, 4) state that “Whilst CSDP has [...] shifted from a European to a global focus, it has also evolved from a concentration on military crisis management operations to address long-term civilian stabilization operations and other security-related activities such as counter-terrorism and combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction”. The focus on the development of civilian crisis management and other non-military- and defense-related issues marks a deviation from the original goal and direction in which the EU as an institution was headed back in 1999. It became clear that the efforts of France and UK at the Saint-Malo meeting, which recognized the need to cooperate with one and another in regards to EU defense policies, was somewhat of a failure if one considers what it set out to achieve in the beginning (Haine 2015, 991).

After the US had previously opposed security and defense development projects of the EU, the ESDP efforts were acceptable from the US’ point of view (Haine 2015, 1003). Not least because ESDP efforts in the 2000s mostly lead to capabilities in humanitarian and civilian crisis management of smaller scale conflicts that were of little interest to the US. The US understood that the ESDP initiatives were not supposed to balance American hegemony because they were lacking in development of essential capabilities such as the necessary logistical capacities, military technology and strategic airlift (Cladi and Locatelli 2012, 275). Rather than balancing the US, the EU’s competences more likely complemented the partners’ division of labor – which was eventually welcomed by the transatlantic partner.

The Establishment of the CSDP (2009)

After the rather disappointing development of the ESDP, the EU however did not shy away from continued integration in security and defense by doubling down and transforming the ESDP into

the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) alongside the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. It was a renewed attempt towards integration, even if, at this point, the security and defense policy of the EU was still in its infantile stage. Opinions about the implementation of the CSDP differ as for some it was seen as a logical step towards integration while for others it was only the product of a rather fragmented development in this regard thus far (Bickerton et al. 2011, 4).

The Lisbon Treaty did not only convert the ESDP into the CSDP (Bickerton et al. 2011, 3), but also changed the structure of the former ESDP and introduced the European External Action Service (EEAS) (Seselgyte 2012, 88-90). The 2009 treaty was deemed a great reform which saw 25 out of 62 amendments targeting CFSP and CSDP matters, thereby proposing huge changes in the domain of security and defense (Howorth et al. 2013, 66). Some of the changes made in regards to the CFSP and CSDP structures were renewed commitments of solidarity, common defense conditions but there were also more pragmatic changes such as the introduction of the Permanent Structures Cooperation in Defense (PESCO), which proposed structural opportunities for states to cooperate with each other (Seselgyte 2012, 88). The cooperation format aims at improving readiness of armed forces, encourages defense spending and facilitates joint cooperation on capability projects (Besch and Scazzieri 2020, 4). While not implemented immediately, PESCO was eventually launched by 25 EU member states in 2017, alongside the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD), which is “supposed to help sustain a high tempo in capability-enhancing defence reform” (Engelbrekt 2022, 388)

By 2010, the EU has been involved in 22 peace-keeping missions, but at the same time, the Union has been heavily criticized for only playing a role in smaller arenas of international conflict and not, e.g., in the Middle East or East Asia. Some critics suspect that the smaller-scale missions could somewhat represent a means to circumvent responsibility on a larger scale (Bickerton et al. 2011, 5). This problem is also reflected by looking at the actual drivers of military reform of the CSDP body. While the EU has undertaken many initiatives to enhance its military capabilities, member states have fallen short of realizing their envisaged goals, e.g., by replacing the Headline Goal with the Battle Group initiative in 2004 (Bickerton et al. 2011, 6; Cladi and Locatelli 2012, 274). While the CSDP is supposed to make inter-state cooperation on defense-related issues more effective, there are multiple factors hindering further development in this domain.

For one, there is a certain sensitivity of member states regarding the balance between autonomy and joint development when it comes to defense-related decisions, underlined by the consensus decision-making process within the EU. Secondly, Batora (2009, 1079) describes tensions between

contrasting views of the political order in which European defense should be embedded in, e.g., Europeanist vs. Euro-Atlanticist views, defense sovereignty vs. pooled defense resources or different views on liberalization of the defense market. The EDA has been struggling with reconciling these differences as to foster effective cooperation between member states (Batora 2009, 1079). Lastly, Howorth et al. (2013, 66) mention a macro-economic reason for slow development since the Lisbon treaty reform: the financial crisis of the late 2000s. From their point of view, the new treaty with many amendments in the realm of defense and security, was a promising development at first, but was soon deemed to fail, in part because of the 2008 financial crisis (Howorth et al. 2013, 66). The unforeseen large-scale financial impact on Europe would go on to gravely impact EU member states' investments into defense budgets and military spending, thereby ending the culmination of many efforts and reforms of the Union throughout the years to slowly but surely develop into a more mature security and defense actor.

EU's Strategic Autonomy Debate Throughout the Years

While there were competing views between prime minister Blair and president Chirac in 1998 at the Saint-Malo summit on how the EU's future in security and defense should look like exactly, they were in agreement about one thing: to become somewhat more autonomous (just not fully – as the French desired and the Brits opposed) (Haine 2015, 1003). A European strategy on defense was agreed upon despite differing views on the conditions of the new policy going forward, but with the collective goal of building some capacity for more autonomous action. Both France and UK acknowledged that a militarily incompetent Europe could create security-related problems in the future and the declaration was supposed to indicate a change towards an added emphasis on security and defense integration within the Union (Haine 2015, 991). It was a sign of recognition that military weakness might be to the detriment of the continent's protection in the future. Especially the French were eager to change the EU's trajectory in this regard – but the EU missed its chance to address the gap between the fact that there is no serious security competition in a world ruled by hegemony and “addressing civil conflicts in a faraway place” (Haine 2015, 991). The EU's ability of autonomous action remained seldom and in instances where it was implemented, could oftentimes be incoherent, delayed and therefore rather ineffective (Menon 2014, 6). While the implementation of the CSDP body in 2009 and its reforms did aim at making collective action more functional, there is not much evidence suggesting that the security and defense framework produced greater ability of member states to work in concert and multiply their influence abroad.

Strategic Autonomy in the Realm of Security and Defense (2013-2017)

After the first instalment of the security and defense policy at the end of the 20th century, the discussion about the EU's development in security and defense policy was rather quiet, until the 2010s (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 3). The crisis situations in Syria, Libya and the Ukraine at the time were all important factors that prompted the EU to once again re-imagine its security and defense strategy. The EU institutions at the end of 2013 released a document which called for the revival of security and defense towards a more competitive and efficient sector, stating that CSDP must be reinforced to shape the world into a better, fairer and rules-based place (European Commission 2013).

The Libyan crisis in particular showed how the dependence on the US in cases of intervention within the context of NATO can be problematic if the operation is more pertinent to European countries than it is to its transatlantic partner (Quintana 2012, 31). The vast majority of air strikes during the Libya intervention were carried out by European contributors, and while the US under president Obama was “leading from behind”, they did also provide almost all of the intelligence information. In regards to Ukraine, Renard (2015) in response to the Russian occupation of Crimea asked the question of: Should the EU use the crisis to their advantage and create a “strategic moment”? Without much backing from the Obama administration, which did not want to antagonize Moscow as not to lose out on them as an asset for, in their considerations, more important issues such as the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the chemical weapons crisis in Syria, it was up to Europe to handle the situation even if there was a risk that Washington overestimated its allies' capacity of strategic ability (Haine 2015, 1006). Europeans did seize the opportunity to launch a diplomatic initiative, with Germany and France at the forefront – leading to the Minsk II agreement in February 2015. The handling of the Ukrainian crisis was thus characterized as “a Gaullist moment: a point at which Europeans finally understood that a *European* solution needed to be found to what is essentially a *European* problem” (Haine 2015, 1007). Even if the long-term consequences in the defense and security sector were not addressed, it showed European leaders' awareness for the necessity of acting in a more strategically autonomous way. In the grand scheme of things however, the Minsk II agreement did not herald any solutions to the incapability of independent defense and security and was mostly a projection of EU soft power.

In both the Libya and Russia situation, the EU only took action when they were forced to do so both by unlawful behavior of Russia and Libya and by the passiveness of the US administration. The US administration under Obama in 2011 signaled American primacy in the Indo-Pacific region against a rising China (Löfflmann 2016, 92; Engelbrekt 2022, 384) and Russia's president Putin

released a grand “Strategy 2020” project in 2010 to assert Russia’s preservation of influence in post-soviet states, citing historical events that cherish Russian grandeur of the past, as he promoted the idea that Russia must again become an international power at the center of an advancing Eurasia (Monaghan 2013, 1235). If these signals would have been taken into serious consideration, it could have nudged the EU towards a more serious reform and build-up of defense and security capabilities already in 2015.

Strategic Autonomy after Brexit and the Election of Trump (2016-2019)

The strategic autonomy debate was again accelerated by the Brexit referendum in 2016 which saw a major partner leave the Union. The discussion of strategic autonomy capabilities of the EU post-Brexit centered around successfully counter-acting the geopolitical instrumentalization of economic and political pressure of other nations. The economic pressure came from US trade sanctions as well as Chinese growing assertiveness in world politics with the Belt and Road initiative (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 4) and the “17+1 initiative” (Miró 2023, 318). The instrumentalization of economic means to pressure EU member states, from this moment on, would become a reoccurring theme throughout the strategic autonomy discussion and was one of the reasons that prompted a broader definition of EU’s definition of strategic autonomy which would some years later be reflected in the Union’s “open strategic autonomy” reform (European Commission 2021).

While the EU at the time did have some means to exert influence in the spheres of digitalization and data protection (see Max Schrems case, Court of Justice 2015), they were clearly lacking autonomy and agency in other areas. The geopoliticization of economic interdependence on a global scale came as a result of the post-cold war crisis and failure of a second youth of “the West” under US-led international order (Miró 2023, 317-318). After the collapse of the Soviet era and also before that, it was due to the geopolitical and political concept of “the West”, led by US hegemony, which granted the EU integration project to thrive. With the inauguration of Donald Trump as president in 2017 however, the US as a trustworthy leader of “the West” was put into question, mainly for two reasons (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 4). Firstly, the selection of Trump raised some questions about the US’s security commitments to Europe and secondly, the EU was put under political and economic pressure by the US over a dispute with Iran (Lippert et al. 2019, 7). The dispute with Washington over the Iran nuclear deal demonstrated “how hard it is for the EU to defend its own ideas about international order and security against political and economic pressure” (Lippert et al. 2019, 7).

In regards to UK's Brexit, the EU Post-Brexit provided challenges as well as opportunity. On the one hand challenges, because the UK had been a source of capabilities in security and defense (Smith 2019, 84) and the EU now had to negotiate new relations in the trade and security domain (Damen 2022, 2). On the other hand opportunities, because the UK at times has been a constraining factor in the EU's external action development (Smith 2019, 84). Due to geographic and historical reasons, the UK has always had a unique place in the world order, namely somewhere between the European continental order, transatlantic relations and colonial networks that were eventually transformed into the Commonwealth (Smith 2019, 84). This extraordinary positioning in world politics gave the British a very particular posture when it came to expanding the EU's foreign policy positioning and at times could be a hindrance towards an advancement in this area, not least because the UK had consistently been one of the more influential voices in the Union. During the Saint-Malo meeting for instance, the UK was one of the two driving forces to gain autonomy, but the British, while being serious about gaining better capability in handling crisis situations in Europe's neighborhood, were also wary of the balance towards their transatlantic NATO partner – and in that regard were very different from the French whose vision of an autonomous Europe in defense was much clearer (Howorth 2004, 174). As Gstöhl (2020, 514) holds, the post-Brexit Union does not necessarily have to be weaker, rather, the referendum might even be a chance for the EU to seize opportunities and properly respond to geopolitical changes by advancing their external action policy.

They did seize their opportunity – only one week after the UK referendum, the EU released a reform document called European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) addressing a renewed overall foreign policy strategy – essentially a new agenda for the EU's abilities and efforts to promote peace and security across continents (EEAS 2016). The report recognizes the growing challenges in the EU's neighboring countries, citing worrisome developments of terrorism and violence in North Africa, the Middle East as well as on the continent of Europe itself. The EUGS sees the EU playing a more active role in collectively promoting the Union's interests and values in the world (EEAS 2016). It entails the promotion of peace and security, prosperity, democracy and a rules-based global order. The EUGS was a strategy report that addressed CSDP matters first and foremost and showcased a collective understanding in the Union that Europe would have to rethink its strategic, i.e., autonomous capabilities in a world that was becoming regionally and globally more fragmented by the day (Michaels and Sus 2024, 384). Miró (2023, 317) has demonstrated that in the years after the publication of the EUGS, strategic autonomy was a term that became omnipresent in policy reports, oftentimes used in policy domains other than security and defense (or foreign policy) such as energy, trade, climate, human rights and financial policy.

Strategic Autonomy widened to other EU policy areas (2020-2022)

During the Covid crisis in 2020, times of geopolitical instability and economic transformation, the EU officially decided to expand the definition of strategic autonomy to other realms such as health, trade and technology (Helwig 2020, 6). In 2021, the EU launched a reform called “open strategic autonomy”, which was essentially a reformulation of values regarding EU trade policy (European Commission 2021). The report states that the EU views trade as one of its most powerful tools and wants to build upon the importance of openness towards trade “with well-functioning, diversified and sustainable global value chains” (European Commission 2021), all while keeping values of resiliency and competitiveness, sustainability and fairness as well as assertiveness and rules-based cooperation in mind. The reform is an assertion by the European Commission to remain eager to positively influence cooperating states by representing EU interests and values through independent leadership and engagement abroad (European Commission 2021).

The expansion of the term strategic autonomy into other domains valuable to the EU, does not mean that the emphasis on areas of security and defense had become complacent, as was demonstrated by a report published in 2022. The report by the European External Action Service called “a strategic compass to make Europe a security provider” was already drafted before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – then finalized and published after the invasion in 2022 (EEAS 2022, 6). The report acknowledges that, already in the year of 2021, there had been a common ambition shared by political actors of EU member states to strengthen the EU’s posture in regards to strategic autonomy. When the final version of the report was published in march of 2022, it highlighted the growing geopolitical concerns regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, rendering the event “Europe’s geopolitical awakening” (EEAS 2022, 4).

Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Attack on Ukraine (2022-2025)

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU found themselves in a difficult position when it comes to strategic autonomy development – mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the EU seemed to have lost its focus on what the debate was supposed to be about, i.e., becoming more capable in the defense and security sector (Powell et al. 2023). The use of the term strategic autonomy has become skewed towards being an all-encompassing description, in part because EU member states have never been able to agree on national preferences in security and defense (Michaels and Sus 2024, 384). Only one year after the invasion, Spain expanded the concept of “open strategic autonomy” even further into the economic realm (see “Resilient EU2030” strategy) and similarly, the EU released a foresight report, also in 2023, emphasizing “sustainability and people’s wellbeing at the heart of Europe’s Open Strategic Autonomy” (European Commission

2023). Secondly, even when the EU released its “strategic compass” policy report, addressing defense and security matters, much like in the past, the report emphasized crisis management over necessary steps in the defense sector (Helwig 2023, 59). Even if this was partly due to the fact that the document was hastily rewritten, as to be released in time after the surprise attack of Russia, it further amplified the notion of a rather unserious commitment to defense and security development in the EU.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine at first seemed to mostly evoke responses that tried to cast aside EU strategic autonomy for the more coveted NATO security assurance (Ratti 2023, 85). By some, this approach is viewed as the most reasonable reaction when considering that EU member states are able to rely on other NATO members and can organize their collective defense with the help of NATO structures (as opposed to EU structures). This sentiment reflects the sentiments of many European states which have been investing more money into defense spending, but have primarily done so in the context of the NATO framework (Dempsey 2023). On an EU level, Ursula von der Leyen in 2023 signed the fourth joint version of EU-NATO cooperation, highlighting the importance of a more capable European defense, in the midst of global and transatlantic security, that is complementary to NATO (Council of the EU 2023). This joint declaration signaled to give preference to the alliance over strategic autonomy and undermines the prospect of the Union’s efforts to mature, albeit while also strengthening the cooperation between CSDP and NATO (Ratti 2023, 83). The UK, in 2022, followed suit and joined the “military mobility program” – a flagship cooperation between EU and NATO, launched under EU’s PESCO (Ratti 2023, 84).

Instead of further developing strategic autonomy or upholding ties with NATO, some authors also called for “strategic interdependence” (Aydıntaşbaşı et al. 2023, 13). This approach is considered a middle of the road alignment which is somewhere in between strategic autonomy in the strongest sense and full alignment with the anti-China US bloc (Aydıntaşbaşı et al. 2023, 13). They argue that while strategy autonomy will only further isolate the EU, overreliance on the US is also not a good option. Strategic interdependence is deemed to be a means of reducing interdependencies where unnecessary and adding to relationships with main allies and strategic partners as to confront geopolitical challenges in a proactive way without the limitations of strategic autonomy (Torreblanca 2023). Strategic interdependence advocates not to act autonomously, but to acknowledge the importance of interconnectivity in the modern world (Aydıntaşbaşı et al. 2023, 14). The concept is based on three principles. Firstly, strategic interdependence acknowledges that decoupling is unrealistic and probably disadvantageous in a world where everything is built upon cooperation while there are some instances where decreasing dependencies on third countries, e.g.,

with potentially hostile states, does make sense (Aydıntaşbaş et al. 2023, 14). Secondly, in EU foreign policy, it should be accepted that the EU cannot change regimes in other countries to fit their democratic values, rather, the EU should focus on making democracies at home a better place, e.g., by compensating losers of globalization to ensure political stability and avoid fragmentation. Lastly, the EU ought to look for partners with which they can create a new world order (Aydıntaşbaş et al. 2023, 15). Instead of agreeing on solutions with like-minded partners, the EU should increasingly enter into new partnership formats, similar to e.g., the Global Gateway (Africa's Green Transformation) or the EU-Latin America and Caribbean Digital Alliance. In their approach towards countries such as India and Turkey, Europe must be conscious of the fact that any deal will be temporary, transactional in nature and must be based upon mutual interests (Aydıntaşbaş et al. 2023, 17).

Even if, after the Ukraine war had started, it seemed that the choice of NATO would again continue to be the only driver of security going forward and thereby “win” the debate of EU's security landscape, the ideal of European strategic autonomy did not just vanish overnight. There were still plenty of voices calling for a maturation of the European-based industrial base and a refocused defense strategy. In February 2024, Valérie Haye, president of “Renew Europe”, called for urgent collective action to build a stronger industrial base to foster EU strategic autonomy and enhance EU budget spending in a strategic way, not only as a response to the Russian invasion but also to “Trump proof” European security in the future (Martens-Preiss 2024). There have been previous initiatives in the past, both in response to the Russian invasion in Ukraine – namely the European Defence Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) and the Act in Support of Ammunition Production with a combined investment of around €800 million over two years (Besch 2024). The projects were rather limited in scope – both time and money – and were supposed to test the waters by expanding the EC's industrial policy. Meanwhile, NATO has remained the primary building block for Europe's collective defense and “operational decisions remain the purview of governments” (Besch 2024).

In March 2024 a new, more ambitious project was launched by the EU with the European Defense Industrial Strategy (EDIS) which aims at enhancing the Union's defense readiness by emphasizing collaborative investment into the European defense technological and industrial base (EDTIB), thereby strengthening adaptability and defense readiness (European Parliament 2024). This was seen as a necessary step since the EDTIB's had been described as fragmented and therefore rather limited with the EDTIB's dysfunction further being “exacerbated by EU Member States' dependency on non-EU defence equipment” (Clapp 2024). The new EDIS initiative proposes a

€1.5 billion investment and a new legal framework on a voluntary basis which according to experts, makes the initiative highly dependable on member states' buy-in, questioning the feasibility of the EDTIB's 2030 goals (Clapp 2024). While this is the EU's first defense industrial strategy and a chance to meet criteria of industrial readiness, long-term funding for the initiative is anything but secure, even in the case that member states agree on the newly proposed structure plan (Besch 2024).

By 2024, EU defense spending reached a peak with €270 billion euros spent across member states (Besch 2024), implying that the invasion of Ukraine has created a sense of urgency to make military defense capabilities a political priority, in some countries more than in others – e.g., Poland, the Baltic States and the Nordic countries but not convincingly so in countries such as Germany (Dempsey 2024). It might need another impactful disrupter in addition to Putin, meaning Donald Trump, to change less engaged countries' positions on defense spending. Dempsey holds: “The gloomy prospect of no longer being able to rely on U.S. security support could push Europeans out of their comfort zone and make them seriously invest in defense. Perhaps.” (Dempsey 2024).

After Donald Trump was elected into a second term, America's vice-president JD Vance, in February 2025, held a speech at the Munich conference that many expected to mainly be about two things: defense spending in Europe and the war in Ukraine (Gardner 2025). Instead, Vance challenged the basic pillars of the transatlantic partnership by heavily criticizing free speech in Europe and leaving everyone attending in shock (Besch and Varma 2025). The future of the transatlantic alliance partnership now looked distinctly different from before – what many European politicians did not want to believe to be true, all of a sudden became very real. The US is serious about a lesser focus on European security. How would the EU respond?

In March 2025, the European Commission released a new plan called “White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030”, aimed at improving defense in the future (European Commission 2025). The initiative intends to boost the European defense industry to better respond both to short-term urgency in support for Ukraine as well as to long-term security questions. While the plan offers €800 billion in defense investment, €650 of the investment is contingent on member states' willingness to increase GDP defense budget spending while the other €150 billion are launched into the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) loan program which will help countries facilitate investments in defense and security (European Commission 2025).

The Relationship between Strategic Autonomy and NATO

After the cold war had ended and Europeans were starting to think about first steps to become more strategically autonomous, the EU was supposed to become a new superpower with the reform of Maastricht and a security pillar but ended up declining in relative comparison to the US in regards to military might (Kagan 2003, 20). At the same time, the EU has enjoyed free security and commitment from the side of the US ever since NATO's promise to defend allies. At the turn of the millennium, the US had conflicting opinions about the autonomy development of military capacity (Posen 2004, 17). On the one hand, the US wanted to encourage EU's development, while on the other hand, they feared that it may come to a situation where Europe was balancing the States, albeit by understanding that the ESDP project would not provide the Europeans with essential capabilities. The question of strategic autonomy is a delicate balancing act because it can sometimes be interpreted as being, in the strongest (French) sense, an either-or scenario – either NATO or strategic autonomy – which can be dangerous since it places the US in an adversarial position. When the EU was headed towards becoming more strategically autonomous with the release of the EUGS in 2016, the US simultaneously insisted on deepening ties to NATO (Howorth 2018, 524). The EUGS report reiterates that the EU is seeking to strengthen cooperation with NATO in a complementary way (EUGS 2016) which, on the surface level, seems non-sensical because the word “autonomy” implies a shift away from some sort of cooperation as it denotes self-governance. This does not have to be the case however, as some authors have pointed out already (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 1). The priority and consequent aim of strategic autonomy should be to become a more effective military actor which can also be achieved by working together with the US. As Helwig and Sinkkonen (2022, 1) hold, the concept of strategic autonomy need not be understood as “a binary choice between dependence and independence or engagement and decoupling” (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 1). Going even further, Howorth argues that “it is only through its relationship with NATO and not in contradistinction to it, that the EU might aspire both to achieve autonomy and to strengthen the transatlantic alliance” (Howorth 2018, 524).

To gain a fuller picture of some of the dynamics between the transatlantic partners, the ideas of “bandwagoning” and “burden-sharing” will be addressed in the following chapters.

Bandwagoning

By NATO, Europeans mean the US, and it is clear that the primary leadership in the alliance is with the US – not with European countries. According to Cladi and Locatelli (2012, 282), European states fall under the category of lambs – a term coined by Schweller (1994, 116). Lambs according

to Schweller are countries that are weak in the security and defense domain: they pay low costs to defend or extend their values and are known as bandwagoners which “ally with the stronger side for protection from more pressing dangers” (Schweller 1994, 117). Scholars therefore believe that behavior of European countries in NATO can be understood as bandwagoning, since they continue to remain dependent on the US for security, i.e., continuously take their side (Cladi 2022, 625). They do this because balancing the US would be somewhat pointless and potentially costly – as long as the US does not allow it.

While the EU and individual member states have made some limited efforts to play more than a complementary role in upholding the continent’s security, e.g., with the joint EU-NATO declaration in 2016 that mimicked the EUGS position of wanting to contribute more in the realm of defense and security by moving in the direction of a more strategically autonomous actor (EU-NATO Joint Declaration 2016), Europeans have been doing more to have the US continue to do the heavy military lifting and keep them close as a partner. Even if there have been some initiatives to further incorporate CSDP into NATO, Europeans have so far not reached independence or autonomy in any meaningful military action.

According to Michaels (2023), the increasing strategic influence of Europe in NATO, be it on a limited scale, is a good development and a step in the right direction. Europe cannot reach strategic autonomy without the help of its transatlantic partner and it also cannot show any signs of anti-Atlanticism as this would only hinder its development into a more mature actor (Michaels 2023). At the same time, it also shouldn’t be too over-reliant on its partners (i.e., bandwagon too much), as not to give up the ability to make independent choices in response to international crisis situations. Michaels reiterates that Europe must find a way to gain autonomy as it “cannot afford to be a bystander when confronted with security threats and challenges in its neighborhood, especially when Washington’s long-term priorities lie elsewhere and when next year’s U.S. presidential election risks undermining NATO” (Michaels 2023).

Burden Sharing in NATO

The debate of burden sharing can be traced all the way back to the 1980s and, in a traditional sense, has focused on countries’ share of contributions in defense alliances (see “two percent of GDP” NATO goal of the 2014 Wales summit – Engelbrekt 2022, 386). In regards to NATO, the GDP contribution share may not to be the fairest way of comparing countries since it neglects the fact that investments of European countries mostly stay on the continent, whereas American investments serve a broader purpose, e.g., in the Indo-Pacific. Jakobsen (2018, 490) has shown that

“share of GDP-investments” of NATO countries produce mixed results in regards to being a good indicator for burden sharing. Apart from “share of GDP-investments”, the distribution of assets, set of roles (Engelbrekt 2022, 385) and number of troops (Jakobsen 2018, 504) are known as additional materialistic indicators of burden sharing. Furthermore, burden sharing can be measured in non-materialistic ways as well. Jakobsen (2018, 504) identified the willingness of citizens to fight for their country to be a non-materialistic variable of burden sharing, arguing that there is a direct link between willingness of citizens and defense-output. From his point of view, such non-materialistic variables should equally important be considered as a “highly valid proxy non-material defence effort” (Jakobsen 2018, 504).

The big picture perspective on burden sharing is that Europeans cannot continue to have the US take on a disproportionate amount of the burden, considering, again, amped up strategic competition between Beijing and Washington (Ratti 2023, 85). The US will only call on Europeans to contribute more to its own security because of the US’s long-term shift in strategic focus. By channeling further security integration of the CSDP through NATO, the EU can move past over-reliance in the future and strengthen their contribution to the alliance, i.e., deepen integration and thereby make an effective contribution to the transatlantic security project while also acquiring some degree of centralization in defense and security decision-making (Ratti 2023, 85).

Chapter 3: Results – In-Depth Analysis of EU Member States since the Russian Invasion in 2022

The strategic autonomy debate after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has brought to the forefront the reinforcement of US's military power and strong political leadership on the European continent, and to some, the discussion of going it alone was dead. To others however, the sentiment that the EU should move closer to becoming a stronger security and defense actor has not changed with the Ukraine invasion (Dempsey 2023). They call for continuous efforts to further develop the EU's defense capabilities (Dempsey 2024; Pugnet 2024). If strategic autonomy is going to be fixed, it should be ridden of ambiguity and the EU should come up with a practical approach that clearly and earnestly defines upcoming steps and commitments (Michaels 2023). The European pillar of security and defense has to be strengthened through strategic reconciliation and trust between member states, Michael argues, without being anti-Atlanticist but also without being overtly reliant upon the US or other third parties. Would this sentiment be reflected in EU member states' views and foreign policy positions? How did EU member states, and more specifically, France, Germany and Poland react to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022?

The Definition of Strategic Autonomy considered in Member States' In-Depth Analysis

While there have been some significant changes throughout the EU's development, e.g., with the further development of the CSDP body and hints of political willingness to become more strategically autonomous, the institution's essence (first and foremost, being an economic and normative power with little strategic influence) has mostly remained unchanged. By now, the strategic autonomy definition of the EU has become as broad as can be – emphasizing well-being of citizens, sustainability and trade among other things – therefore making it difficult to use the most recent definition of “open strategic autonomy” in this thesis. The definition of strategic autonomy used in assessing EU member states' developments since the Russian invasion, will therefore not be as broad as the “open strategic autonomy” definition and instead, for the purpose of this thesis, will only refer to the defense and security domain and maturation thereof.

The in-depth analysis in this final chapter of the thesis will evaluate France's, Germany's and Poland's political willingness to pursue an improved defense and security policy since the Russian invasion in 2022.

In-Depth Analysis of Case Study Examples

France

After times of uncertainty post-cold war, the French in Gaullist fashion, were inspired to push for the idea of strategic autonomy – a concept that aimed at reducing dependency on the US (Miró 2023, 317). France has traditionally been one of the great European powers (Rieker 2017, 1) and always wanted to prioritize strategic autonomy over US leadership (Rees and Xu 2024, 1251). After carving out a military role for European countries in NATO was unsuccessful during the 1990s, strategic autonomy was Europeanised throughout the conflictual 2000s. Even after sentiments in Europe towards the US changed – as the US continued to be considered a close partner rather than anything else (Miró 2023, 317) – France remained to be one of the main drivers (or rather THE main driver) and staunchest proponents of creating a greater role in the world for themselves but also for further European integration of military, economic and political matters opposite of the US (Zandee 2020, 1). The idea of an inherent greatness – “la grandeur”, famously stated by Charles de Gaulle – is something that French leaders have held onto until today (Rieker 2017, 1). Sarkozy for instance has viewed the EU as the reincarnation of the great country of France in the past and wanted the EU to progress into an even stronger position in a multipolar world (Vaisse 2008, 5-6). This ambitious posture did not change with a very vocal president in Emmanuel Macron at the forefront, as the president’s personal drive and ambition is reminiscent of previous great French leaders such as de Gaulle or Mitterrand (Tiersky 2018, 1).

After the first push for strategic autonomy in the 1990s, the most recent incarnation is Macron’s brainchild (Besch and Scazzieri 2020, 2). The French president has been especially outspoken about wanting to advance EU integration in the field of defense and security (Zandee 2020, 1). He has displayed a very strong belief in the need to advance the arms industry in Europe, to strengthen the EU’s defense and security capabilities and to consequently become a more effective actor in carrying out military operations – and it could indeed serve the EU well in order to hedge against the backdrop of a weakening US foreign policy focus in Europe (Shapiro and Puglierin 2023; Besch and Scazzieri 2020, 2). Macron, in 2019, declared NATO to be “brain dead”, criticizing strategic cooperation within NATO and especially between the US and its allies while emphasizing that, because NATO is brain dead, the EU has to start thinking about means to develop policy reforms that strengthen its military sovereignty and lessen the dependence on the US as a measure of last resort (The Economist 2019).

Since the Ukraine war however, Macron's other grand ambitions were exposed as his diplomatic efforts to prevent the war had failed (Rees and Xu 2024, 1253). The president of France in the past tried to appease Putin over NATO enlargement, trying to make Russia feel less isolated, with the ultimate ambition to include Russia in the European security infrastructure, all while minimizing the role that the US played. After the war, these plans have been put on hold and instead of calling for "strategic autonomy", Macron has been emphasizing the need for "strategic intimacy" between transatlantic partners (Tarquinio 2022). The war in Ukraine necessitated a refocus of the US's role in situations of immediate danger on the European plain. "What a difference a war makes", Tarquinio states (2022).

Representative public opinion polls of the German Marshall Fund (2022) show that in September 2022, at least 72 percent of the French population sees NATO to be "somewhat important" – a large increase from only 52 percent in 2021. France is thereby not too far behind e.g., Germany (scoring 80 percent in the same dimension), but there is a noticeable difference in citizens' views on NATO being "very important", as only 25% of France's population hold this belief – the lowest by far between Germany (scoring 53 percent), Poland (scoring 66 percent) and the UK (scoring 49 percent). In regards to US involvement in the defense and security of Europe, only 60 percent think it to be at least "somewhat important" and a mere 14 percent see it as "very important" – by far the lowest of all EU countries (with only Italy similarly low with 19 percent) (German Marshall Fund 2022). Despite the lower percentages for US involvement, France also scores rather low, in comparison, on the importance of the EU for national security compared to other EU countries, with 73 percent perceiving the Union to be at least "somewhat important" and 30 percent thinking it to be "very important" – the lowest mark of all EU member countries polled.

France, under the leadership of Macron, has made a major shift in its foreign policy approach – the previous clashes between France and the US over the defense of Europe became obsolete. Moreover, to the surprise of Biden and many others, Macron in May 2023 was quick to point out that there needs to be a pathway of membership for Ukraine in the future (The Economist 2023). France (together with Germany) had previously blocked Ukraine from NATO membership back in 2008. France did not only change its position in regards to NATO but also in regards to EU enlargement (Weber 2024, 16). What used to be perceived as a source of imbalance, as not to unnecessarily provoke Russia, was now regarded as a requirement in order to rebalance the now disturbed security order. A Russia that is trying to take influence in states outside of the EU's borders has to be contained, e.g., by taking in Ukraine and seizing the moment for a new EU treaty,

from the perspective of France, this could be a main opportunity for the Union to develop into a *Europe puissance* (Weber 2024, 16).

Macron's vision is in line with "la grandeur", in that the EU, ultimately, becomes a balancing power in great power competition. Macron in 2022 stated that "the future of "European civilization" and the liberal order depends on the strengthening of the regional organization" (Staunton 2022, 22), i.e., the EU shall become a power that can stand up to the US and China as to protect European civilization in the face of contemporary challenges. Macron perhaps had been the first who understood that the EU would ultimately be involved in a strategic match between the US, China and Russia and that it would have to use its leverage carefully (Macron 2021). The currently changing geopolitical landscape has confirmed Macron's sentiments of the need for Europe to become a stronger actor in the face of emerging threats (Weber 2024, 17).

With all the ambition that Macron had put into EU's security capabilities, had to acknowledge that the CSDP body (which used to be seen as a rival to NATO and excluded the US) was too ineffective to properly counter the Russian threat to Europe (Rees and Xu 2024, 1254). In response to Putin's aggression in Ukraine, France announced a shift to "wartime economy" and released a plan to increase defense spending by 33% (as well as an increase of 60% for intelligence capabilities) (Caulcutt 2023), thereby aligning with much of the western consensus of signaling support to Ukraine (Rees and Xu 2024, 1253). The defense spending increase amounts to a boost of €413 billion to modernize France's military between 2024 and 2030. The spending would go into multiple areas such as air-defense, nuclear dissuasion infrastructure, drones and intelligence – which is much needed since there have been questions about France's readiness as it pertains to high intensity conflicts and new warfare (such as drone warfare and cyber-attacks) (Caulcutt 2023). In Macron's words, when it comes to Russia "we need to be one war ahead" (Caulcutt 2023). While France is one of the world's biggest arms export countries, as of January 2023, it has provided Ukraine with weaponry only on a limited scale, partially due to issues of maintaining stocks – exposing shortages in France's military equipment (Dodman 2025). The government support to Ukraine by France between the beginning of the war in February 2022 and February 2025, was relatively low in comparison to contributions made by other larger countries, e.g., Germany and UK (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2025). UK in that time span provided 0.52% of its GDP (€15.17 billion) in support of Ukraine, Germany provided 0.44% (€17.27 billion) of its GDP, while France only provided 0.19% (€5.16 billion) of its GDP. France did however have a huge share in EU-based aid (€10 billion – €15.16 billion in total), somewhat making up for the difference vis-à-vis the UK (€15.17 billion in total).

Martill and Sus (2024, 5) propose a six-dimensional model to classify national responses of European member states to the war in Ukraine up until September 2024. When it comes to the first dimension, France is described as being one of the countries that puts itself in a leadership role of (1) commitment (Martill and Sus 2024, 5). France however, is considered one of the countries that has contributed less in regards to military aid to Ukraine, thereby scoring low in the second dimension (2) contribution. Nonetheless, the notion of France being a lesser contributor is contested – considering France’s EU-based share in aid (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2025). When it comes to the third dimension, which evaluates a country’s degree of (3) convergence between its response and prevalent national attributes such as culture, identity and preferences, France has responded similarly well as the UK. Martill and Sus state that in regards to (3) convergence, “their responses to the war accord reasonably well with the way they see the world and their emphasis on power projection in a dangerous world” (Martill and Sus 2024, 6). France is not mentioned in the findings of dimension (4) contestation. In regards to the dimension of (5) consistency, which evaluates the level of consistency in a country’s response since the beginning of the war, the responses of Paris to the Ukraine war have varied over time. Macron, e.g., has been hesitant to suggest NATO membership to Ukraine at the beginning of the war but has changed his position in 2023 (see The Economist 2023). Others hold that while Macron has changed its position on EU and NATO enlargement, a key narrative of his agenda – the need of strengthening security and defense cooperation – has remained stable despite the war (Weber 2024, 17). Lastly, France has displayed variability in (6) choice of institutions, promoting European structures over others as alternatives to continue EU integration in the defense industry and decrease economic dependence on its transatlantic partner (Martill and Sus 2024, 6).

After France’s defense spending finally passed the 2% of GDP mark in 2024, talk of reaching a “wartime economy” continued amid newly elected president Trump who has turned its back on Ukraine support (Dodman 2025). France’s finance minister Eric Lombard states that “We will have to make greater efforts to protect ourselves, to build an economy that protects peace, and to strengthen our defence within a European framework” (Dodman 2025). To reach the state of a “wartime economy” it would mean that a majority of industries operating in France contribute to the war effort. France however, is still far from reaching the self-proclaimed goal.

Already before Trump came into power in 2025, France has started to look for a Trump hedge (Allison 2024). The uncertainty surrounding the Trump administration’s security guarantees to Europe could prompt rejuvenation of German-French relations towards a more autonomous EU. When Trump did win the election and took office in 2025, it must have been clear to Macron what

had to be done. Amid a threatening geopolitical landscape, he calls for strategic autonomy – again – understanding that GDP increases and joint procurement efforts would help the continent’s autonomous abilities overall while likely keeping Trump close as well. In January 2025 he appeals to European leaders: would Europe have the means to fight on its own without US support (Kayali 2025)? He asserts that the 2% of GDP defense spending mark will not be enough to secure autonomous capabilities on an EU level (Kayali 2025). Macron has also postulated the idea of extending France’s nuclear umbrella to a broader European dimension (Besch and Bartoux 2025). It would preferably do so without being integrated into NATO’s nuclear planning group – further speaking to the sentiment of remaining autonomous in its actions. Moreover, Macron emphasizes the importance of Europeans to build on its own military industrial complex, stating that France will continue to stand for European-based arms procurement (Kayali 2025).

Germany

Up until the Russian aggression in 2022, Germany was holding on to the belief that Putin’s threats regarding Europe’s future were only a bluff (Bunde 2025, 2). Only three days after the Russian attack, Germany’s chancellor Olaf Scholz, in his *Zeitenwende* speech, proclaimed that the full-scale invasion would become a watershed moment for Germany (Scholz 2022) – a reaction that, especially for German standards, was seriously distinct (Scholz 2022). Scholz in his *Zeitenwende* speech iterated that “the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before” (Scholz 2022) and that Germany would do “what is needed to secure the peace in Europe” (Scholz 2022). The German chancellor, in 2023, doubled down on his views on the future of European security, claiming that Germany must become the security guarantor that others expect it to be (Scholz 2023, 22) – thereby conveying continuity in his intentions and vision of a new Germany.

The watershed moment suggests substantial changes in Germany’s approach towards its (renewed) foreign and security policy. Accordingly, Scholz declared that, following the re-emergence of the Russian threat in the east, Germany would increase its defense spending and deliver weapons in support of Ukraine – breaking with a post-World War II taboo on arms exports in crisis situations (Matlé 2024, 3; Bunde 2025, 2). Furthermore, the chancellor made clear that Germany will be cutting ties to Russian energy and lessen its dependency in this regard. Under chancellor Scholz, Berlin has followed up on its promise to deliver weapons to Ukraine (even if they have, to some extent, done so inconsistently), it has created a €100 billion *Bundeswehr* investment fund (in addition to the regular defense budget) towards force readiness as Germany remains committed to reach and uphold the 2% of GDP mark of NATO (Nabers and Stengel 2025, 20-21). Approximately 15 months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Germany released its first National Security Strategy

(NSS) – a very direct reformulation of Germany’s new security focus (Kamp 2023, 73). The report, first and foremost, addresses the need to strengthen security partnerships between the EU and NATO as well as bilateral ties to France and the US. Moreover, the NSS asserts that the *Bundeswehr* shall be the main security-policy instrument to expand Germany’s leadership role in deterrence and defense (Kamp 2023, 78). The author holds that “The NSS reflects the fact that the *Zeitenwende* has already taken place in the minds of Germany policymakers and the German people, and signals that Germany’s NATO allies can hope for a militarily stronger and politically more realistic Germany in the future” (Kamp 2023, 73).

Representative public opinion polls show that citizens’ willingness to help defend an EU or NATO ally in the East in case of a Russian conflict, in 2022, has shifted dramatically from before the Russian aggression (Fagan and Poushter 2020). Further opinion polls from September 2022 show that at least 80 percent of people in Germany thought that NATO is “somewhat important” and 53 percent thought that the transatlantic organization is “very important” – marking a staggering 30 point increase from only 23 percent in 2021 that thought NATO is “very important” (German Marshall Fund 2022). Moreover, 85 percent thought that the US should at least be “somewhat involved” in European security, alongside a 21-point increase (from 24 to 45 percent) compared to 2021 in regards to the notion that the US should be “greatly involved” (German Marshall Fund 2022). When it comes to the importance of the EU as it pertains to national security, at least 75 percent of German citizens thought that the Union is at least “somewhat important” – with 41 percent of them stating that the EU is “very important” to national security. Considering these data points, it seems clear that the Russian invasion has altered the calculus in many peoples’ minds on issues of collective defense, however, it remains unclear what driving factors exactly constitute the shift in greater willingness to reassure NATO partners in the East (Graf et al. 2024, 300). The authors’ findings show that the most important driver of alliance solidarity in Germany towards eastern countries may be Russia’s new public image (Graf et al. 2024, 320).

Even if most of the public seems to have come on board in regards to the importance of security and defense, academic scholars in 2025, two and a half years after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, are torn on the fact that there has actually been a shift in Germany’s foreign policy approach ever since the *Zeitenwende-moment* (Bunde 2025, 2). Blumenau (2022, 1912) states that is undeniably true that the watershed moment created by Scholz triggered many changes of long-standing traditions and beliefs in Germany’s foreign policy approach and Mello argues that Germany, by channeling a shift in security strategy, has shifted away from being a “civilian power” (Mello 2024, 12) towards becoming a security guarantor in Europe. Even if this new role of a “security power” has not taken

form yet, some steps have already been taken that warrant consideration in regards to change of culture (see e.g., the European Sky Shield Initiative or NATO's air defender exercise). Molly (2024, 3) furthermore underlines the difficulties that a country may go through in achieving a fundamental shift away from being a "civilian power" – stating change will most likely happen in a gradual way.

According to the framework of Martill and Sus (2024, 5), while Germany has made substantial (2) contributions to Ukraine, they have taken a back seat in defining the response and therefore score lower in (1) commitment. Germany between February 2022 and February 2025 provided 0.44% (€17.27 billion) of its GDP and are one of the major contributors alongside the UK and Denmark (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2025). Germany, besides shouldering a great economic burden, also took on a great social burden in providing a safe haven for Ukrainian refugees, taking in 1.24 million people as per January 2025 (Bundesministerium des Innern 2025). The level of (3) convergence for Germany – as compared to e.g., France – is relatively low since the ties between Berlin and Moscow have, traditionally, been rather close (see previous Russian energy dependence) and because the shift in security and defense policy from before is remarkable (Martill and Sus 2024, 6). In regards to (6) institutional choice of the preferred frameworks in response to the war (NATO – EU), Germany is considered to fall under both. Germany for instance has deployed a brigade in Lithuania – breaking with Germany's long-standing foreign policy tradition of "no troop deployment" since World War II (Larson 2023).

Apart from the more positive takes on Germany's new role, some have criticized Germany's new foreign policy measures by stating that they were simply necessary and "face-saving" measures amid the Russia situation in Ukraine (Handl et al 2023, 514). The long-term implementation process of Germany's government seems to have been going rather slow which is why some say it is inadequate to properly measure the *Zeitenwende's* achievements so far, calling it a "false promise" (Helferich 2023, 85) or "illusion" (Ulatowski 2024, 59). Matlé (2024, 5) holds that the discrepancy between ambition and reality is in part due to the murkiness concerning the long-term funding situation for the *Bundeswehr*. Against the backdrop of these slower implementations, it is not surprising that Germany has had its difficulties in achieving the 2 percent target of NATO (up until 2024), even with the help of the special investment fund. Matlé (2024, 2) chops this up to mainly being a consequence of overregulation and bureaucratic as well as ministerial hurdles – stating that the money of the €100 billion investment plan was barely spent during the first year of its implementation. After the defense department went through some personnel changes, the processes facilitating change came up to speed (Matlé 2024, 3; Gatzke and Friederichs 2023). Still, critical voices of military investments remained. Eva Högl (parliamentary commissioner for the

Armed Forces of Germany from 2020 to 2025) for instance called for a budget of €300 billion in order to achieve the goal of completely modernizing the Bundeswehr (Georgi and Schuller 2023). Similarly, Boris Pistorius, federal minister of defense, has called for increases in expenditures as well (Ismar et al. 2023).

In essence, the effect of the new foreign policy approach of Germany, leading up to the 2025 elections, is considered to be ambiguous (Bunde 2025, 3). “In some areas, the extent and speed of change have been remarkable, whereas progress has been limited and cumbersome in others. And while decisions in some policy fields appear irreversible, a stable consensus on a new German foreign policy remains elusive” (Bunde 2025, 3). It seems that the political will oftentimes is there, but the capacity to e.g., close the equipment gaps of the *Bundeswehr* within the targeted time frames are not realistic as per Pistorius, the gaps in the foreseeable future can, at the earliest, be closed in 2030 (Jungholt and Schuster 2023).

After German parliamentary elections in 2025, the new chancellor Friedrich Merz, made a strong first impression on the country’s defense policy, stating that the new government will provide the necessary investments to eventually boast the strongest army in Europe (Köstlinger 2025). From Merz’s point of view, this is the appropriate approach given that Germany is the economically strongest country on the continent – it is also what Europe expects of it. The chancellor’s vision for the future includes a deterring Europe that will never have to use its weapons because of its military might (Köstlinger 2025). Merz in beginning of March struck a “game changing” deal for defense spending – proposing a €500 billion fund to parliament in order to boost infrastructure projects over the next 12 years (Köstlinger et al. 2025). The reform is brake-exempted and is supposed to help the German economy along the way. The process through which the debt brake reform was accomplished was highly unusual and somewhat controversial, since Merz punched it through the Bundestag before being sworn into parliament (Paternoster 2025). The funding however, opens a real path to rearm and therefore change the landscape of defense in Germany in the upcoming years – it seemed that the ups and downs of the post-war *Zeitenwende* have come to a halt under chancellor Merz who has signaled not only strong commitment and willingness, but has also taken action since the start of his tenure.

In revolutionizing the German defense and security sector and to make it a smoothly running operation, the German military has to recruit additional troops which has become a challenge due to the younger generation’s unwillingness to join the military (Pitel 2025; Köstlinger 2025; Lunday 2025). A recent survey showed that only a third of people age 18 to 29 in Germany would be in

favor of the revival of conscription. Germany's top military commander Carsten Breuer says that the *Bundeswehr*, by all means possible, has to recruit an additional 100.000 troops but the government has also already ruled out the return to traditional conscription which was abolished back in 2018 (Pitel 2025). Instead, the new coalition government has already rolled out voluntary military service to make the *Bundeswehr* more appealing in order to ramp up recruitment numbers in the future. If the German military cannot reach the necessary numbers of active soldiers, the functionality of Germany's improved military and defense could be at risk (Lunday 2025).

Poland

Poland and the Baltic States had warned about Russia's imperialist ambitions which have been confirmed ever since the Russian invasion in 2022 (Sydoruk 2023, 312; Sus 2025, 4). Lennart Meri, Estonia's president in 1994 warned Europe that freedom could be in danger soon, since Russia already at the time, was "boiling with insults, aggression and imperial nostalgia" (Applebaum 2022). He appealed to the West to take preventative action so that the imperialist sentiments of Moscow could not be fulfilled. If the Russian war did not start because of perceived provocations through NATO enlargements, it started because of inherent imperial ambitions. Some decades later, it has become especially clear, how essential the NATO enlargement was to some European countries at the Eastern flank (Sydoruk 2023, 312). In April 2022, in a survey conducted by foreign affairs, a group of experts was asked about the decision of previous NATO enlargements. The overwhelming majority, including experts from Poland, agreed that NATO enlargement was neither a mistake nor did it pose a threat to Russia (Foreign Affairs 2022). Instead, they hold, it was the right decision since it upgraded Europe's security landscape and strengthened democracy in the affected states.

The response of Poland to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is described as having been very decisive, uncompromising (Szynowski and Gil 2025, 1) and "driven by strong leadership aspirations" (Sus 2025, 1) as Poland was sure to position itself to play a key role in molding the West's response to the war. Poland immediately became one of the most committed and strongest supporters of Ukraine. It provided military help to Ukraine early, as it was one of the first to send lethal weaponry and continued to be one of the top providers of weapons throughout (Sus 2025, 4), while also calling for stronger measures on an EU and NATO level. Only two days after the Russian attack on Ukraine, Poland's president expressed the need for a quick path to Ukrainian EU membership (Statement from the President of Poland 2022). Furthermore, Poland has openly been advocating for Ukraine's NATO membership since the onset of the invasion as well (Kuzio 2023). In 2023, when the possibility of NATO membership for Ukraine seemed too far out of

reach, Poland's president Andrzej Duda called for the arrangement of bilateral security guarantees of allied NATO countries vis-à-vis Ukraine – an idea that was picked up after the 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius (Irish and Pollard 2023).

Under PiS party governance, before the government change in December of 2023, Poland clearly took on a strong Atlanticist position, which can be described as being at the core of Poland's strategic culture. Moreover, "the US approval of Poland's support for Ukraine and the strengthening of American presence in the country further advanced the status-seeking behaviour of the Polish governing elite" (Sus 2025, 15). Poland pledged to increase its ambition to modernize military and defense systems, as well as to raise defense spending from 2 percent to 3 percent in 2023 (Fraiori 2023) – and actually ended up spending close to 4 percent in 2023 (World Bank Group 2025). Additionally, the country plans to implement five integrated services by 2032: Air Forces, Land Forces, Navy Forces, Special Operations and Territorial Defense, granting Poland top notch military capability status in comparison to other NATO members. In regards to the strengthening of the CSDP body within the EU, Poland prioritizes further developing ties and defense capabilities of NATO in comparison (Fraiori 2023). It has done so by increasing the number of NATO soldiers in Polish territory – strengthening the defense of the Eastern flank – and has been vocal about the necessity of NATO to remain the major defense and security organization in Europe, downplaying EU projects in this regard. It does however, find close EU-NATO cooperation to be desirable if EU policies or actions complement, rather than duplicate NATO's initiatives (Fraiori 2023). Prime minister Morawiecki in April of 2023 has affirmed this sentiment, stating that the EU should not become strategically autonomous from the US but instead, follow the path of strategic partnership together with the US. This approach from Poland is in line with its past approach in defense and security. Since entering NATO, it has primarily strived for and encouraged the enhancement of NATO presence in the region, relying on continuous support in partnership with the US (Fraiori 2023). The strong political support for NATO and the US as partners is also reflected in public opinion polls (German Marshall Fund 2022). Polish citizens, compared to other countries, rank first overall in approval of both "US involvement in the Defense and Security of Europe" (88 percent) and "Importance of NATO" (91 percent).

Martill and Sus (2024, 5) hold Poland highly in regards to (1) commitment, since the country showed a high degree of willingness when it comes to taking on a strong leadership position in promoting European efforts to respond to Russia's war. Poland has furthermore contributed the largest share of GDP in assisting Ukraine with 0,81 percent (€5.13 billion) of its GDP (Kiel

Institute for the World Economy 2025). In regards to the level of (4) contestation, public opinion is ambiguous. While Polish citizens have mostly been in support of providing Ukraine with financial assistance (93 percent in favor), military equipment and armaments (90 percent in favor), would welcome Ukraine membership in NATO (88 percent in favor), and the Polish population would support Ukraine membership in the EU (90 percent in favor) – either now or sometime in the future (CBOS 2025), there has been some contestation from the side of Polish farmers. By opening the EU market to Ukrainian agricultural products, they fear that competition on the internal market will hurt them (Konończuk 2023). Poland is also described as being highly (5) consistent in their response to the Ukraine war and in regards to (6) institutional choice, the Poles have been the most active participants in running EU training mission for Ukrainian troops – albeit by mainly favoring the NATO framework overall (Martill and Sus, 2024, 7).

Besides showing strong support to Ukraine by providing weapons and aid, Poland has also exhibited leadership in urging other countries to follow suit (Fraiori 2023). Polish Prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki was notably critical of Germany, calling Berlin's hesitancy in delivering military equipment "unacceptable". Polish state officials had already made dissatisfactory remarks towards Germany before the 2022 war in light of Nord stream 2 – as they thought the initiative ignored Eastern European countries' security concerns (Fraiori 2023). Furthermore, Poland also did not see eye-to-eye with the French, stating that president Macron had prematurely called for peace talks with Russia – they did however complement France's flexibility in regards to Ukraine's EU membership.

Poland clearly made use of the opportunity to assert itself as a regional advocator in the Eastern European region (Sus 2025, 1). When it comes to Poland's relations with Ukraine, the government has worked on forming a special relationship with Ukraine, not only in the midst of crisis but also in the long-term (Fraiori 2023). Zbigniew Rau, minister of foreign affairs, in April 2023 asserted that: "Russian aggression closely untied the two nations and generated enormous social capital of friendliness and trust. We are facing a chance, a unique one in the last centuries, to rebuild the Polish-Ukrainian community destroyed by the German and Russian partitioners, and by the Bolshevik totalitarian regime" (Fraiori 2023). While Poland aspires to be a leader in questions relating to Ukraine long-term, it is not the first time that it presents itself as a victim of foreign aggression. The Baltic state countries, similar to Poland, were very supportive of Ukraine by sending arms and aid early on, but Poland separated itself from them by being very vocal about its aspirations, with the exception of Estonia, which has been similarly vocal about pushing for a strong response on an EU level (Raik and Arjakas 2024, 8).

After the Polish parliamentary elections in 2023 which marked the end of populist subversion in Poland (The Economist 2024), Donald Tusk was elected as Poland's new prime minister. While the new prime minister in many ways stood for change from the previously governing PiS party, there was considerable continuity in regards to Poland's foreign policy position towards Russia (Sus 2025, 15). Donald Tusk at the beginning of his term stated that despite the fact that there are political conflicts in Poland's domestic politics, "there is no difference of opinion regarding support for Ukraine [...] because our security is also at stake" (Tilles 2024). Poland's prime minister Tusk, similar to the PiS party officials, has engaged in status-seeking behavior of his own – asserting Poland's goal of getting back to its rightful place in Europe. The prime minister, like the government before him, urged allies to increase their support for Ukraine, stating for instance that "Anyone in the free world who pretends to be neutral deserves the darkest place in political hell" (Tilles 2024). The new government has also continued to push for integration of Ukraine into NATO and the EU – which to Poland is the best strategy to keep Russia "as far away as possible", says defense minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz (The Economist 2025). Mr. Tusk in this regard has been critical of the PiS government's criticism towards Germany (Sus 2015, 16), stating that strained relations had contributed to marginalization of Poland's position in the EU and NATO, which has hindered the country in the past to fully realize its visionary role as a leader in shaping the West's response to the Russian invasion. Under the new regime, Poland has also continued to enhance defense spending in light of geopolitical concerns and ambitions of regional leadership in security (McNeil 2024). Most recently, Poland is planning to prepare all its male citizens for large-scale military training in order to increase Poland's army size – aiming for an army of at least 500,000, Tusk said (Easton 2025). Currently, Poland is also planning to spend 4.7 percent of its GDP on defense in 2025 – the largest percentage of GDP in all NATO countries (The Economist 2025). Poland's defense minister Kosiniak-Kamysz notes that Poland is the only country that meets Donald Trump's expectations. The country sees itself as a bridge between the EU and the US and is keen to keep America engaged (The Economist 2025). While the PiS government has consistently waved of aspirations of strategic autonomy in the past, the new government under Mr. Tusk is less EU averse and could be more open to the development of autonomous capabilities. The previous PiS party presidential victory however, provides the new president with the powerful ability to veto prime minister Tusk's agenda and could do so e.g., when it comes to pro-EU military and defense decisions (Kość 2025).

Conclusion

The release of the 2022 “strategic compass” EU policy document recognized Russia as a real threat but much of the agency to develop into a serious strategic actor still remained tied up to members states’ ambitions. Academic scholars, in reaction to the Ukraine war, identified three ways for Europeans to effectively counter the Russian threat: (a) strengthen NATO ties, (b) strengthen strategic autonomy and (c) strengthen strategic interdependence. While all three are important, in the long term, the EU must improve its ability to independently respond to crisis situations the most. It seems to be a necessity to strengthen domestic defense and security capabilities, when Washington’s foreign policy priorities are on another continent. In the short term, the EU must hold onto NATO as a security guarantor – much of its security architecture is built upon US support and NATO could also be a helpful facilitator in the development of EU’s strategic capabilities. While the French have made propositions to extend their nuclear umbrella over Europe – this would most likely just provoke president Putin that is waging a war in Ukraine, and seems unnecessary as long as US security guarantees remain in place. Lastly, although the proposition of strategic interdependence is an admirable one, it seems to be a tall task considering great world powers such as Russia and China are already competing in the Global South and other regions of the Non-Aligned.

Since the “strategic compass” in 2022, there have been multiple reforms enhancing military spending, rearmament and joint industrial base development on an EU level, most notably, the “Readiness 2030” initiative. The procurement package is a big step towards deepening integration and an effective contribution of reaching centralization in defense and security. While the EU, with the release of the procurement initiative, has acknowledged the need for serious investments in joint procurement, and while it addresses an important aspect of defense and security development – the European industrial base – a big portion (€650 out of €800 billion) of the investment is contingent upon member states willingness to invest. If realized however, it could be a significant advancement. In an ideal world, the EU would succeed in the balancing act of gradually building on its own industries, all while limiting dependency on US weapon imports. If the maturation of the EU into a strategic actor is in the US’s interest, then European-based defense procurement should also be welcomed by the transatlantic partner.

The comparative, in-depth analysis of France, Germany and Poland produced a somewhat mixed but illuminating picture of political will across EU member states in 2025. France and Poland, since the onset of the war, have taken on strong leadership roles in strengthening European defense and

security capabilities. Yet, their positions diverge: while Poland has maintained a cautious posture toward strategic autonomy – seeing itself as a bridge between the EU and the US – France has demonstrated more variability in promoting EU structures over NATO, particularly since Macron’s assertion of strategic autonomy following the inauguration of the Trump administration.

France’s long-standing tradition of supporting EU strategic autonomy has gained renewed urgency amid intensifying great power competition. Macron, who’s vision has been advocating for the EU’s ability to withstand pressures from US, China and Russia in the past, views current geopolitical developments as confirmation for his rhetorical leadership. Despite the fact that France’s financial contributions to Ukraine have been on par with other countries’, it continues to face structural limitations, e.g., military stock shortages – underlining the urgency for European joint procurement efforts – and a relatively slow transition to its self-proclaimed “wartime economy”. Public opinion reflects France’s unique political culture in which NATO and US security guarantees are not considered to be the priority.

Germany on the other hand, has been slower to adapt. Even though chancellor Scholz boldly declared a *Zeitenwende* in 2022, a serious shift in the government’s approach towards defense and security investments did not occur. Furthermore, Germany has shown less resolve at the hand of indecisive and ambiguous support for Ukraine. Most recently however, new chancellor Friedrich Merz has made a more tangible shift towards security commitments following a substantial infrastructure reform that the *Bundeswehr* had been in desperate need of. Still, Germany is struggling with societal challenges, namely, the younger generations’ reluctance to embrace military service. While modern warfare is becoming more important (Balcaen et al. 2022, 28-29), Germany must address recruitment challenges to build a functional military force. Opinion surveys suggest that Germans consider NATO (80 percent) and the EU (75 percent) to be at least “somewhat important” to national security – reflecting general approval of institutions.

Poland, meanwhile, has maintained a steady commitment to defense and foreign policy, even amidst a government change at the end of 2023, there has been broad continuity in its approach towards Russia, European security and its position on NATO. Prime minister Donald Tusk has upheld Poland’s strong pro-Atlanticist position, remains very committed to Ukraine and invests heavily into domestic defense – reaching 4.2 percent of GDP in 2024, the highest in NATO. While there had been some hope for Poland to transform into a more EU-oriented country under Tusk, the recent election of a PiS-affiliated president provides a veto power to hinder Tusk’s agenda. As

a result, Poland in the foreseeable future, is likely to continue to prioritize transatlantic relations and be rather stingy on developing autonomous defense capabilities.

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