



Course of

SUPERVISOR

CANDIDATE

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General Introduction:

European security is developing quickly. The post-Cold War vision of a global community of peace, cooperative engagement and stability ushered in what is regarded as a new era of geopolitical contestation. The "façade" of the security environment in world politics has been compromised by several factors, including the rise of great power competition, the emergence of authoritarian regimes, the weaponization of energy and information, and the proliferation of complex, multi-layered hybrid threats which have potentially altered the international order. In stark contrast with the indecisive trajectory of political expediency, defence in Europe, which primarily existed in the votive realm of NATO-led US leadership, is now unequivocally the exclusive decision of sovereign governments and transnational institutions. The issue of how Europe is to secure itself is no longer hypothetical; it is now a nearly immediate question, and it reignited a fundamental question for European nations: who is truly responsible for their defense?

The complete Russian invasion of Ukraine during February 2022 became the main reason for this transformation. The aggressive act destroyed European security perceptions while revealing deep defense system weaknesses across the continent. The ongoing conflict has created the biggest military and humanitarian disaster in Europe since World War II. The EU has been compelled to take on fresh responsibilities regarding crisis management and military assistance and economic stability. NATO under United States leadership became the primary force for military deterrence coordination and Eastern European defense posture enhancement. The ongoing conflict has restored NATO's political significance while demonstrating the EU's unfinished development from civilian power to security capability.

The current crisis and transformation period serves as the foundation for this research. The defense of Europe in modern times depends on more than state armies and bilateral alliances. The success of institutional actors particularly the European Union and NATO depends on their ability to adapt and share responsibilities while collaborating with each other. NATO maintains its position as the world's strongest military alliance, yet the EU works to establish itself as an independent force in security and defense policy. The effectiveness of this emerging dual structure remains uncertain. The two institutions face challenges in forming a unified European defense posture because their differences and overlapping responsibilities persist.

Understanding this dynamic is important not only for theoretical reasons but also for setting Europe on a political and strategic course. The commentary on “strategic autonomy” is more than a slogan; it is an existential need for Europe to find its own role in security and defense in a changing world. As former ECB President Mario Draghi famously defended the euro, the EU must do “whatever it takes.” That very urgency exists now considered defense. The EU must give a serious level of commitment, credibility, and coordination if it wishes to make a meaningful contribution in protecting its citizens, and its values.

Consequently, this thesis will investigate the extent to which NATO and the EU act as complementary actors in the realm of cooperation concerning the defense of Europe. This research will be carried out in three chapters. The first chapter will track the historical evolution of NATO and the EU as security actors, specifically noting the developments that happened because of the end of the Cold War period. The second chapter will examine the institutional and legal frameworks that structure their relationship; this chapter will focus primarily on areas of both cooperation and friction, necessarily proceeding with a comparative analysis of the two organizations' strategic key documents and will analyze the perspectives of selected EU member states that are also NATO members and how they view NATO and its role. The final chapter, Chapter 3 will be about the war in Ukraine, and will analyze its implications for both organizations and examine the war in Ukraine and what it might mean for the future of their relationship therefore, its strategic alignment.

Chapter 1 – The historical development of European defence: between the quest for autonomy and anchoring in NATO

In the aftermath of the Second World War, principles of collective security began to be conceptualised in Europe in a way that would promote future stability and attempts to avoid wars. Even before NATO was established in 1949, earlier efforts had been made to regionalize European alliances through various initiatives and treaties, such as the 1947 Treaty of Dunkirk and the 1948 Treaty of Brussels. The idea of collective defence also had ramifications for the strategic balance as it was developed within a European context, and NATO was formed based on developing transatlantic security against a Soviet threat.

Equally important to the formation of NATO were the principles developed as the architecture that still dictates defence systems in Europe today. The relationship between war-making and state-building is eloquently explained by Charles Tilly's line that "war made the state and the state made war."¹ The devastation brought upon by wars by the twentieth century in Europe represented an alternative to full-scale war: interstate cooperation and collective security and, eventually, supranational integration. This chapter will outline the origins of the European defence cooperation, plot out some early attempts, the formation and strategic rationale of NATO, and objective of defence autonomy in an institutional marker.

1.1 The founding period

In the wake of World War II, Europe was affected by economic and security problems. Damage to infrastructure, loss of war potential, and political weakness left the continent vulnerable to invasion. The two most devastated countries, Britain and France, were most afraid that Germany would again be a threat and boosted Soviet presence in Eastern Europe. The Western European states responded with regional defense treaty calls, prioritizing defense against German aggression over the broader Cold War tensions just emerging. Those early steps, however, expressed European defense autonomy preference without military muscle and integration sufficient to offer long-term protection, so additional transatlantic cooperation was necessary.

1.1.1 The treaty of Dunkirk (1947) and Brussels treaty (1948)

The first step towards regional security of post-war Europe arrived with the UK-French Treaty of Dunkirk in 1947. Even though short of using the word European integration, the treaty marked a step in the direction of regional security collaboration. This was followed in March 1948 with the Treaty of Brussels between Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in the defense agreement. Article IV of the Brussels Treaty had given an undertaking of mutual defense where upon attack by one of the members, others would

¹Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 67.

come to its assistance with armed and other support in terms of Article 51 of the UN Charter.²

“If any of the High Contracting Parties should be the object of an armed attack in Europe, the others shall afford [...] all the military and other aid and assistance in their power.”

The Brussels Treaty's Article V in 1948 was the initial formal European commitment to collective defense, ahead of the NATO Article 5 and an early aspiration for European regional security autonomy. Phrased within a purely European setting, it was war-weakened Western European countries desiring to defend themselves collectively but not to invoke the United States.

The Brussels Treaty will create the Western Union a few years later, the initial multilateral defense community of Europe, but eventually it was apparent that Western Europe would never be a threat to Soviet military and economic hegemony. At the time of its signing in 1948, however, the treaty primarily served as a political signal of unity among Western European states in the face of Soviet expansion. The 1948–1949 Berlin Blockade led to a more dependable transatlantic security system, and European leaders extended an invitation to the United States to secure their protection via the military. As anti-Western feelings in the Soviet Union increased, the European countries started looking to the United States for an enhanced security guarantee. Only finally was it decided that only a truly transatlantic security pact would prevent the Soviets from invading and, at the same time, rule out the resurgence of European militarism and lay the foundation for political integration. This resulted in the negotiation of an Atlantic security pact that on April 4, 1949, culminated in the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Brussels Treaty was a harbinger for closer European cooperation and the ECSC Treaty of the European Coal and Steel Community, later followed by the European Economic Community (EEC). They once more furnished the basis for the creation of NATO in 1949, which extended defense guarantees of the United States to Europe and sketched out future transatlantic security cooperation.³

²Robin Insall and Jim Salmon, *The Brussels and North Atlantic Treaties, 1947–1949* (London: Routledge, 2014), 457.

³ *Ibid.*, 315.

1.1.2 The creation of NATO (1949)

Strategic goals behind NATO's formation

It is commonly believed that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was created solely in response to the Soviet threat, but that is only half the story. Actually, the alliance's establishment was one piece of a larger strategic plan for three broad goals: containment of Soviet expansion, preclusion of the re-rise in Europe of nationalist militarism on the continent by virtue of its presence there of a vigorous North America and spurring European political unity.

The European nations, following the Second World War, aspired for defense autonomy, yet their weaknesses in economics and the military rendered them highly dependent on external aid towards long-term security. The Marshall Plan or European Recovery Program initiated by US Secretary of State George Marshall in 1948 provided gigantic economic aid to Western Europe on the cost of economic rehabilitation and politics stabilization on the price of defense autonomy. But increasing Soviet aggression, in the form of crises such as the Czech coup of 1948 and the communist victories in Italy and Greece, created the ascendancy of the need for a more formalized transatlantic security agreement.

Recognizing that the European powers were militarily too feeble to contain Soviet aggression, the United States discarded its long-standing policy of isolationism through diplomacy and welcomed the establishment of a formalized security system. It was by a resolution adopted in 1948 by the U.S. Congress, known as the Vandenberg Resolution, that a defense alliance connecting Western European nations, Canada, and the United States, became feasible. This change in U.S. policy led to the establishment of NATO in 1949, guaranteeing that security in Western Europe would be anchored in the transatlantic sphere, not in separate European efforts.⁴

The North Atlantic Treaty: Articles V and VI

After months of talks, the North Atlantic Treaty was signed on 4 April 1949 by Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Treaty created NATO as a

⁴ NATO, "Founding Treaty," NATO, September 2, 2022.

transatlantic community of nations based on the principle of collective defense, with Article V as its essential part. The Treaty supplanted earlier regional efforts, including the Brussels Treaty, with a comprehensive transatlantic construction and placed U.S. military strength firmly at the center of European security affairs. More than previous regional pacts of the interwar years, NATO's expansion of membership to include all of the states of the North Atlantic region resulted in a transatlantic community that was credible and exercised real power over international security. The United States also stated interest in mutual defense through its Mutual Defense Assistance Program (1949) and offered aid in kind to European defense valued at \$1.4 billion. At the time of NATO's creation, only 5 future EU Member States were part of the Alliance but today 23 of the 27 EU Member States are members of NATO, tellingly highlighting the increasing interdependence between both organizations but also EU structural reliance of the transatlantic strategic framework.

Early European reactions to NATO

The European reaction to the establishment of NATO in 1949 was subtle and nuanced, both initial resistance and final acceptance of transatlantic cooperation in security matters. European countries, particularly Brussels Treaty Organization (BTO) members, during the early years perceived NATO as supplementary to, rather than a substitute for, their regional defense schemes. They initially considered the Americans as backing the Brussels Pact, but for the moment, seeking to preserve a European security identity that was independent, only to be insisted on an expanded Atlantic perception of security by the United States instead.

Others, like Belgium's Paul-Henri Spaak, were equally ambivalent and viewed NATO as second-best. European nations did not want to take excessive advantage of American military assistance, nor did they want NATO to take over their defense policy. In time, Spaak did veer more to the American side, especially as Cold War tensions increased and agreed strategic value of a transatlantic alliance emerged. As NATO Secretary General (1957-1961), he became one of the most enthusiastic proponents of deepening the internal consultation and transatlantic discourse in the Alliance. Spaak hardly abandoned his Europeanist faith in principle, but he exploited the office of secretary general to employ a more expansive vision of the Atlantic that leaned on economic cooperation and involved reserved spaces for European positions fleshed out within NATO. His life demonstrates

pragmatic tightrope walking between expression of European strategic identity and embrace of American.⁵ Furthermore, The United Kingdom in 1949 was a strong believer in NATO, viewing it as a solution to peace and collective defense against growing Soviet strength. The UK public and government were strongly supportive of a transatlantic alliance. Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, though in poor health, was deeply committed to the idea. He participated actively in the preparation of the North Atlantic Treaty and strove to make the UK a signatory. His dream was realized on 4 April 1949 when he signed the Treaty on behalf of the UK.⁶

The rising Cold War hostilities, and more particularly Soviet expansionism and the Berlin Blockade of 1948-1949, ultimately persuaded European nations to embrace NATO as the only defense guarantee on offer against Soviet hostilities. Britain and France, in fact, viewed NATO as so much a practical measure to help alleviate an imminent security requirement, not anything to do with any irreversible transfer of European defense into American hegemony.

However, this instrumental acceptance of NATO did not extinguish hopes for a real European defence identity; it instead sparked new endeavors, particularly the proposed European Defence Community (EDC) to establish a supranational military organisation that would provide Europe with strategic autonomy within the transatlantic alliance.

1.1.3 European aspirations for defense autonomy

The European Defence Community (EDC) and its collapse

France's initial 1950s proposal of a pan-European, supranationally commanded military force was the European Defence Community (EDC). The Pleven Plan in 1950 had proposed the EDC, which would have integrated the French, West German, Italian, Belgian, Dutch, and Luxembourg armies into a single European army under the control of a centralized authority instead of national commanders.⁷

⁵Paul-Henri Spaak, speech at the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, Washington, D.C., April 4, 1949.

⁶NATO, "The Founding Treaty," *NATO Declassified*, last modified September 2, 2022.

⁷Robert Schütze, *European Union Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The policy was framed with the intention to resolve two most significant post-war security issues: one, to forestall unilateral remilitarization of West Germany, which became unavoidable amid growing Cold War tensions; and secondly, to create an integrated military picture of Europe sufficiently strong to present itself alone but in unison of purpose with that of NATO. This deployment would have created a supranational force within Europe at the military level.

The EDC was originally thought of as a radical step toward building a unified European army, combining the militaries of various European nations into a collective military unit under one political and military entity on the European level. The joint military strength would be financed from an overall budget, encouraging collective responsibility among the member states. In addition, the member states would nominate and stand accountable to themselves and to a European Assembly, a Minister of Defense. This minister would possess the same authority within the European army as a defense minister of any country possesses over its own armies. But those already having national armies would remain masters of whatever was left outside the integration into the European army. This was very ambitious because it sought to subordinate defense policy an essential pillar of national sovereignty into the powers of European institutions, something that was a huge step towards increased security and military European integration.⁸

The EDC Treaty explicitly defined both the strategic and institutional relationships between the European Defence Community (EDC) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As indicated in Article 2(2), the EDC was to defend its members "by cooperating in Western Defence, within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty," thus situating the EDC in NATO's collective defence structure. Article 5 reiterated that the EDC "will cooperate closely with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," creating a legal obligation to institutional cooperation. In terms of operations, Article 18 specified that the European Defence Forces would be placed under the authority of NATO's Supreme Commander, who would be responsible for the force's organization, preparedness and deployment, thus ensuring both forces were strategically aligned. Finally, Article 47 established a framework for joint action, in that the EDC Council could convene joint meetings with the NATO Council and any legally binding decisions made

⁸ Josef L. Kunz, "Treaty Establishing the European Defense Community," *The American Journal of International Law* 47, no. 2 (April 1953): 275.

unanimously at such meetings, would be "binding on the institutions of the Community." Together, these provisions demonstrate that the EDC was intended to function as an integrated European pillar within NATO, both dependent on and reinforcing the broader transatlantic security framework.⁹ Moreover, the United States highly endorsed the EDC as it saw European unification of defense to forestall Soviet encroachment and reduce direct American military intervention in matters of Europe. By integrating Western European military power into a unified system, the EDC was intended to prevent a resurgence of German militarism, increase the defense of Western Europe, and allow for a combined European potential to balance Soviet aggression.

However, the 1952 EDC Treaty was extremely supranational in nature in the terms outlined in Article 1, by common institutions, common forces, and one budget all on the model precedent of the ECSC.¹⁰ Supra-nationality was most clearly visible from the outside in the competences and independence with which the central executive organ had been invested, and in the manner in which control of the common budget had been guaranteed, elements reaffirmed in the Preamble to the Treaty. But this same supra-national character was the EDC's most challenging feature and its final downfall.¹¹ In France, the concept was met with violence; nationalists, Gaullists, and Communists were against French forces being under European command, as a loss of sovereignty. They were also strongly suspicious of remilitarizing West Germany and thought that even within a European framework, Germany would once more be militarily powerful on its own. Whereas René Pleven had previously proposed a grand plan of a European army—more extensive than any tried yet. France would have liked an incremental integration rather than an immediate and wholesale surrender of sovereignty for defense. Moreover, European Economic Community, second best to EDC, was deliberately silent on defense as a complement to economic activity to avoid the same debate.¹²

Geopolitical context also mitigated the project, as the death of Stalin in 1953 ushered in a period of peace and diminished the urgency for a European army. While Italian and

⁹ *EDC Treaty*

¹⁰ Article 1 EDC Treaty: "The High Contracting Parties, by the present Treaty, set up among themselves a European Defence Community, supranational in character, comprising common institutions, common Armed Forces, and a common budget."

¹¹ Martin Trybus, *European Union Law and Defence Integration* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2005), 79.

¹² John Goormaghtigh, "France and the European Defence Community," *International Journal* 9, no. 2, 1954, 96.

European political deadlock problems, such as the Trieste crisis, alongside tensions that built up in the Cold War pushed other countries to be cautious rather than rushed in their considerations of the ratification.

By 1954, these concerns reached their maximum expression, and the French National Assembly rejected the EDC Treaty on August 30, 1954, killing the project for the time being. The failure of the EDC had staggering consequences on European security, as it ratified NATO's place as the salient external security actor and secured the halt on European defence integration for 60 years. The EDC's demise guaranteed NATO as the West's defense foundation, since a competing European military framework was never put in place. In 1955, West Germany was able to join NATO and ultimately, its military forces were reasserted under U.S. and Western control, as opposed to a European initiative. Meanwhile, the European leaders did continue to negotiate the creation of a political Europe, a common European foreign policy.

If EDC–NATO integration had already occurred in the early 1950s, it would have amounted to a revolution in European and transatlantic defense. In fact, the creation of a supranational European army within the EDC, tied to NATO through binding joint decisions, would have been the first real transfer of sovereignty on war issues to a European institution. Strategically, it would have complemented NATO by building an integrated European pillar, neutralizing fragmentation and U.S.–Europe coordination. Politically, it would have initiated the establishment of a European federal order since military integration would have required similarly political power. This would have produced a more integrated and autonomous Europe decades before its time.

1.1.4 The creation of the Western European Union (WEU)

The Western European Union (WEU) was created in 1954 as an immediate result of the failure of the EDC, replacing the security gap that its rejection produced and providing the basis for the remilitarization of West Germany within a controlled European atmosphere which was the main pressing defense concern at that time.

In September 1954, the British Foreign Minister advocated in lieu of West German participation in NATO and a less supranational European defense community to replace EDC, which had been rendered defunct. Consistent with this, during the Nine Power

Conference (September 28-October 3, 1954), European nations, the United States, and Canada negotiated the reorganization of European defense cooperation. It was among the most significant milestones which brought an end to West Germany's occupation and allowed its rearming subject to strict controls was the WEU extension of the Brussels Treaty to West Germany and Italy.

WEU's Role within the NATO framework

The London Conference of October 1954 decided to incorporate the move of admitting Germany and Italy into a re-established Brussels Treaty. The ensuing Paris Protocol rearranged the Brussels Treaty and established the Western European Union (WEU) by the initial Western Union members, Italy, and West Germany.¹³ The protocol further laid the basis for German membership within NATO. Three additional provisions concerning the military were included in the Paris Protocol. The United Kingdom, under Protocol II, promised to remain with some troops in Europe, the withdrawal of which was to be done save in cases of necessity under the vote of most of the remaining signatories. Protocol III had been arms control-oriented, and the Federal Republic of Germany had pledged not to produce atomic, chemical, or biological weapon a main condition that France insisted on.

The Brussels Treaty's preamble initially carried an anti-German tone; the new commitment was "to promote unity and encourage the progressive integration of Europe,"¹⁴ which encapsulated a shift in the position of the WEU to broader European undertakings. Article IV of the Modified Brussels Treaty formally committed the WEU to NATO and initiated a process in which NATO became in charge of European defense through an intergovernmental arrangement with the political acceptability of the alliance, rather than a supranational military integration. Defence cooperation would still be decided at the national level, in accordance with the preference of the United Kingdom, which wished to maintain sovereignty, rather than transnational authority.

As the WEU was an independent European defense organization it recollected NATO, in that it had its own Council of Ministers, a parliamentary consultative assembly, and an armaments control organization of its origins. The WEU effectively enabled German

¹³ Protocol (with Exchange of Letters) Modifying and completing the Brussels Treaty, signed 23 October 1954.

¹⁴ Article II Paris Protocol I.

rearmament in a conditional framework with the militaries there still under extensive European (and NATO) control and oversight, allowing for the trusts of integration without once more attempting supranational European army was funded, which was deeply dissatisfying was not converse and still politically unacceptable to France, the UK, and awareness in both camps.¹⁵ The 1954 Paris Treaties formally recognize the WEU as a component collective actions under the authority of NATO by formalizing and aligning with NATO's strategic direction.

The WEU, as a forum for European defense cooperation, was never able to evolve into an independent military capability. The WEU was mainly a political forum for coordinated approaches to arms control and limited peacekeeping effort, including in the Balkans in the 1990's, although on this occasion the WEU did manage to have some traction. Article IV of the Brussels Treaty stated explicitly that the WEU would not duplicate NATO's military activity and would be closely coordinated with NATO's activities. This formal subordination to NATO and the extent to which it was expressly stated that the WEU would not develop in an independent direction, but *mutatis mutandis* relying on NATO's military planning and coordination, demonstrated that European States understood WEU's military utility was firmly attached to NATO's military capacity.

European efforts to become more objectively autonomous in defense, from Selwyn Lloyd's "Grand Design"¹⁶ to French and German plans for an independent European nuclear force in the 1960s were effectively halted by U.S. opposition. The U.S. viewed a successful WEU as potentially undermining NATO's primacy and Washington hardly had an interest in facilitating a less strategically dependent Europe (i.e. more autonomous). These limitations provide emphasis that European defense ambitions remained structurally dependent on the transatlantic alliance.

The formation of the WEU, however, eventually demonstrated the inability Canada-Western Europe to develop a military policy distinct from that of the United States. States had bilateral and industrial efforts to achieve some sort of defense integration, such as the

¹⁵ Martin Trybus, *European Union Law and Defence Integration* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2005), 100.

¹⁶ Ralph Dietl, "The WEU: A Europe of the Seven, 1954–1969," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 7, no. 7, 2009, 435.

Franco-German Élysée Treaty or the Euromissile project, but those programs did not reach a stage of independence.¹⁷ The Cold War had essentially guaranteed that NATO would continue to dominate as a framework, and any unified, supranational European defense policy would remain elusive.

1.2 From Economic Union to Political Ambition

1.2.1 The Rome Treaties and the Economic Focus of Integration

Political integration of defense in Europe ceased out of this failure. Defense policy had been coordinated outside of the core integration institutions in Europe since the mid-1950s, primarily through the WEU, institutionally and politically distinct from the European Communities. Integration was rather directed more towards the economic.

The Messina Declaration in 1955 provided new momentum for new forms of integration through economic cooperation and led to the 1957 Rome Treaties which created the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom. Importantly the Rome Treaties contained no reference to the free movement of military equipment that would later complicate defense coordination under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). For EEC member states, who were already protected by NATO and WEU, there was little incentive to create a separate European defense union. The European project was primarily recognized solely as an economic and diplomatic entity, not military.

As more time passed, integration strengthened through the framework of institutions such as the European Political Community. Economic integration remained paramount, and post-war leaders prioritized the rebuilding and stabilization of their countries. Defense did not rate as highly, as the EEC countries enjoyed security and guaranteed commitments through NATO while Europe pursued unification through trade and common institutions.

1.2.2. The rise of European Political Cooperation (EPC)

The European Political Cooperation (EPC) began unofficially in 1959 as the foreign ministers of the six members of the European Communities met on a regular basis, initiating modest coordination of foreign policy. Compared with the later periods, the EPC in the 1960s lacked any formal structure, goal setting, or enforcement. The EPC

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 444.

existed on the grounds of procedural consensus without relinquishing any sovereignty.¹⁸ Paradoxically, even as the EPC protected national sovereignty, it was perceived both within the continent and from beyond the continent as a single foreign policy stance without the actual clout with which to impose its agendas. This disparity between aspiration and fact was made evident most forcefully in the crises of the former Yugoslavia. The EPC did, nonetheless, lay important groundwork for what was to follow. Its codification in the 1986 Single European Act at the institutional level sparked a transformation, positioning EPC as a potential bridge between the supranational European Communities and the intergovernmental Western European Union defense framework (WEU). This was to make way for an integrated and consistent foreign and security policy style in the European venture.

1.2.3. The Maastricht breakthrough and the birth of CFSP

From 1989 to 1991, the demise of the Soviet Empire and the conclusion of the Cold War complicated the European strategic landscape. With the Cold War paradigm now thrown aside, the nations of the European Economic Community (EEC) can now aspire to more significant political and security objectives. Economic integration has reached an advanced level; now European policy makers must consider how to continue integrating into foreign and security policy.

On 7 February 1992 the Maastricht Treaty was signed until it came into force on 1 November 1993 formalized this change. The treaty created a new European Union (EU) with a new three-pillar structure, which had included a new Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that replaced the previous structure of European Political Cooperation (EPC) which in some measure had posed issues of defense and security but did not give those issues a means to act as the EU. The CFSP was meant to add a political and diplomatic dimension of credibility to support the economic power of the EU.

The emergence of the Yugoslav Wars between 1991 and 1999 quickly revealed the limitations of the CFSP as the EU needed NATO and the US, particularly in the cases of Bosnia and Kosovo, to have a cohered response to conflict, subsequently, the limitations in capability formula would result in a gap between aspirations to play a role and EU capabilities to act. In addition to the intra-EU challenges noted above, which were

¹⁸Martin Trybus, *European Union Law and Defence Integration* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2005), 108.

compounded by ongoing strategic pressure from Washington on member states, the American leadership of transatlantic security sometimes constrained, conditioned or influenced the EU's ability to act independently. In some cases, the EU would undertake foreign policy action that had only implicit approval of Washington and thus very limited the independence of the CFSP.

The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 sought to enhance EU Member States cooperation and improve the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The EU continued to expand its defence activities, leading to an update for the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) with the Lisbon Treaty.

Even though the CSDP was still heavily reliant on NATO, it was nevertheless a major move towards both a single and somewhat autonomous European approach to global security and had been legitimately created in law with the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.

Expanding the Scope of CFSP

The domain of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is circumscribed extremely broadly by Article 11(1) TEU, where the Union shall formulate and develop a common foreign and security policy in all external relations areas linked to such policy. The common sounding but broad wording of the provision was construed as allowing for flexibility, flexibility in the ever-changing international geopolitical world, particularly in the post-Cold War environment. But the Treaty does not define exactly what "foreign and security policy" entails, leaving room for some maneuver. While these aims imply a potential security role for the EU, the CFSP does not have independent military capabilities, and defence decisions are still highly intergovernmental.

Furthermore, while Article 2 TEU refers to a common defence policy as an overall EU objective, Article 11 TEU does not, and CFSP instruments cannot be applied to defence. This carefully defined boundary reflects the caution exercised by Member States, particularly in relation to national sovereignty issues, as well as NATO obligations.

Eventually, while the ambitions of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy are developing, the issue of mutual defence remains unresolved. The WEU at one time had a formal European defence obligation under Article 5 of the Modified Brussels Treaty, but the EU has not formally inherited that responsibility. The absence of binding mutual

defence obligation in CFSP creates the weakest aspects of EU defence integration, considering the high-risk overlapping obligations under NATO and resistance by some member states.¹⁹

1.3 Defining the EU's Security Role Post-Cold War

The Oslo Agreement (1992) and Petersberg Tasks

The Oslo Agreement, in June 1992 signed and later endorsed by the Foreign Ministers of NATO, was an important step towards deciding the boundaries of the partnership of NATO-Western European Union (WEU) as well as towards the demarcation of bricks of European defence policy. By this agreement, the WEU was officially acknowledged by NATO as the European pillar of the Alliance, confirming the creation of a separate European defence and crisis management capacity while as an institution overall remaining consistent with NATO institutions. The Oslo Accord established the precedent for the imperative of a non-redundant and complementary relationship between the two institutions, where European defence efforts would complement, but not deplete, the transatlantic alliance.²⁰

At the heart of this new role for the WEU was assuming the Petersberg Tasks, which were later detailed in a WEU Council meeting at Petersberg, near Bonn, in June 1992. The tasks laid out a range of military missions that the WEU could undertake, including humanitarian and rescue missions, peacekeeping missions, and crisis management, including peacemaking. The Petersberg Tasks greatly enlarged the scope of European defense action beyond collective defense of territory in accordance with the post-Cold War security environment of regional instability, humanitarian emergencies, and peace operations of increasing complexity.²¹

In conjunction, the Petersberg Tasks and the Oslo Accords paved the way for the subsequent EU appropriation of these responsibilities under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). They also provided a precedent for all future EU-NATO

¹⁹Martin Trybus, *European Union Law and Defence Integration* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2005), 160.

²⁰ NATO, "Relations with the European Union," last modified December 3, 2024.

²¹ Publications Office of the European Union, "Petersberg Tasks," *EUR-Lex*, accessed March 29, 2025.

cooperation, lending legitimacy to the argument that Europe should be able to act militarily whenever the moment arises, particularly where NATO won't.

ESDI within NATO and the Brussels Summit (1994)

After the Cold War, NATO began to engage non-member states with partnerships more formally, and to develop relationships with non-membership basis, enabling NATO to expand its impact beyond its core membership. This change was formally codified at the 1994 Brussels Summit of the NATO Heads of State and Government which was a notable subsection in NATO policies, and the beginning of future NATO-EU partnership.²² The Alliance resolved it needed to better adapt to the emerging security challenges that would go beyond collective defense, as well deepening crises such as those experienced in the Balkans. This was a decisive event resulting in strategic plans that evolved from focusing entirely on collective defense chiefly in Article V to crisis management and in peacekeeping type roles, as core mandates of NATO.

A principal facet of this newly forged relationship was NATO's creation of its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994 and allowed NATO to engage and admit membership to any country that were members of the CSCE (now OSCE) and met the qualifying criteria (most of them were states that previously belonged to the Warsaw Pact). The PfP program de-emphasized collective defense, and instead put the emphasis on modernization of armed forces, capability for interoperability with NATO forces and civilian democratic control of the military. These would emerge as important principles for the founding elements of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).²³

The PfP has enabled third countries to develop certain relationships with NATO, but also development within the PfP of cooperation in areas such as defense transparency, democratic control of the military, and partnerships with NATO forces. At the time of writing there are 17 states participating in PfP states, with Cyprus being the only Member of the EU that is not a member of NATO's PfP program.

²²European Parliament, "Enlargement of the European Union: An Historic Opportunity," *European Parliament Enlargement Briefings*, accessed March 29, 2025.

²³Hans van Leeuwe, "Partnership for Peace: An Update on JSTOR," *JSTOR*, 2024.

In 1997, the NATO allies established the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) to expand the consultation space between the NATO allies and PfP members. It allows, as compared to other NATO tools, for political and security dialogue among NATO allies, yet also provides flexibility and difference among those who share an interest in working with NATO. The EAPC is comprised of all PfP members and NATO allies and is the first forum representing the totality of public partnership dialogue externally that NATO pursues²⁴.

While PfP does not explicitly include the EU-NATO partnership, it implicitly invokes the EU-NATO partnership. The PfP establishes a general partnership without limitations between both organizations, through member nation membership. Of importance is today's situation, where there are 22 states that are NATO and EU members, 4 NATO members applying for membership in the EU, and the UK as a former EU member state.

The Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTF) concept received support at the Brussels Summit, which had great influence. This approach came up with separable but not separate command concepts for NATO which permitted European coalitions to access NATO assets for operations in which NATO wasn't involved, moving closer to Berlin Plus. Another fundamental takeaway was the recognition of Europe's Security and Defence Identity (ESDI). This purpose was to involve more European countries into transatlantic defense under NATO while promoting cohesion within the Alliance. It aimed for stronger European element of the alliance whereby European allies were encouraged to take more responsibility for their defense as well as region crisis management. The establishment of ESDI was closely linked to the Western European Union (WEU), regarded as a key contributor to NATO planning and executing European-led operations with NATO support.²⁵

It picked up steam following the Brussels Summit, finally resulting in the 1996 Berlin and Brussels meetings, where NATO Defence and Foreign Ministers agreed to enable WEU-led missions by providing access to NATO assets and command facilities. For this purpose, detailed arrangements were laid out for the release and recall of NATO assets,

²⁴ NATO, "Updated Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) Action Plan 1998–2000," *NATO Review* 47, no. 1 (1999): 23.

²⁵ "European Security and Defence Identity - EUR-Lex," Europa.eu, 2025.

joint planning, consultation arrangements, intelligence sharing, and inclusion of WEU operational requirements within NATO defense planning.

Berlin Summit (1996): Toward Berlin Plus

The June 1996 Berlin Summit was a milestone in the transatlantic security partnership where NATO Foreign Ministers called for the building of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) within the context of NATO. The plan was intended to re-establish balance between Europe and North America by making the European allies take more leadership in regional and global security without compromising their strong anchorage in NATO's strategic format. Most importantly, the summit brought in the concept which would evolve into the "Berlin Plus" arrangements that first provided NATO assets and capabilities for WEU-led crisis management missions. The agreement gave institutional bases to prospective NATO-EU cooperation and secured the notion of a flexible, interoperable security partnership whereby Europe could act whenever and wherever required, leveraging NATO capabilities while retaining collective transatlantic cohesion.²⁶

The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997)

The Amsterdam Treaty represented a momentous inflection point in the ascendancy of the EU as a meaningful security and defense actor. One of the main institutional innovations of the Treaty was the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which gave the EU real credibility as it could now credibly represent and coordinate a common external voice in the context of the international system. The treaty also integrated the notion of "constructive abstention" (currently Article 31(1) TEU), which enables member states to be abstaining agreement for CFSP and still not ruling out a collective action, thus providing even more flexibility as regards decision-making in the EU, how member states vote on CFSP related matters is characteristically thought of as sensitive issues, such as foreign policy and defence, where member states preferences may differ.

²⁶ NATO, "NATO Ministerial Communiqué M-NAC-1(96)63, 1996.

Amsterdam was also important in including the Petersberg tasks²⁷, which were originally developed by the Western European Union (WEU), in the EU construct that granted the Union a mandate to conduct humanitarian operations, peacekeeping, crisis management, and peace enforcement missions. While the EU did not yet have its autonomy in military capacity, the treaty granted it the mandate to “avail itself of the WEU” when making decisions with defense implications in Protocol No. 11.²⁸ The WEU thus served as a transitional entity providing operational capability while respecting NATO demands and accommodating neutrals where sensitivity was appropriate. This enabled advancement in defense integration without compromising existing alliances or current policies of non-alignment.

Nevertheless, this evolving defense role of the EU placed more and more political and normative pressure on neutral states such as Ireland, Austria, Sweden, and Finland. These countries saw being neutral as a core part of their national identity and connected to their foreign policy; and they were faced with the shared identity, and their need to change in relation to the growing EU security agenda. These elites of those states used discursive reframing and discursive shift from broad, value-based notions of neutrality to more specific notions of “military neutrality” or “military non- alignment.”²⁹ This reframing enabled them to contribute to developments by the EU in the security sphere while trying to suggest continuity in their national policy. The shifts occurred, at least sometimes, in opposition to the public, that was much less supportive of the 'new' military neutrality.

Although the Amsterdam Treaty didn't bind Europe to a full sovereign defense model, it did create the necessary institutional and normative infrastructures that would shape the EU's future defense aspirations. It set the table for the treaties to follow, specifically Nice (2001), and Lisbon (2009) which indicated that the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was an evolving reality and while also codifying some ideas, such as the mutual defense clause. Overall, Amsterdam was both a constitutional and functional moment,

²⁷Petersberg tasks were defined by the WEU Council of Ministers in 1992 and incorporated into the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997.

²⁸ Protocol No. 11 on Article J.7 of the Treaty on European Union, attached to the Amsterdam Treaty (1997).

²⁹Karen Devine, "Neutrality and the development of the European Union's common security and defence policy: Compatible or competing?", *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2011, 338.

that attempted to balance national sovereignty, allegiance to a multilateral alliance, and the ambition of Europe to make the case for coherent, but evolving defense integration.

1.4 Prelude to change: Strategic ambiguity before St. Malo

Saint Malo Declaration

European defense policy stood at a crossroads late in the 1990s, with no consensus on how to make the EU more effective at leading military crises. Different proposals had been proposed during Pörschach talks and later meetings of defense ministers. These ranged from the addition of Western European Union (WEU) as an independent "fourth pillar" of the EU, to WEU-NATO and WEU-EU division of labour, to opening of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) within current NATO frameworks. France and Germany still had to negotiate modalities of indirect access to forces within WEU, within NATO, or through multinational forces like the Eurocorps until December 1998. That uncertainty was only one facet of wider institutional uncertainty and national cross-pulling inclinations in mediating European sovereignty and membership in NATO. But at some point, there was a movement in a more EU-directed defence policy, and more recognition of the fact that the Union would have to have autonomous resources and institutions if it was going to be a viable response to the outside world.³⁰

EU-NATO relations were not formally established until 1999, although the foundations for more intensified European defence cooperation were initially set in December 1998 by the publication of the Saint-Malo Declaration. Since the post-war attempt to establish a European Defense Community (EDC), the declaration was the first significant defense-related undertaking. It was also a pivotal point in the abrupt shift in Franco-British relations, as British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac, who had opposed an independent European security role in 1992, were now coming together to support it. In fact, France agreed that an EU military role must be conducted in accordance with NATO commitments, while the UK ceased opposing such a role as long as it did not duplicate NATO organizations.

This compromise redefined the notion of "European defence" not as a replacement for NATO, but as a complementary capacity that would allow the EU to act when NATO

³⁰ Alyson JK Bailes and Graham MesservyWhiting, "Origins and Process," *Death of an Institution*, 2011.

chose not to. As the declaration boldly stated, *“The Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises.”*³¹

The Saint-Malo Declaration emphasized that “the European Union needs to be in a position to play its full role on the international stage,” and went further to state:

“The Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and the readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises.”

This statement openly challenged the confines of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), five years earlier established. Despite all its hopes, the CFSP had yet to deliver concerted action in response to great regional wars, most shamefully the Yugoslav Wars. The EU's inability to exert effective military or humanitarian intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo disastrously undermined its credibility, and it was understood that a more effective and unified defense policy was required.

For the first time since the EDC collapse, the EU's two leading military powers invoked an independent European defense capability outside the immediate framework of NATO, yet remaining strategically compatible with the Alliance. The declaration noted:

“In order for the European Union to take decisions and approve military action where the Alliance as a whole is not engaged, [...] the European Union will also need to have recourse to suitable military means (European capabilities pre-designated within NATO's European pillar or national or multinational European means outside the NATO framework).”

But the crucial feature of the Saint-Malo agreement was that autonomous European action would only be taken where the entire NATO framework was not involved, highlighting continuing reliance on transatlantic coordination.

The Saint-Malo Declaration was a major turning point in EU defence policy, a reaction to the inability of the EU's CFSP in the Yugoslav Wars. The inability of the EU to promise

³¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

a collective military or humanitarian intervention in the war revealed structural flaws and the need for an operational defence component within EU foreign policy.

Cologne Summit

The EU-NATO cooperation was finally officialised a half-year later, at the Cologne European Council (June 1999). In fact, the EU leaders pledged themselves to make the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) a reality to give the Union a crisis management and peacekeeping capability apart from NATO if necessary.³² What began as a Franco-British initiative soon became a collective pledge of the fifteen member states. During the Cologne Summit the WEU crisis management role was officially transferred to the European Union in 1999.

ESDP was conceived to be Charter-friendly and as NATO-friendly as the EU signaled its desire to complement, rather than compete with, the Alliance. It established a civilian capacity for crisis management, facilitating more integrated post-Cold War management of conflict. These were brought about through pressure from the Kosovo War (1998-1999). With failure by EU diplomats to avoid humanitarian war, it was NATO under U.S. leadership that moved under KFOR, according to UN Security Council Resolution 1244, to pacify and stabilize. This was military weakness by the EU and developed the desire for more effective, independent defense institutions.³³

The Cologne and Helsinki decisions bureaucratized the ESDP and marked the turning point in EU foreign and defense policy. They laid the foundations for the CSDP, later enshrined under the Treaty of Lisbon, and made the EU a more credible international crisis management actor.

U.S. response and the “Three Ds” doctrine

The Saint-Malo Declaration and the subsequent development of the ESDP significantly reshaped the EU-NATO relationship. While NATO remained the primary security provider for Europe, the EU’s newfound military ambitions raised concerns in Washington. In response, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright articulated the

³² “Cologne European Council 3 - 4 June 1999 Conclusions of the Presidency - European Council Cologne 3 - 4 June 1999 Conclusions of the Presidency,” Europa.eu, 2020.

³³ United Nations Mission in Kosovo, “United Nations Resolution 1244,” UNMIK, June 10, 1999.

"Three Ds" Doctrine, which set clear boundaries to EU defense integration acceptable: no decoupling, or risk undermining transatlantic ties and reducing dependence by Europe on NATO; no duplication, in an effort to conserve resources, avoid dilution of efficiency, and prevent ineffectiveness; no discrimination, to ensure the exclusion neither of non-European NATO allies (e.g Turkey). Albright's intervention represented Washington's apprehension that an EU with military power independent of the United States would undermine NATO superiority and US leadership in European security matters.³⁴

Beyond these anxieties, the EU and NATO reconciled in a working relationship under the Berlin Plus Agreement to allow the EU access to use NATO command structures and planning assets. This facilitation allowed the EU to undertake its first-ever military mission Operation Concordia in 2003 in North Macedonia using NATO resources with the preservation of alliance solidarity.

1.5 Institutionalizing NATO–EU relations: 2000–2003

The EU and NATO are also committed to similar values by following interdependent security policies in the 21st century. Cooperation between them continues within the process of crisis management. The formalisation of cooperating began when EU High Representative Javier Solana and NATO Secretary General George Robertson exchanged letters in January 2001 that provided space for the possibility of meeting in a regular way and undertaking political-military discussions together. Then, it formalised cooperation to a certain extent of institutionalisation, when the EU and NATO approved the EU-NATO Declaration on European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in December 2002. The Declaration established the basis to have focused consultation and possibly operational collaboration.

NATO is the lynchpin of collective defence, but development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) has strengthened the EU's ability to undertake its own independent crisis management operations that support NATO's missions. This is clearly a win-win partnership for both organizations since NATO is pushing for a more active role for Europe, especially when the NATO organization is not able or willing to act. This partnership is made-up of several fundamental principles: “the reassurance of mutual

³⁴Brooke Davies, “Case Analysis Madeleine Albright: Negotiating Gender at Home and Abroad,” *Negotiation Journal*, April 11, 2022.

reinforcement, effective consultation, transparency, equality and respect for the autonomy and interests of both parties according to the United Nations Charter Cooperation also includes the coherent and complementary development of our military capabilities”.³⁵

The arrangement itself is well defined through three interlinked goals: ensuring that non-EU NATO Allies have the legal opportunity to participate in ESDP activities, ensuring that the EU has guaranteed access to NATO planning, and finally, coordinating the development of the military capabilities.

The Berlin Plus Agreement and operational impact

The Berlin Plus agreement, which was signed in March 2003³⁶ dashed an essential step for EU-NATO cooperation on crisis management. Berlin Plus relied heavily on the outcomes of the declaration text issued by the St.-Malo Declaration³⁷, issued in December 1998, which they declared the necessity of having a European defence capability, which would be able to act autonomously. With the Berlin Plus agreement the EU was able to conduct military operations with NATO assets when NATO declined to take action. This, allowed the EU to access NATO's planning unit and structure and discerned how one European deputy to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) could carry out EU-led missions, reinforced greater information sharing, established the means for returning NATO assets, and a basis for joint consultations (in the implementation of coordination).³⁸

The structure connected EU military planning with NATO's structures, operational compatibility was maintained. It also made unnecessary an autonomous defense structure which aided in the disbanding of the Western European Union (WEU) in 2011 and bolstered the EU's defense responsibilities withing the CSDP framework. In addition, the EU issued its first European Security Strategy in 2011 which focused on countering global threats, promoting stability within regions, and fostering a multilateral international order.

³⁵North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Union, *EU-NATO Declaration on ESDP*, December 16, 2002.

³⁶ NATO, *EU-NATO: The Framework for Permanent Relations and Berlin Plus*, NATO Factsheet, 2005.

³⁷ Saint-Malo Declaration, Joint Declaration by the British and French Governments, 4 December 1998.

³⁸ NATO, *EU-NATO Cooperation in Crisis Management*, 2005.

Berlin Plus operationally facilitated the execution of Concordia in Macedonia and Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁹ These cases highlighted the importance of more agile responsive planning. During the Berlin Plus operations in Kosovo, some tensions have arisen between the EU and NATO regarding strategic autonomy and division of labor, but the fact that both organizations form relations enabled collaboration even outside Berlin Plus.

The infighting between the EU and NATO concerning the use of non-EU member state Turkey and issues of strategic autonomy and overlap of responsibilities has not prevented practical achievements from being made.

Nevertheless, shared membership and a shared strategic interest in regional stability have led to continuing cooperation both within and outside of the Berlin Plus framework - including joint action in Kosovo and in cyber defense.

In addressing capabilities shortfalls and ensuring effective operational capability, all states began similar initiatives, where the EU launched European Capability Action Plan (ECAP) in 2001 to increase resource pooling and member state specialization, while NATO adopted a cooperative PCC in 2002 aimed at increasing investments in deployable and modern forces. In 2003, a joint EU-NATO Capability Group was established to organize their work and eliminate redundancies, this joint initiative represented a dual-track approach whereby the EU was aiming to improve capabilities through CSDP tools, and at the same time maintaining NATO alignment overall.⁴⁰

While the exact wording of the Berlin Plus arrangement is categorized, the principles established in the arrangement, especially the “separable but not separate” capabilities and the assumption of NATO support, continue to influence operational cooperation between the EU and NATO today. Thus, the Berlin Plus arrangement is the largest regime of soft law undergirding the relationship between these two organizations and the basis for the EU's ongoing defense identity in the transatlantic alliance system.

Operation Concordia

³⁹ European Union External Action Service (EEAS), “EU Military Operation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – Concordia.”

⁴⁰NATO, *Prague Summit Declaration*, 21 November 2002; Council of the European Union, *European Capability Action Plan (ECAP)*, 2001.

Operation Concordia, which kicked off in March 2003 in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, was the first military operation of the European Union under the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), but the way it was undertaken revealed the EU's considerable reliance on NATO. While the operation was technically under the political direction of the EU, it was executed through the Berlin Plus arrangements that allowed the EU access to the military assets, planning capabilities and operational structures of NATO. Furthermore, the EU would not have been able to have a successful operation without the fully functioning SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) from NATO providing the planning, logistics and reserve forces, simply because the EU had no institutional capacity to conduct an operation of this sort on its own.⁴¹

The political circumstances that allowed Concordia to be undertaken, were equally dependent on NATO and American cooperation. The UK's role was instrumental in convincing the United States to agree to allow the EU access to NATO systems, thus creating a link between their European ambitions and the United States' concerns over an independent EU defense identity. Absent the UK's mediation, the US' objections would have likely sunk the operation outright. Even then the operation was still being conducted under very tight parameters, reflecting the persistence of NATO oversight and EU military autonomy as a constraint on the mission.

In line with earlier NATO operations, Concordia sought to support the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) did provide political guidance, but in fact all real operational control resided with NATO structures. The EU simply did not have the strategic depth or capabilities to lead, hence NATO's involvement lent legitimacy and feasibility to the mission.

In the end, Concordia showed not EU autonomy but EU dependence. It highlighted the divergence between the EU's ambitions and the military means to implement its ambitions, that the only time the EU can effectively execute crisis management is when NATO is involved, explicitly politically with US support. There was institutional, operational, and political dependence, reconfirming that EU security role will be always could and should be positioned in relation to NATO

⁴¹European Union External Action Service (EEAS), "EU Military Operation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – Concordia."

This dependence on NATO was further illustrated in the context of the series of developments related to the Berlin Plus arrangement. Operation Concordia demonstrated European Union-NATO cooperation could happen, but also demonstrated the fragility of that co-operation, not least in the context of deteriorated political and military relations, as was the case during the Iraq War. Proposals for greater EU autonomy, such as the establishment of a permanent EU military headquarters, were not advanced as leaders were unwilling to risk damaging broader relations with NATO. On the contrary, the "Summit of Four" (France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg) from February 2003 prompted backlash from the US and UK and negotiations ensured no standing EU HQ was established, but some limited EU planning cells were established at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and European Union Planning & Conduct Capability (EU-PCC) arrangements through Council structures. The United Kingdom remained central as a conduit to navigate these tensions to limit the EU's aspirations to acceptable boundaries for NATO and Washington.⁴²

1.6 Lisbon Treaty (2007): Legal and strategic innovations

The 2007 Lisbon Treaty, which came into force in 2009, represents a milestone in the development of the defence and security identity of the European Union. Having started life in Maastricht, the EU came of age as a de facto civilian power based on capability in the realm of the Western European Union (WEU) to a relatively more autonomous actor in being able to mold and implement its own Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), based on both civilian and military instruments.

Its most straightforward institutional innovation was to eliminate the EU pillar structure, giving the EU full legal personality (Article 47 TEU) and merging external action frameworks into one. It renamed the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) the CSDP under the Articles 21 to 46 TEU regime. Lisbon brought two significant new innovations: the Mutual Defence Clause (Article 42(7) TEU), whereby member states pledge themselves to mutual assistance in case of armed aggression, and the Solidarity

⁴²Hans-Martin Koopmann, *A Driving Force Despite Everything: Franco-German Relations and the Enlarged European Union*, Studies and Research No. 36 (Paris: Jacques Delors Institute [Notre Europe], November 2004).

Clause (Article 222 TFEU), proclaiming collective action in case of terrorist attack, natural disaster, and other crisis in the European Union.⁴³

They welcomed deep institutional support. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy was established by the merging of Commission and Council positions for improved coordination. As a complement to this role, the European External Action Service was established, as well as an enlarged mandate for the European Defence Agency to build defence capabilities and industrial cooperation. Besides, the Treaty launched Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) under Article 42(6) and 46 TEU, through which willing and able member states can intensify defence cooperation a differentiated integration of EU defence policy.

Despite these general shifts, the Treaty was wise enough not to intrude on national sovereignty, especially on defense. Declaration 13 and 14 again asserted that the Treaty would not affect each other's own security and defense policies of non-aligned or neutral nations such as Austria, Ireland, Sweden, and Denmark, or diminish NATO commitments.

Indeed, the Lisbon Treaty also witnessed the quiet disappearance of the Western European Union (WEU), assuming much of its role in EU institutions and rendering it obsolete. Even as the Protocol No. 11 to Article 42 of the Treaty of the European Union officially provided for "*the European Union shall draw up, together with the Western European Union, arrangements for enhanced cooperation between them*," in fact such preparations proved redundant since WEU was disbanded finally in 2011. The Lisbon Treaty incorporated the working tasks till then associated with the WEU into the mechanism of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). But the stronger mutual defence element of the WEU (Article 5 of the Modified Brussels Treaty) was not subsequently entirely replicated within the Lisbon framework. Instead, Article 42(7) TEU had a mutual assistance article that, although of symbolic significance, was vague, highly conditional, and did not form a firm, enforceable EU-level mutual defence commitment. Thus, the CSDP remained predominantly intergovernmental in character and remained

⁴³Sally Rohan, *The Western European Union: International Politics Between Alliance and Integration* (London: Routledge, 2014).

weakly subject to parliamentary control, being an object of mass condemnation of EU defence policy-making democratic shortcoming.

However, the Lisbon Treaty made the EU's defence policy sensible and modernized, creating a flexible yet integrated system better able to counter new security risks like terrorism, cyber-attacks, and hybrid war. It also made it easier for the EU and NATO to cooperate more closely, particularly with the Solidarity Clause and non-conventional security cooperation, further broadening the foundation of cooperation beyond solely military.⁴⁴

Ultimately, the Lisbon Treaty was more strategic building than revolution; embracing the work of the WEU, re-fortifying the defence and security pillar of the EU, and establishing frameworks for an eventual common defence policy, should member states ever come to agree. In a way the WEU has been lisbonized into the European Treaties.

Chapter 2 –Towards structured cooperation: legal, strategic and political developments in EU-NATO relations

Having established the historical evolution of the relationship between NATO and the European Union, as well as their respectively different trajectories of institutional development, it is clear that they have each played unique and complementary roles in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. NATO, created for national and collective defense, has remained the main source of military protection for its members. The European Union, originally formulated as an economic and political integration project, has also developed its scope of competencies: primarily through engaging in foreign and security policy, and pursuing independent strategic capabilities to adapt to changing geopolitical realities.

While there are differences in origin and purpose between NATO and the EU, their complementarity has been robust. The EU is still reliant on NATO's military capabilities to secure its members, especially from outside threats. This reliance illustrates the

⁴⁴Sally Rohan, *The Western European Union: International Politics Between Alliance and Integration* (London: Routledge, 2014).

structural convergence of NATO and the EU, even as the EU tries to become more autonomous on defense issues.

This chapter focuses on the legal and institutional relationship of NATO and the EU, as well as the formal limits on cooperation and coordination (not only their key treaties, but also in strategic documents). This chapter will examine the shifting threat perceptions of NATO and the EU from the second half of the last few years, focusing specifically on their most important strategic documents - NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, and the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass. These strategic documents are an important basis for comparing how the NATO and EU have been able to converge or diverge on security in general and on the specific issues of Russian aggression, hybrid warfare, and systemic rivals. The chapter ground also examines national perspectives of selected NATO and EU members including France and Germany and the Baltic states to understand how different strategic cultures and threat perceptions in the euro-Atlantic region affect NATO-EU relations more broadly.

2.1 EU and NATO legal frameworks for cooperation

2.1.1 EU legal provisions and treaties

Legally, EU cooperation with another international player, NATO, relies on two factors: the existence of EU competence in the relevant policy sector and mutual values and principles, as enshrined in Article 21 TEU. Both these conditions pertain to EU-NATO cooperation. It is grounded in the internal competence of the EU under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and is founded on shared values of democracy, rule of law, human rights, and respect for the principles of the UN Charter. These original principles, enshrined in Article 2 and 21 TEU, reappear in the founding North Atlantic Treaty of NATO, Articles 1 and 2, repeating democracy, individual freedom, the rule of law, and the resolution of disputes by peaceful means. The EU-NATO cooperative approach has been pursued ad infinitum in common texts and declarations. Additionally, their collaboration is respectful of universal principles of sovereignty, decisional autonomy, reciprocity, and broad participation, all principles reiterated consistently by the European Council.

The EU foundation treaties provide explicitly the partnership between the EU and NATO. The foundation of the EU-NATO partnership is explicitly established in Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which references NATO twice. Article 42(2) affirms that

"The policy of the Union in accordance with this Section shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States and shall respect the obligations of certain Member States, which see their common defence realised in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), under the North Atlantic Treaty."

Initially, Article 42(2) TEU acknowledges collective defense is managed by NATO on behalf of a subgroup of Member States and that CSDP of the EU has to be compatible with both NATO commitments and neutral or non-aligned states' security arrangements. Article 42(2) establishes an EU legal requirement to create a defense policy compatible with NATO, thereby crafting a closer partnership with NATO as a pragmatic implementation of EU law.

Meanwhile, Article 42(7) TEU which we have seen in chapter 1, introduces the EU's Mutual Assistance Clause, states:

"If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States."

"Commitments and cooperation in this area shall be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which, for those States which are members of it, remains the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation."

The mutual assistance clause binds Member States to aid one another against armed aggression, but reaffirms that for NATO members, the Alliance remains the first forum for collective defense, while continuing neutral membership with flexibility as per national policies.

Together, the two provisions establish a twin legal commitment: to EU defense integration, and to transatlantic solidarity through NATO, but with full regard for Member States' sovereignty and strategic choice. However, surprisingly even after the amendments of the Lisbon Treaty, NATO is mentioned by name only twice in the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), and in both cases with reference to the precautionary Article 42, Section 2, stating that the EU is to 'respect the obligations of certain Member States, which see their common defence realised in NATO.

2.1.2 NATO legal foundations

As mentioned in the first chapter, the North Atlantic treaty organisations rely mainly on the collective defense clause stated in article 5:

“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.”

This article is the constitution of NATO's founding principle as a collective defense alliance in solidarity terms. But the commitment is qualified by a necessary proviso: each member state is free to make its own sovereign determination as to how it shall respond, subject to its own means and judgment. This concession allowed the European members to secure the American participation while offering Washington freedom of response, which satisfied varied strategic interests in the Atlantic basin. In practice, Article V has been invoked but once in NATO's history: in October 2001, after the terrorist attacks of September 11.⁴⁵ It was a moment of definition for transatlantic solidarity and tested the operational utility of the mutual defense clause.

⁴⁵Tom Lansford, *All for One: Terrorism, NATO and the United States* (London: Routledge, 2018).

Article 6, further defines the geographical scope of Article 5, specifying:

“For the purpose of Article 5, an armed attack on one or more of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack:

on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France, on the territory of Turkey or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer

on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties, when in or over these territories or any other area in Europe in which occupation forces of any of the Parties were stationed on the date when the Treaty entered into force or the Mediterranean Sea or the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.”

Articles 5 and 6 of the NATO Treaty are the Alliance's collective defense policy by the Alliance such a high-profile one as an historic American commitment to defend European security. While Article 6 of the NATO Treaty was supposed to determine the geographical boundaries of the collective defense commitment of the Alliance, its geographical limitation reveals inherent vulnerabilities in the modern Euro-Atlantic security regime.⁴⁶ By limiting Article 5 to Europe and North America and portions of territory north of the Tropic of Cancer, Article 6 excludes strategically important EU territory such as the Canary Islands, an autonomous Spanish region. Although it is an EU member state and thus within the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, the Canary Islands are geographically south of the Tropic of Cancer and thus outside the area covered by NATO Article 5. This indicates a structural contradiction: while the EU relies on NATO for security in military terms, there are certain areas of EU territory not legally covered by the NATO collective defence commitment.

Moreover, NATO's Article 4 of the NATO Treaty lays down a general framework for promoting internal consultations between the Alliance and for more intensified co-operation with the EU. Article 4 states:

⁴⁶Antoaneta Boeva and Ivan Novotny, “Scope and Historical Developments of Article 6,” *Emory International Law Review* 34 (2019): 121.

“The Parties will consult each other whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is being threatened.”

Article 4 therefore stipulates that any NATO Ally may bring matters before the North Atlantic Council if they believe that their territorial integrity, political independence, or security is threatened. Despite being invoked only seven times since 1949, the article has since then become after Article 5 a core driver of the political reaction of NATO. So, for instance, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, nine Eastern NATO members (Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) invoked Article 4.⁴⁷

In addition to its original consultative role, Article 4 has subsequently come to serve to underscore the general role of strategy, in this instance particularly to the EU. It was a procedural lead-in to invoking Article 5 during the Cold War but now serves as the legal basis for so-called "non-Article 5 operations." These comprise NATO operations outside the North Atlantic area and those having nothing to do with collective defense. Hence, Article IV has expanded the operational field of NATO and set the political basis for missions beyond the traditional geographic field.

The NATO Treaty replaced the more limited regional pacts such as the Brussels Treaty with a transatlantic focus. Unlike the previous pre-war European defense pacts, NATO opened its membership to all North Atlantic nations and formed the basis of a transatlantic community with considerable influence on world security policy

2.1.3 Article 5 vs. Article 42(7) : Legal convergence, strategic divergence

While both Article 5 of the NATO Treaty and Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) establish mutual defense commitments, they differ significantly in legal formulation, historical context, political weight, and operational capacity. Article 5, adopted in 1949, serves as the cornerstone of NATO's collective defense, backed by an established integrated command structure, operational procedures, and most importantly,

⁴⁷NATO, "Press briefing by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council," last modified February 25, 2022.

the military leadership of the United States. Its activation after the 9/11 attacks demonstrated how the entire Alliance mobilized in coordinated support, showing a level of collective readiness unmatched elsewhere. However, both provisions clearly tie their mutual defence obligations to the framework of the UN Charter. In fact, each cooperation or military response to armed aggression will take place according to Article 51 of the Charter, thereby situating their obligations within the larger framework of international peace and security.

In contrast, Article 42(7), adopted much later in 2007 with the Lisbon Treaty, uses technically stronger legal language, obliging member states to provide “*aid and assistance by all the means in their power*” in the event of an armed attack. Rhetorically strong though it is, however, the article is not weighed down with the numerous institutions NATO bears. There is no permanent EU defense force, and the strategic culture and neutrality obligations of member states complicate the matter further. Even the French instance of 2015 regarding the Paris terrorist attacks upholds such a threshold: France utilized bilateral aid instead of employing an EU military intervention under Article 42(7), a testament to the clause's low level of effectiveness in action. Furthermore, The absence of a unified EU defense force and the divergent defense policies among member states, including neutrality clauses further complicate its application.

Use of Article 42(7) is typically at the discretion of bilateral or multilateral diplomacy. It does not promise immediate support, nor does it promise it to trigger a response from all the remaining 26 member states in the form of a collective armed response. It only obliges them to consider the appeal on their minds and negotiate. Article 5 called upon by NATO, however, activates the entire Alliance in a member response automatically involving war planning and command structures. The issue, however, is not that one state causes others to jump to its aid. Instead, a single NATO command oversees the coordinated and unified response.

Additionally, NATO has expanded the interpretation of Article 5 to emerging domains like cyber and space, whereas it remains unclear whether Article 42(7) would extend to such non-traditional threat areas. This legal and strategic gap has drawn increasing attention within EU institutions. In its 2021 report on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the European Parliament explicitly called for operationalizing Article

42(7) and aligning its scope with NATO's Article 5.⁴⁸ The report urged the development of an "ambitious common understanding" of the clause, particularly in cases such as cyberattacks, and emphasized the importance of defining the conditions and modalities for its activation.

Ultimately, while Article 5 ensures collective defense, Article 42(7) offers a form of mutual assistance that remains largely political and intergovernmental rather than institutionalized. As EU and NATO memberships become increasingly aligned, there is growing recognition that greater transparency, interoperability, and strategic coherence between these two defense frameworks is essential for credible and effective collective security in Europe.

As said before, While Article 42(7) of the TEU has stronger wording than Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, both have very different binding and operational consequences. Article 5 is more commonly thought to be the cornerstone of the NATO Alliance because it commits all members to collective defense under a single command arrangement. Conversely, Article 42(7), while expressed in threatening terms, requiring assistance "by all the means at their disposal" it is not a keystone article in the EU's institutional architecture. It remains an intergovernmental mutual aid instrument, rather than an automatic collective defense trigger.

The actual invocation of Article 42(7) depends heavily on bilateral or multilateral diplomacy and does not presuppose consent or automatic assistance from all the other 26 EU members. The article needs them to consider the request and go on to consultations, but not necessarily coordinated or concerted military action. With an Article 5 invoked in NATO, however, the whole Alliance is pledged, the agreed military preparations being triggered and joint action under NATO's command arrangements. It is no longer a matter of one state requesting help from the others, but an integrated action of operation under one command. With NATO and the EU increasingly overlapping in membership and interests, growing understanding is increasingly being founded on the necessity that greater transparency, interoperability, and strategic congruence between the two

⁴⁸ European Parliament. (2022). *Implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy – Annual Report 2021*.

institutions must be reached to have a credible and effective collective security presence in Europe.

2.1.4 Binding Agreements between the EU and NATO

There is only one binding EU-NATO treaty, the 2003 Athens Agreement on the Security of Information, signed at the time by NATO Secretary General George Robertson and latterly by EU Council President Georgios Papandreou.⁴⁹ This acknowledgment, signed up to under Article 37 TEU, provided a structure for the sharing and security of classified information between the two institutions and replaced the earlier ad hoc practices agreed by informal letter correspondence in 2000. Not a full codification of the conduct of military operations, it was a significant step in institutionally negotiating levels of confidence and security standards in EU–NATO relations an essential step towards guaranteeing that the EU had achieved NATO security standards of confidentiality and towards establishing the groundwork for future cooperation in operations like Operation Althea. The secrecy of the agreement, coupled with the restriction to EU Member States which belong to NATO or are in the Partnership for Peace, reflects the official EU-NATO legal cooperation's strategic selectivity and sensibility.

2.2 Areas of cooperation between EU and NATO

2.2.1 Historical context and foundational declarations

The complementarity between the EU and NATO has evolved from a purely consultative framework to operational strategic partnerships. EU-NATO relations since 2016 have been constructed on a network of interlocking high-level declarations and annual progress reports endorsed and signed by the institutional actors' leaders and adopted by the European Union Council of Ministers. The 8 July 2016 EU-NATO Joint Declaration at the Warsaw Summit was signed by Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, and Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, as a milestone agreement towards greater cooperation in the face of heightened threats from the east and the south.⁵⁰ The EU Council, on 6 December 2016, adopted conclusions on the first tranche of 40 standalone proposals for the priority

⁴⁹“EUR-Lex - 22003A0327(01) - EN,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, accessed May 31, 2025

⁵⁰ Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation.

areas such as cyber defence and hybrid threats.⁵¹ They were preceded by the December 2017 Council adopting a second tranche of proposals with new proposals on counter-terrorism, military mobility, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda paralleled at the NATO level by its North Atlantic Council in an interlocking process.⁵²

It was in turn replicated by the second Joint Declaration of 10 July 2018 at Brussels on the eve of the NATO summit⁵³, and then by the latest third declaration of 10 January 2023 where the signed said they renewed anew their "firm commitment to supporting Ukraine" and shared a common set of response to a common security challenge.⁵⁴ This enhanced synchronization was palpable in the Ninth Progress Report presented to the EU Council on 13 June 2024.⁵⁵ The report used June 2023-May 2024 to implement the 74 joint proposals, referencing the new timeliness of EU-NATO coordination in the war in Ukraine, Gaza conflict, and general worldwide uncertainty.

Strategic and operational coordination

EU and NATO are also highly harmonized to each other with continuous contacts at many levels ambassadors, ministers, the armed forces, and advisers together to share and deal with their mutually common security concerns. They keep each other in contact quite frequently very frequently through their personnel between NATO and the EEAS, or the European Commission, and the European Defence Agency, the key EU organizations.

To facilitate operational coordination, NATO has had a liaison team in the EU Military Staff since 2005, and the EU has had a cell in SHAPE HQ in NATO since 2006.

The EU High Representative and the NATO Secretary General inform member states regularly. Non-EU European Allies are significant contributors to such a strategic partnership.

⁵¹ EU-NATO Joint Declaration: Implementation.

⁵² Defence Cooperation: Council Adopts Conclusions on EU-NATO Cooperation, Endorsing Common Set of New Proposals for Further Joint Work.

⁵³ Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation.

⁵⁴ Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, 10 January 2023.

⁵⁵ EU-NATO: 9th Progress Report Stresses the Importance of Ever Closer Cooperation at a Key Juncture for Euro-Atlantic Security.

Joint initiatives and priority areas

The EU and NATO have engaged in increasing defence cooperation to increase interoperability, optimize the use of resources, and ensure better military mobility in the Euro-Atlantic area. As 23 of the NATO members are also part of the European Union, defence planning procedures have now become a strategic necessity. Efforts are ongoing to synchronize the EU's Capability Development Plan (CDP), Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), and Headline Goal Process (HLGP) with the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) and the Planning and Review Process (PARP), on cross-participation and staff-level discussion terms. Alongside, military mobility is one of the focal areas of convergence. Since 2018, the Structured Dialogue on Military Mobility has given both organizations a platform on which to raise shared issues, from the transit of hazardous substances and customs coordination to enhanced cross-border transport networks.⁵⁶

Hybrid Warfare and Cyber Defence

The Estonia 2007 cyberattacks were the first wake-up call for NATO since they demonstrated that states can be vulnerable to coordinated internet attacks. It was with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 that the complete strategic scope of hybrid threats became understood. The operation included military occupation, cyberattacks, disinformation, and economic pressure and brought into focus the need for an EU–NATO joint formalized response. Because they have stated in their 2023 joint report, "hybrid threats can target vulnerabilities of societies, which cannot be effectively neutralized by any single actor" as the two established in their 2023 EU–NATO joint report.⁵⁷

It was realized in 2016 in a tremendous institutional change. During the Warsaw Summit of NATO, NATO formally declared the cyber space as an operational area equal to land, air, sea, and space. The announcement placed cyber defense at the heart of international politics and provided a path to invoke Article 5 as a response to a cyber disaster.

⁵⁸Subsequently later in the year, towards the end, the European Union addressed the NIS

⁵⁶ NATO, "NATO's Relations with the European Union," last updated March 12, 2024

⁵⁷ NATO, *Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare: Reference Curriculum*, Brussels: NATO Headquarters, June 2024, 37.

⁵⁸ Warsaw Summit Communiqué, NATO, 2016.

Directive (2016/1148) which mandates member states to deliver cybersecurity in the essential sectors of crucial infrastructure like energy, finance, health, and transport.

It reasserted itself in the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian invasion and reaffirmed that the EU and NATO need to proceed collectively to defend democratic societies against ever-more technologically advanced, multi-domain, and threats rendering historical differences among war and peace, the military and civilian, foreign and domestic security increasingly irrelevant.

Moreover, the EU and NATO have significantly expanded cooperation in critical infrastructure protection and civil preparedness. With increasingly interdependent contemporary societies relying on energy systems, transport networks, cyber networks, and space assets, these critical infrastructures have been placed at the forefront of hybrid strategies. A turning point in this cooperation came in January 2023 when a joint NATO–EU Task Force on Resilience and Critical Infrastructure Protection was established.⁵⁹ The Task Force, whose report in June 2023 pointed out most key vulnerabilities and recommended intensified cooperation in the fields of energy, transport, cyber, and space resilience, urged enhanced intelligence-sharing, identification of alternative logistic routes, and more joined-up security research. Parallel and Coordinated Action Exercises (PACE), including Integrated Resolve (PACE22) and the alliance's own crisis exercise (PACE23), have also been extremely valuable exercises in probing both organisations' readiness to face advanced hybrid scenarios, demonstrating the benefit of joint civil-military training.

In the new hybrid war environment, cyberattacks have become a central aspect, forcing the European Union and NATO to take cybersecurity to the strategic level. The cyberspace has emerged as the fourth combat capability dimension land, sea, air, and cyberspace where political and military type campaigns occur through such operations as espionage, disinformation, and the destruction of critical infrastructure.⁶⁰ The EU and NATO are struck by the same vectors, including cybercrime groups, politically motivated non-state actors, and sophisticated state actors, thereby exposing shared vulnerabilities in civilian and military domains. Although cooperation and investment have increased in

⁵⁹ European Commission, “NATO and EU Step Up Cooperation on Resilience and Critical Infrastructure Protection,” *European Commission Press Corner*, June 16, 2023.

⁶⁰ Aliko Guchua and Thornike Zedelashvili, “NATO and EU Cybersecurity Environment and Standards,” *Ukrainian Policymaker* 9, 2021, 4–11.

recent times, responses remain largely fragmented and reactive, particularly against sustained campaigns by actors like Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Having established the most salient strategic axes, the 2021 Brussels Summit of NATO reaffirmed that cyberattacks were in some case able to invoke Article 5 of the NATO Charter. The challenge of challenges brought by attribution and operational imprecision still overhangs coordinated action, though. Both the EU and NATO have shifted here from policy coordination to pragmatic cooperation: everyday staff contact, situational awareness with each other, shared crisis management planning, and capacity building of partners. Both the organizations' staff also participate in each other's cyber defense exercises for instance with the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE). The NATO Cyber Security Centre and the Technical Arrangement on Cyber Defence of CERT-EU formalize the cooperation further, allowing formal information sharing and best practices sharing between their incident response teams.⁶¹

While terrorism proper is not hybrid, it belongs to the hybrid type of threats whenever "used within a larger campaign employing several coordinated tactics," as well as for psychological war and world propaganda.⁶² At issue here is the bifurcated line in instances of ISIS and Al-Qaeda that fall under "hybrid actors" because they blended terrorism with conventional force, strategic communications, and globalized networks. This development requires a closer look at terrorism itself not just as an independent threat, but as an adaptable instrument in hybrid war strategies. In fact, both NATO and the EU have extended their cooperation to anti-terrorism and WMD prevention dissemination, especially information exchange and coordination in safeguarding civilian populations from chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) threats.

Finally, NATO–EU naval coordination has been more practical since 2016, particularly collective action in response to the troubled Mediterranean security environment. To respond to the immigrant and refugee crisis, NATO deployed Standing Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) to the Aegean Sea to support Greek and Turkish authorities and the EU's Frontex agency with real-time surveillance and intelligence to combat human trafficking and illegal migration.⁶³ Simultaneously, NATO launched Operation Sea Guardian to

⁶¹ *Ibid.*,

⁶² Mikhail Kostarakos, "European Union and NATO Cooperation in Hybrid Threats," *Springer Optimization and Its Applications*, vol. 205, 2023, 408.

⁶³ Marina Militare Italiana, "Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2)," *Marina.difesa.it*, accessed April 6, 2025.

enhance maritime situational awareness, counterterrorism, and capacity-building in the broader Mediterranean. Both operations, led under Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM), reflect NATO's integrated approach to maritime security and its formal association with the EU, including staff-level dialogue and coordinated operations such as the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction framework. Together, these efforts show the strong and sustained presence of the Alliance in humanitarian and security operations as well as enhancing Europe's borders and seas.

2.3 Strategic documents and comparative analysis

2.3.1 Evolution of NATO Strategic Concepts

Since 1949 up to the present time, subsequent phases of NATO strategic thought emerged to counter tensions of the trajectory of historic evolution in geopolitics. Between the Cold War era, Alliance identity rested on Article 5 defense and mutual defense deterrence under the Washington Treaty, a hard military posture aimed at discouraging the Soviet Union to begin with. When tensions eased, NATO slowly expanded its strategic mandate to include conversation, diplomacy, and partnership-based cooperative security. After the Cold War, from the early 1990s, further developed NATO's agenda to crisis management and global partnership, taking NATO's mission beyond the confines of the traditional Euro-Atlantic sphere. Afghan, Libyan, and Bosnian missions bore witness to the transition, with an equal commitment in governance support, training, and reconstruction alongside more conventional combat operations. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks provided a second tipping point by opening the mission to tackle new issues of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction proliferation, and hybrid warfare, which beckoned more liberated thought.

One greatest turning point was the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and China's emergence on the world stage as a strategic challenger. In response, NATO once again turned to defence and deterrence, now inter alia in the form of forward forces in defence on its eastern and south-eastern flanks. All this was reiterated in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which reaffirmed the centrality of collective defense at the heart of the NATO purpose. Reflected in that shift, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept explicitly describes Russia as “The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct

threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area"⁶⁴. Far from the language of the 2010 Strategic Concept, still describing Russia as a potential future partner in developing a common security space.

Historically, NATO's activities have been structured around three strategic pillars: collective defense (Article 5), crisis management (non-Article 5 operations), and cooperative security with non-member partners. Although the Alliance had increasingly prioritized lighter, mobile crisis management forces over recent decades, the war in Ukraine has reasserted the primacy of conventional collective defense.

And at the same time, NATO has also increasingly widely strategically used beyond its original regional context. To reference Baciú and Kunertova, today NATO attempts to "strike the right balance between power and purpose, global and regional interests, and policies of restraint and affirmation"⁶⁵. While close Russian military threat to Europe demands a robust defense policy, growing global Chinese presence in cyberspace, technology, and economics demands a global international strategic vision. It is this two-track approach which is a manifestation of a profound shift in the mission of NATO, with the Alliance accommodating to an era of multipolarity where threats are regional and global.

NATO Strategic Concept (2022)

The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept encapsulates the new Alliance commitment of collective defence, international stability, and protection of democratic values. In a more insecure and stormier international order, NATO has adapted its thinking on strategy to confront a wide range of interconnected, multifaceted challenges. Today's strategic landscape is one of rising great-power competition, rampant instability, and the growing involvement of anti-democratic forces committed to overturning democratic values and international norms.

In this context, the Strategic Concept places Russia's aggression in Ukraine and China's as the greatest threats to Euro-Atlantic security. Both are recognized as NATO's greatest

⁶⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022*, Brussels: NATO, 2022, 4.

⁶⁵ Cornelia Baciú and Dominika Kunertova, "Evolutionary Stable Global Orders: Co-Relational Power and Multilateral Security Organisations," *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 18, no. 1 (2022): 53.

strategic challenges in some form or another. Russia is the most proximate and most direct of those challenges, as above. The declaration dismisses any prospect of partnership, asserting, “we cannot consider the Russian Federation to be our partner”⁶⁶. Conversely, China is regarded as a long-term strategic adversary whose “stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values”⁶⁷. NATO highlights China’s opaque military modernization, destabilizing cyber activities, and economic coercion. Most of all, the Concept cautions that “The deepening strategic partnership between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests.”⁶⁸. While NATO opens its arms to partnership with China, it is concentrating on resilience, deterrence, and solidarity as it confronts mounting geopolitical competition.

NATO's role is to defend Allies "against all threats, from all directions"⁶⁹ with a 360-degree view of threats today. NATO lays specific stress on actually “deterrence and defence, crisis management and prevention, and cooperative security”⁷⁰ as its primary missions. For these purposes, NATO leverages a spectrum of capabilities from military might, nuclear deterrence, space and cyber, technological innovation, to building resilience. The Alliance promises to “significantly strengthen our deterrence and defence posture,”⁷¹ with improved readiness for dominant multi-domain operations, and counter terrorism threats by hybrid war to climate change. NATO reaffirms the strategic partnership with the United Nations, European Union, and like-minded friends such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Indo-Pacific friends. All such partnerships are claimed to “crucial”⁷² to practicing projection of stability, resilience-building, and protection of the rules-based international order.

Finally, the 2022 Strategic Concept once more puts the European Union as the natural and strategic ally of NATO in the evolving security environment. The European Union is explicitly mentioned in the Strategic Compass, seeing as key partner which “will

⁶⁶Ibid., para. 9.

⁶⁷Ibid., para. 13.

⁶⁸*North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022 (Brussels: NATO, 2022), para. 13.*

⁶⁹Ibid., 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁷¹Ibid., 6.

⁷²Ibid., para. 42.

contribute to international peace and security”.⁷³ The alliance is not secondary but inter-enabling, particularly if there is enhanced geopolitical tension and hybrid threats. The EU and the NATO have a common democratic values platform and must work together on matters of military mobility, cyber defence, climate security, and counter-malign influence by autocrats such as Russia and China. Particularly, the 2022 Strategic Concept re-affirms NATO's unwavering commitment to collective defence under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the cornerstone of the Alliance's deterrence stance. Article 5 is not merely a defence pledge in our contemporary high-technology and multi-dimensional security situation; it is also a political cornerstone of transatlantic ties between NATO and the European Union. The Concept calls on EU non-members to engage in EU defense activity to avoid fragmentation and coordinate concerted action. It highlights the fact that EU defense capabilities must be enhanced to complement NATO's strategic objectives. Close cooperation between the EU and NATO will be required to bolster resilience and enable an immediate and collective response to emerging threats, most especially if cyberattacks or hybrid attacks are included that can trigger Article 5.

2.3.2 Comparative analysis: NATO Strategic Concept (2022) vs. Washington Summit Declaration (2024)

In relation to the significance of NATO summits in determining the strategic direction of the Alliance, comparison of tone and language of the 2022 Strategic Concept and the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration provides deep understanding of NATO's evolving stance. The 2022 Concept set out a vision for the long term during the crisis triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and the 2024 Summit offered the opportunity to turn that vision into operational reality. Summits as platforms for decision-making of the highest level offer a unique lens through which to gauge how NATO develops through initiatives and new priorities. Conversely, these two texts demonstrate how NATO's threat perceptions, its defence policy and alliances most significantly with the European Union have adjusted to address a more uncertain international environment. It is not just a stylistic contrast, nor even an essay lamenting the skipping of summits; it is more an acknowledgment of the catalytic role of summits in converting collective vision into

⁷³Ibid., 1.

collective policy, solidarity, and firmness. It is because of the part summits play in defining realistic security policies that such a comparison is pertinent and opportune.

The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept and the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration are the twin pillars of Alliance development in strategy. The 2022 Concept was a watershed moment that unambiguously focused attention on Russia as the most immediate threat and the rise of China-based systemic threats. It also established the basis for further cooperation between the EU and NATO, mentioning the EU as “unique and essential partner”⁷⁴ as far as hybrid threats, cyber defence, and resilience are concerned and emphasizing complementarity and interoperability. The Washington Declaration 2024⁷⁵ once again expanded the framework even further, claiming “unprecedented levels”⁷⁶ of cooperation with the EU and packaging collective action as a package on space, cutting-edge technology, and energy security. The EU's initiative during the Summit, with Indo-Pacific partners, was observed to experience the exercise of its leadership in NATO's broader strategic vision. The Declaration reiterated Article 5's application, particularly on hybrid and cyber threats, and emphasized the strategic significance of a robust transatlantic defence system. The Summit also saw the EU's role in countermeasures against disinformation, cybersecurity, and capacity-building. Strategic concepts enshrined in 2022 were tested and validated through exercises like Steadfast Defender 24 and the development of NATO's Integrated Cyber Defence Centre. Equipped with its advanced cyber design, nuclear modernization, and improved air and missile defence, NATO was prepared to demonstrate its capability for ferocious, multi-domain war. The EU's contribution, though, was not just complementary but co-designer of vision of collective security as well, a witness to its progressively important contribution towards regional and international attempts at stability.

⁷⁴NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022* (Brussels: NATO, 2022), para. 43.

⁷⁵ NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration: Issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C., July 10, 2024*, Press Release 2024 001.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 29.

2.3.3 EU Strategic documents and development

The EU's first effort at a shared strategic vision of its security role was in the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), “A Secure Europe in a Better World.”⁷⁷ It framed terrorism threats, weapons of mass destruction proliferation threats, and failed state threats within general multilateral and preventive frameworks. Even as the global environment was evolving rapidly with the Russian annexation of Crimea, migration crisis, and United Kingdom's Brexit referendum. The ESS was the action-guiding document for more than a decade, blaming the EU's tardiness in responding to emerging security trends. Nonetheless, by 2016, the solidarity crises pushed the EU to redefine its position in the world, and the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) was introduced. The EUGS set out the overall vision of “strategic autonomy” and called for a more “credible, responsive, and joined-up” Union.⁷⁸ As Federica Mogherini so elegantly expressed it at the time: “This is no time for uncertainty: our Union needs a strategy.”⁷⁹ While the EUGS outlined a broader vision encompassing diplomacy, development, security, and resilience, it fell short of describing the development of detailed delivery mechanisms at the operational level. Then there was the 2022 Strategic Compass, the EU's first as a fully geopolitical actor that would be able to do something about war on its territory. The Compass is quite specific about this aspiration: “*We need to make a quantum leap to develop a stronger and more capable European Union that acts as a security provider,*”⁸⁰ adding that it “*sets out a common strategic vision for EU security and defence policy... to strengthen our strategic autonomy*”⁸¹. Even while the same fundamental issues crop up in each paper, namely security, partnerships, hybrid threats, what has changed fundamentally is the sense of ambition and strategic thinking and the reality that the EU went from vision to action.

Simultaneously, the EU also introduced important new tools such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), European Peace Facility (EPF), and European Defence Fund (EDF) where launched to realize its ambitions and to acquire actual capabilities. As

⁷⁷ Council of the European Union, *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*, Brussels, December 12, 2003, 11.

⁷⁸ European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, June 2016, 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁰ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union That Protects*, Brussels, March 21, 2022, 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Ekengren and Hollis (2020) observe, the decade witnessed "exceptional developments of EU institutions and capacities" as the Union shifted from symbolic posturing to tangible action.⁸² Along with the challenge of convergence between such instruments, their member states undertook an exercise of joint strategic thinking, and the European Council subscribed to the Strategic Compass. Heads of state and government institutionally committed themselves for the first time in the history of the EU to a thoroughly prepared and consistent security and defense policy strategy.⁸³ While security threat, partnership, and hybrid war challenges are of importance to all the strategic documents equally, level of ambition, top-level political solidarity, and pragmatic shift from vision to action is what has truly evolved. EU response to deteriorating security environment thus is more one of evolutionary progress towards the role of an autonomous actor that can complement and supplement NATO in any future European security policy than one of rhetorical concessions.

EU Strategic Compass

Since it has been throughout since the start of Russian attacks on Ukraine, never has defence and security collaboration among the European Union Member States been more relevant. It is this that the EU endorsed the Strategic Compass as a first-ever-ever-unanimous ever-strategic document signed by all its Member States. This initiative, with the purpose of standing the EU as an able and active security provider, was part of one of the agendas of Germany's 2020 EU Council Presidency. The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence initiative launched in March 2022 provides a vision that will make the EU a credible and powerful security provider in the changing world.⁸⁴ As the European Union's new foreign and security policy framework, the *Strategic Compass* is now set to steer the direction of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

The paper is a five- to ten-year blueprint with four pillars: Act, Secure, Invest, and Partner.⁸⁵ Under the "Act" pillar, the EU vows to have by 2025 an Active Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 staff who will be able to respond quickly against

⁸² Sus, Monika (2019). 'Institutional Innovation of EU's Foreign and Security Policy: Big Leap for EU's Strategic Actorness or Much ADO about Nothing?', *International Politics*, 56:3, 411–25.

⁸³ Biscop, Sven (2021). 'The Strategic Compass: Entering the Fray', *Security Policy Brief*, 149.

⁸⁴ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security* (Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council, March 21, 2022).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

crises. Under the "Secure" pillar, there is commitment to counter cyber and hybrid threats, creating increased resilience in key areas like space security and sea security. "Invest" focuses on filling defence capability gaps, bolstering innovation, and improving the European Defence Fund and joint programmes for procurement. Finally, the "Partner" pillar reaffirms strategic alignment with NATO, the UN, and like-minded countries so that an EU defence position that is more forward-looking makes the transatlantic alliance stronger, not weaker. As provided by Article 42(7) of the EU Treaty, the Strategic Compass is an essential step to a united, effective, and independent European system of security a step to empower the EU as a more effective and more credible global player.

2.3.4 Comparative analysis of NATO and EU strategies

The 2022 Strategic Compass reconfirms NATO's primacy to the European order of security, particularly for the EU member countries who are members of the Alliance as well. The Compass reconfirms that “NATO remains the foundation of their collective defence”⁸⁶ At the same time, the Compass reconfirms that the EU initiatives on building its security and defence role are meant to complement and not substitute NATO, to establish a broader and stronger transatlantic framework. A stronger EU is offered as a global and regional security player, being aligned with the strategic interests of NATO.

Above all, Compass reflects a shift in EU policy, which is placing increased emphasis on its own separate identity in terms of "decision-making autonomy"⁸⁷ and a desire to reduce dependencies in the most critical areas from outside. Initiatives such as the proposed EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, enhanced military mobility, and hybrid and cyber defence improvement reflect a more assertive European stance. This is a two-pronged strategy: while remaining fixed in NATO for collective defence, the EU is attempting to develop strategic autonomy to operate independently, if necessary, particularly in the neighborhood.

Together, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept and the Strategic Compass enunciate a shared strategic vision, responding to an ever more deteriorating international environment after the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a “tectonic shift in European

⁸⁶European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security* (Brussels: EEAS, 2022), 5.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 2.

history.”⁸⁸ and as a moment when “shattered peace”⁸⁹ in the Euro-Atlantic area. Both documents identify a shared threat, such as terrorism, cyberattacks, disinformation, authoritarian interference, climate-driven instability, Russia and Chinese assertiveness. More specially, both NATO and the European Union are on their way towards treating China as a systemic threat but differ in response as regards tone variation and strategic priority. NATO is more forceful in words in the 2022 Strategic Concept, stating that “the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values”⁹⁰ and warning that China “strives to subvert the rules-based international order”⁹¹ by using “malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric”. NATO also poses the question for the PRC’s alignment with Moscow outright because “the deepening strategic partnership between the PRC and the Russian Federation... runs counter to our values and interests”⁹² The Strategic Compass of the EU is more multilateral. Although it does call China a “systemic rival” it also calls it “partner for cooperation” and an “economic competitor”⁹³ and thus shows itself capable of having diplomatic contact and strategic caution. The report further notes that China’s expanding presence in the world “a “at sea and in space, cyber tools, and hybrid tactics”⁹⁴ requests the EU to make sure that China’s action “do not contradict the rules-based international order”.⁹⁵ Therefore, although both NATO and the EU agree to encircle China as an emerging strategic threat, they disagree over discursive framing: NATO is debating China predominantly as a security threat, yet the EU is more restrained and attempts to strike a balance between deterrence and cooperation.

Whereas the documents reflect this convergence, they vary in what their institution prioritizes and in its role. NATO’s agenda is collective defence, deterrence, and 360-degree defence of Allied soil by reaffirming Article 5 and nuclear deterrence as part of the “supreme guarantee”⁹⁶ of Allied security. The EU, on the other hand, is an

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁹NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022* (Brussels: NATO, 2022), 1.

⁹⁰NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022* (Brussels: NATO, 2022), para. 13.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, para. 14.

⁹²*Ibid.*, para. 16.

⁹³European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (Brussels: EEAS, 2022), 5.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁶NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, para. 29

autonomous security actor with military and civilian capacities. In addition to its capacity for deployment, it also sets out instruments like the Hybrid Toolbox and concepts of space and cyber defence.

Despite this convergence, the texts communicate their institutions' unique purposes and concerns. NATO is concerned with allied defence, deterrence, and 360-degree defence of Allied territory, reiterating Article 5 and nuclear deterrence as central to its security commitment. The EU is sold as an independent security actor with both military and civilian capabilities. Beyond its potential deployment, it provides tools like the Hybrid Toolbox and space and cyber security policy.

While both strategies are imbued with resilience and readiness, the EU focuses more on strategic autonomy; the ability to look after itself whenever the situation demands it, by making such an exercise subject to the condition that it must be "complementary to NATO"⁹⁷ and deployed to strengthen global and transatlantic security. The EU also espouses a more comprehensive approach, embracing civilian, diplomatic, economic, and technological instruments of crisis management and meeting new threats. As the Strategic Compass itself notes, "interdependence is increasingly conflictual and soft power weaponized,"⁹⁸ demanding an increasingly strong European contribution to global stability.

Even with all its hopes of offering an operational vision, however, it reads more like a threat analysis than an actual strategic plan. Most alarmingly of all, its threat analysis is itself largely borrowed from the NATO threat analysis, which throws serious questions of coherence and independence. Because NATO and the EU are distinct institutions with distinct missions and institutional cultures: one a military alliance, the other a political union; applying a shared threat framework risks hiding divergence within their respective priorities. Its own unique analytical foundations would most likely be required for an independent EU position, proportionate to its own values, capabilities, and objectives.

Nonetheless, both declarations confirm the primacy of partnerships, first and foremost between the EU and NATO. NATO reiterates its commitment to cooperate "closely with

⁹⁷European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security* (Brussels: EEAS, 2022), 2.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

our partners, other countries and international organisations, including the United Nations and the European Union,"⁹⁹ and the EU commits itself to "deepen strategic partnerships with the UN and NATO."¹⁰⁰

Lastly, NATO remains the Euro-Atlantic defense umbrella, and the EU an in-complement politically distinctive but unequal player with instruments of economic coercion, cyber and hybrid defense, and civilian crisis management. As long as, they are held together by values and converging perception of threat, the challenge to be addressed in the coming years is how complementarities can be established without undermining the strategic autonomy the EU has increasingly conceived at the center of its external policies.

2.4 A comparative analysis of Member States' Views on the EU–NATO relationship

2.4.1 France: “EU strategic Autonomy”

France's attitude towards NATO has evolved a great deal since its creation as it is a refined combination of European strategic independence, collective defense, and sovereignty. As a founding member and a participating member, France increasingly grew frustrated with what it perceived to be U.S. domination of the Alliance. This suspicion reached its peak in 1966, when President Charles de Gaulle withdrew France from the integrated military command of NATO, lest dependence on external powers undermine French autonomy and international prestige. France remained within NATO's political structure and adhered to collective defense, nevertheless. France has pursued a policy of "calibrated distance" cooperative behavior with NATO while fostering a more differentiated European defense identity over the years. This was followed by its full return to NATO's integrated command in 2009 by then-President Nicolas Sarkozy on interest-based pragmatism for influence and operational effectiveness. France then joined all the major operations by NATO and played a significant role within the military. It still however maintains a belief in a NATO that is solely Euro-Atlantic defense-oriented and has a simultaneous wish to enhance European strategic autonomy, within the EU context.

⁹⁹NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022* (Brussels: NATO, 2022), 1.

¹⁰⁰European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security*, 6.

Indeed, President Emmanuel Macron's NATO and European defense dream is one of high strategic thinking and ambition: calling for a strong transatlantic alliance as well as less dependence on the United States in Europe. Macron has insisted that Europe needs to reclaim ownership of its own security agenda, particularly in the face of increasing geopolitical uncertainty, American strategic unpredictability, and systemic challenge by Russia and China. His later-infamous 2019 declaration that NATO was afflicted by "brain death"¹⁰¹ was less a declaration of the Alliance's obsolescence than a polemic against political complacency and a call to Europeans to strive for actual strategic agency. For Macron, France is at the forefront of European Strategic Autonomy (ESA), an idea borrowed from France's enduring fascination with national strategic autonomy and now reimagined as a collective European endeavor.

Strategic autonomy has emerged as a constitutive ethos of EU defence and industrial policy, especially in response to evolving global conditions. Initially established in the 2013 European Council conclusions on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)¹⁰², the topic has, since then, been extended to a wide range of strategic areas. Although it does not imply complete independence from NATO, it does demand an EU that is independent where necessary; namely by possessing a robust European defence technological and industrial base. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia revived the relevance of NATO but also united the European determination to complement the transatlantic security by building its defence capability, as planned under the EU Strategic Compass (2022) and the European Council defence conclusions of 2025.¹⁰³

The broader vision maps the European Commission's "open strategic autonomy" vision in its 2021 Trade Policy Review.¹⁰⁴ 'The EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its strategic interests and values.'¹⁰⁵ This thinking envisions an EU that may determine the orientation of global development without sacrificing autonomy through leading and contributing. With a view towards this, to attain this, the Union has sought to find the means in legally and

¹⁰¹ BBC News, "Nato Alliance Experiencing Brain Death, Says Macron," November 7, 2019.

¹⁰² European Council, *European Council Conclusions on Common Security and Defence Policy, 19–20 December 2013*, Brussels: European Council, 2013, 8.

¹⁰³ European Council, *European Council Conclusions on European Defence, 6 March 2025*, Brussels: European Council, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ European Commission, *Trade Policy Review: An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*, COM (2021) 66 final, Brussels, February 18, 2021, 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

politically. The Critical Raw Materials Regulation (EU) 2024/1252¹⁰⁶ and the Critical Raw Materials Act (COM (2023) 160)¹⁰⁷ are intended to diversify supply chains and establish indigenous European capability in extracting, processing, and recycling strategic materials, after being revealed through over-reliance on countries like China and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In a similar vein, the European Chips Act (Reg. 2023/1781)¹⁰⁸ is an effort at balancing Europe's exposure in semiconductors production, looking to decouple itself from China and Taiwan and establish competitiveness in local EU production.

Macron envisions ESA as Europe's ability to act and decide independently in a scenario of interdependence by creating independent operating capacities and like-minded threat perceptions. He puts ESA next to NATO, but not instead of it. France asserts that strategic autonomy is an added value to collective defense since it allows Europe to react in case NATO is unwilling or incapable. The 2017 French Strategic Review underscored that strategic autonomy has to be turned into operational capability based on a lasting defence industrial base and enhanced cooperation in the technology and intelligence sectors. This has shaped EU-wide thinking, stressing that independence is only possible if supported by the necessary resources, infrastructure, and political cohesion.¹⁰⁹

France has been advocating a sequence of concepts in favor of these goals, for instance, the European Intervention Initiative (EI2)¹¹⁰, which in 2018 introduced itself as one means of reinforcing Europe's ability to act rapidly and independently in emergencies. EI2 will instill a common strategic culture in the members, prepare the forces operationally, and offer a rapid, EU-led response capability that is independent from the

¹⁰⁶ European Parliament and Council, *Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 of 11 April 2024 Establishing a Framework for Ensuring a Secure and Sustainable Supply of Critical Raw Materials and Amending Regulations (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020*, Official Journal of the European Union, L, May 3, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing a Framework for Ensuring a Secure and Sustainable Supply of Critical Raw Materials and Amending Regulations (EU) 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020*, COM(2023) 160 final, Brussels, March 16, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ European Parliament and Council, *Regulation (EU) 2023/1781 of 13 September 2023 Establishing a Framework of Measures for Strengthening Europe's Semiconductor Ecosystem and Amending Regulation (EU) 2021/694 (Chips Act)*, Official Journal of the European Union, L, September 13, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ French Ministry for the Armed Forces, *Strategic Review of Defence and National Security – Key Points* (Paris: DICOd, 2017), 26–28.

¹¹⁰ Gianandrea Gaiani, "Macron ottiene l'adesione dell'Italia all'European Intervention Initiative," *Analisi Difesa*, September 21, 2019.

more prolonged or politically inclined streams like NATO or PESCO. More notably, EI2 even issues an offer to include the UK in membership as per its realistic and open vision.

Across the EU, the idea gained momentum in the wake of global tectonic shifts such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Ukraine war. EU increasingly looks towards the idea of making the best of the full gamut: defense and digital connectivity, health, raw materials, to economic policy. Reports like the EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor (2022)¹¹¹ indicate reducing dependencies towards the exterior and, first, value chains of strategic character and strengthening a pillar industry and technologically resilient. The push for "open strategic autonomy" is a message that the era is now, as it has come to the point of realizing that the EU must be reenergized so that it can progress despite protectionism, cooperation and openness can no longer be sidestepped with the onset of the new era.

However, Macron's vision of ESA has been challenged. Divergent visions in the EU, most of all, East Europeans' fear of being cut off from NATO, certainly express tensions of ambition and purpose of strategic autonomy. France does contend, however, that ESA is not necessarily intended to dismantle transatlantic solidarity, but to allow Europe to act where or when NATO will not or cannot. Macron also advocated for concepts such as a European Security Council and supported initiatives like the Intelligence College in Europe, all in the aim of stimulating greater European information and decision-making autonomy. Macron's vision for the ESA is of a more self-assured and confident Europe, one self-assured enough to speak for itself but unambiguously as a member of the transatlantic club. It would make the EU an actor of security unto itself, placing European sovereignty and salience front and center internationally.

Finally, Yet, the concept of strategic autonomy is not conceived similarly throughout all of Europe, and one of its essential disparities can be found in comparing Emmanuel Macron's perspective to that of the European Union institutions. Emmanuel Macron's strategic autonomy is different from that of the European Union regarding scope and ambition. They do coincide on wanting to reduce Europe's dependencies, but Macron offers strategic autonomy as a step in the direction of European sovereignty, whereas the EU markets it as resilience within the international order. Macron's ambition is for a

¹¹¹Mario Damen, *EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023: From Concept to Capacity – EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), Strategic Foresight and Capabilities Unit, PE 733.589, July 2022.

strategically independent Europe able to take sovereign decisions in defense, technology, and foreign policy and become a geopolitical actor. Macron's method is political and centralizing, typically led by state-level initiative and clear executive leadership. The EU institutional approach, meanwhile, promises economic security, supply chain autonomy, and technological capability cast in terms of "open strategic autonomy" that maintains global trading links and alliance structures. Furthermore, Macron's advocacy of strategic autonomy has the consequence of challenging existing transatlantic dependencies, as the EU is attempting to balance autonomy with continued cooperation with NATO and the United States. Not only a contrast of competing strategies, but of competing philosophies: Macron's sovereignty-focused, the EU's integrationist and pragmatic.

2.4.2 Germany: “European pillar of NATO”

In contrast to France, which advocates more "strategic autonomy" of the EU, Germany's changing perception of NATO is increasingly compatible with a pragmatic, U.S.-oriented security order, especially under external threat. Although Germany continues to participate in EU-led defense efforts, its fundamental security orientation has gravitated towards NATO since 2022.

Germany's own self-concept of NATO has also been transformed profoundly, from World War Two reluctant reliance to increased and more dedicated participation in more recent times. West Germany had traditionally aligned with NATO as it was coming into the Western alliance while East Germany aligned with the Soviet Union ; a split that still influences local political attitudes today.¹¹² Germany halted by NATO in recent decades as a security guarantor who had a duty but exercised prudence, keeping the defence budget below 2% of GDP and refraining from exporting arms to conflict zones.¹¹³ This position was completely reversed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a *Zeitenwende*; a turning point in German foreign policy and spent €100 billion on the modernization of the Bundeswehr in an effort to meet NATO's defense spending target.¹¹⁴ Conceptually, this shift was codified in Germany's

¹¹²L. Constantin Wurthmann and Sarah Wagner, “On the Association of Attitudes Towards NATO and Weapon Deliveries for Ukraine with Vote Intentions in Germany,” *German Politics* 34, no. 1 (2025): 1–24.

¹¹³Pavel Timofeev and Mariya Khorol'skaya, “Dilemmas of European Security: Comparing the Approaches of Germany and France to the Role of the EU and NATO in Europe after 2022,” *Comparative Politics Russia* 15, no. 4 (2024): 132–154.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*

inaugural National Security Strategy (2023), in which NATO has been identified as the "indispensable foundation of German, European and transatlantic security"¹¹⁵ and the EU as a value-added partner, especially for non-military issues like cybersecurity and supply chain stability. This is an unequivocal goal to raise the "European pillar"¹¹⁶ of NATO, or the increasing input of European partners to constructing the military and political strength of the alliance. Officially, Germany supports the establishment of strong EU-based forces, encouraging collaborative arm projects, and enhancing the defense industry to improve European input into NATO. As the policy underlines, "the more our European allies contribute militarily and politically to NATO, the more solid the transatlantic Alliance will be."¹¹⁷ The German approach assumes that collective defense and national defense are indivisible, and NATO remains the cornerstone of its deterrence and defense position, especially considering the evolving international political landscape of the present day.

Statistically, German military purchases are increasingly reflecting this alignment with 63% of German arms imports between 2019-2023 being American, evidencing its alignment with the transatlantic defense-industrial complex. The purchase of 35 US F-35 fighter planes; circumventing collaborative European initiatives such as the FCAS is only a sample case, although it draws French and EU institutional opposition.¹¹⁸ It needs to be noted that opinion from the people would be divided: 50.3% Germans oppose that NATO instigated war, whereas 24.4% oppose and 25.2% remain neutral. Similarly, over 40% would cut off weapon supplies to Ukraine and only 36.7% will continue to supply them, feelings now strongly identified with party affiliation. For example, 68% of AfD voters are against arms deliveries, while 59% of Green Party voters are in favor of further aid. Such growing politicization of foreign policy has placed matters of NATO into the

¹¹⁵Federal Government of Germany, *National Security Strategy: Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany* (Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, 2023), 32.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹⁸Pavel Timofeev and Mariya Khorol'skaya, "Dilemmas of European Security: Comparing the Approaches of Germany and France to the Role of the EU and NATO in Europe after 2022," *Comparative Politics Russia* 15, no. 4 (2024): 42.

limelight as a campaign platform of political competition in favor of more NATO-critical parties like the AfD and Sahra Wagenknecht's BSW.¹¹⁹

In parallel to political fragmentation, Germany has also made decisive institutional steps to enhance its defense capability. In 2025, the Bundestag and Bundesrat passed a constitutional amendment loosening the historic "debt brake" rule to allow defense and security spending above 1% of GDP without violating fiscal limits.¹²⁰ This historic gesture was triggered by a sequence of pressures: growing geopolitical uncertainty in the wake of Russia's persistent aggression, a discernible change in U.S. position after the Trump-Zelensky Oval Office showdown, and Germany's need to maintain NATO commitments in addition to reforming its military and infrastructure. Politicians such as Friedrich Merz, possible future chancellor, defended the move by asserting that "whatever it takes" now means defense.¹²¹ The reform also took advantage of the current Bundestag's two-thirds majority before a freshly elected, more divided parliament which could veto it. In addition to the defense exception, a special fund of €500 billion was also approved to build infrastructure and enhance climate resilience, showing Germany's commitment towards long-term strategic economic and military sovereignty following heightened public opinion in favor of more integrated national and European defense.

Even while Germany welcomes the more dynamic EU role, it does not call for an autonomous Europe cut loose from NATO. Berlin desires action which renders Europe a full and functioning equal in NATO, rather than an adversary. Toward this end, Germany reaffirms its pledge to NATO's collective defense commitment and seeks European strategic consistency on endeavors such as the EU Strategic Compass. Germany also views its own role as that of an "honest broker"¹²² of transatlantic relations, that of a mediating and stabilizing power between Europe and the U.S., particularly in periods of strategic tension. But this role has been made that much more difficult by previous dilly-

¹¹⁹Constantin Wurthmann and Sarah Wagner, "On the Association of Attitudes Towards NATO and Weapon Deliveries for Ukraine with Vote Intentions in Germany," *German Politics* 34, no. 1 (2025): 11–16.

¹²⁰Federal Foreign Office of Germany, "Defense, Infrastructure: Parliament Approves Reform of the Debt Brake," *Germany in France*, March 19, 2025.

¹²¹ Euronews, "Fonds spécial pour la défense : l'Allemagne envisage une réforme du 'frein à l'endettement'," *Euronews*, March 7, 2025.

¹²² Benjamin Pommer, "Return of the 'Honest Broker'? Examining Germany's Potential as Transatlantic Anchor Point in the Light of Strategic Competition," in *Turbulence Across the Sea: Transatlantic Relations and Strategic Competition*, eds. Elie Baranets and Andrew R. Novo (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024), 99.

dallying, e.g., Berlin's previous hesitation to go on record in favor of providing weapons to Ukraine and the profound energy dependence on Russia. These have sometimes damaged the image of Germany as the leader of Europe in terms of security issues. But Berlin is trying to rise again by enhancing transatlantic solidarity, de-linkage from Russian energy sources, and intensifying its security engagement. Germany realizes that its economic strength, if combined with an open foreign and security policy, can create some kind of soft power such as military power in shaping European and international security. In brief, Germany sees a world with NATO still in the lead, while Europe, especially Germany, takes more responsibility for its own defense and global security, not as an alternative to U.S. involvement but as a stable and committed partner in an integrated transatlantic community.

2.4.3 Baltic States and Poland

The Baltic States and Poland are currently the loudest and most assertive voices of collective defense within NATO, motivated by a shared experience of Soviet occupation and geographic proximity to an expanding belligerent Russia. NATO has remained the cornerstone of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania since 2004 accession; a feeling amplified by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022. Those latter two episodes compelled the Baltic states to reassess their security context, all designating Russia as the biggest strategic threat and accelerating NATO integration. The eFP of the alliance, launched in 2017 following a commitment at the Warsaw Summit of 2016, has since become the cornerstone of their defense strategy. All three Baltic nations also have a vigilant multinational battlegroup commanded by a lead ally NATO within Canada covers Latvia, the UK covers Estonia, and Germany covers Lithuania; at a forward-deterrent unit with mass-level bilateral joint exercises like Saber Strike, Spring Storm, and Iron Wolf for force preparedness and integration.¹²³

Aside from conventional defense, the Baltic nations have also set the pace when it comes to innovation and resilience. Estonia, for instance, emerged as the cyber defense leader of NATO via the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence Tallinn and co-operation with Sweden and Finland on air defense and maritime surveillance. Lithuania and Latvia

¹²³ Ricardo López-Aranda Jagu, "The Baltic States' Evolving Strategic Posture: National Interests, NATO Integration, and Transatlantic Coordination," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 66, October 2024, 175–196.

have established civil defense structures, defense structures for strategic infrastructure, and air surveillance throughout the area, particularly because of their territorial location close to Kaliningrad and Belarus. Despite internal conflicts, Latvia's large Russian-speaking minority, for instance: these countries possess a united strategic vision: deterrence by the presence of NATO, popular opposition, and active defense of Ukraine and other Eastern allies. Their evolving role demonstrates not only adaptation but increasing leadership within the alliance.

Poland's trajectory as a NATO member encapsulates this change as it has transitioned from an aspirational security alignment following the end of communism to being a key contributor to NATO's eastern policy. Polish elites, whose primary aim after communism collapsed in 1989 was to allow for a restoration of national sovereignty and to integrate into the Western security order, viewed NATO expansion as vital. Its joining the bloc in 1999 was the turning point towards abandoning its Soviet heritage and solidifying its dedication to the alliance cause. Although backing the alliance's post-Cold War crisis management intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, Poland remained firm in insisting on the territorial defense forever as NATO's priority. According to the Oxford Handbook of NATO: "Poland joined NATO in 1999. It did so with the belief that collective defence was NATO's core mission."¹²⁴

The 2014 Crimean annexation prompted Poland to ask for an enhanced presence by NATO along its borders, and it reacted by having the U.S.-led eFP's battalion deployed along the Suwalki Gap, a strategically valuable area. Poland has also seen further bilateral deployments by the United States in the form of rotational forces and prepositioned materiel. With a 4% of GDP defense budget in 2023: the highest in the alliance.¹²⁵ Poland has been spending on US military equipment such as F-35s, HIMARS, Patriot missiles, and Abrams tanks, all of which mirror its twin approach of NATO building as well as transatlantic defense relationship development. Its security narrative, once reliably wary of Russian revisionism, was classically formulated in 2008 by President Lech Kaczyński: *"Today it is Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, then the Baltic States, and one day the time may come for my country, Poland."*¹²⁶ This foresight has come to pass, and Poland and the

¹²⁴Wojciech Lorenz, "Poland," in *The Oxford Handbook of NATO*, ed. James Sperling and Mark Webber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 723.

¹²⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2023)*, NATO Press Release (2023) 054, July 7, 2023, 3.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 729.

Baltic States are now not only beneficiaries but also co-authors of NATO's Eastern Defence agenda.

2.4.4 Finland, Sweden and Denmark.

Finally, NATO membership by Sweden and Finland is a new chapter in European security history. Thirty years after defense neutrality began to gain traction, the two countries felt compelled to seek full membership following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, reminding the world that NATO was their country's survival and neighborhood security lifeline. Finland and Sweden, which joined in April 2023 and March 2024, respectively, plugged a strategic gap along the northern peripheries of the alliance and rendered the Nordic area an area to be defended rather than a grey zone. Along with their highly professional militaries, solid democratic foundations, and geography, they also contribute enormously to the deterrent mass of NATO in the Baltic and in the Arctic. Faced with hybrid threats of cyber aggression, airspace penetration, and misinformation, these two nations increasingly shape NATO strategic thinking, threatening to give a classic example of Nordic solidarity and anchor the alliance collective defense against Russian aggressiveness.¹²⁷

Finland's and Sweden's membership in NATO, and Denmark's dropping of its EU defense opt-out, constitute a historic Nordic turn in security policy triggered by the shock of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. While Denmark has had its defense under NATO's umbrella since the Cold War era, it had stayed outside EU military bodies such as the European Defence Agency (EDA) and PESCO. But after a decisive referendum of June 1, 2022, Denmark ended a nearly 30-year military opt-out, aligning more with its Nordic cousins. Finland and Sweden's effort to join NATO alongside Denmark's deepening participation in EU defence cooperation has created a Nordic bloc that strengthens NATO's northern flank and Europe's deterrence. This movement has eliminated the historical buffer with Russia to establish a border between two opposing blocs. From a realist perspective, a border on a map is perceived as a strategic threat by Russia, which may either create a stabilizing effect to deter future Russian regional manoeuvres or escalate conflict across the larger Euro-Atlantic region.

¹²⁷Karen-Anna Eggen, "Designing around NATO's Deterrence: Russia's Nordic Information Confrontation Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47, no. 3 (2024): 410–434.

Chapter 3 – War, strategy and the future of European security: reassessing the EU-NATO balance after Ukraine

In following up on the analysis in Chapter 2 of the areas of cooperation between the EU and NATO, the developments in threat perceptions of both organizations, and the differences in perceptions of the Atlantic Alliance amongst their respective member states, this chapter will provide an analysis of the institutional responses of both NATO and the EU to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The Ukraine conflict is regarded as a critical moment in this analysis, or a game-changer, which has forced both NATO and the EU to reassess their strategic posture and institutional identities, and geopolitical ambitions, under significant external pressure. It is here that we witness the structural constraints of each organization, and the various methods of conflict resolution and collective defense that exist in a time of crisis.

In this chapter a comprehensive overview of the war's political, strategic and institutional implications for both actors, and considers what implication this war may have on transatlantic security governance. More specifically, will the war result in NATO-EU complementarity and a new more coherent and integrated relationship, or will the result be accelerating strategic divergence and the EU developing greater autonomy in defense and security? The chapter also contributes to the broader understanding of how through shocks such as the war in Ukraine can transform institutional relations and shift the variable geometry of European security architecture.

To understand the fate of NATO and the European Union, it is necessary to consider the 2022 Russian war against Ukraine as a game changer where both organizations valued their strategic ambitions and mandate differently. The war was not unexpected but took place because of the Western Russia irritability and insecurity over centuries caused by NATO aggressions in the East of Europe in pursuit of U.S. strategic interests. Russia's full-scale invasion was "an inevitable consequence of how the West, especially the U.S, has utilized NATO in the post-Cold War period".¹²⁸ Russian red line running across

¹²⁸Yanan Song, "Ironclad US Commitment to NATO? From NATO Expansion to the Ukraine Crisis," *Strategic Analysis* 47, no. 1 (2023): 1.

NATO membership of Ukraine, provoking military intervention to reassert authority over its perceived buffer zone.

As already mentioned in Chapter 2, that aggression provoked NATO to rebadged Russia as “the most significant and direct threat” to Euro-Atlantic security.¹²⁹ Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine directly and immediately challenged NATO's and the European Union's strategic interests. As noted in Chapter 2, both recent strategic reports by the EU and NATO equally both placed the threat of Russia with greater emphasis since the Ukraine conflict erupted. But they do put it slightly differently: NATO is more direct and more forceful in language, calling Russia “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” and concluding that “we cannot consider the Russian Federation to be our partner”¹³⁰. On the other hand, the EU Strategic Compass also recognizes the gravity of Russian aggression but applies it to the broader geopolitical context of the country and refers to it as “a tectonic shift in European history”¹³¹ and states that Russian action “severely and directly threatens the European security order and the security of European citizens”¹³². Whereas NATO depends on deterrence and forward defence as its operational principle, the EU locates the threat in a wider strategic context, stressing European resilience and strategic autonomy as needs. This disparity in orientation means that the two organizations will most likely not go in the same direction in the future. Indeed, as NATO's own vision is, in a large-if not total-degree, dictated by that of the United States, its future position will most likely reflect American strategic interests. This is already present in the recent developments of the Russia-Ukraine war, where U.S. imprint is particularly evident in NATO's strategic moves and declarations.

3.1 Effect and consequences: for NATO and the EU

Effect and consequences: NATO

For NATO, the war was a grim reminder of its “raison d'être”: collective defense against external aggression. This has been responded to by a drastic toughening of its deterrent

¹²⁹North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022* (Brussels: NATO, 2022), 4.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, para. 8.

¹³¹European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (Brussels: EEAS, 2022), 5.

¹³²*Ibid.*, 7.

position, by raising high-readiness forces from 40,000 to over 300,000 and in defense of its Eastern members through standing multinational battlegroups stationed in Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria.¹³³ Meanwhile, NATO has accelerated membership of Sweden and Finland ; two of the former non-aligned nations; inaugural demonstration of heightened sense of solidarity and sense of urgency among allies. This expansion altered the strategic equilibrium of the Baltic Sea and brought more than 1,300 kilometers of the Russian border into the area of NATO.

Ever since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, Ukraine has maintained a commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration and NATO membership. In 2014, NATO shifted from political ad hoc aid towards an institutional relationship with Ukraine. Coordination subsequently expanded to include military training, security sector reform, and interoperability-facilitating actions according to NATO standards. In 2015, Ukraine launched a bold defense reform package to bring itself into alignment with the values of NATO. At the top of their list were to create unified military command, to improve defense planning and budgeting management, and to professionalize the armed forces. It was also to transition to Western weapons platforms and to NATO doctrine. In 2016, such growing cooperation was committed at the Warsaw NATO Summit by the Comprehensive Assistance Package¹³⁴ presenting a template of the long-term defense reform and institutional capacity building of Ukraine. Ukraine incorporated membership in NATO into a foreign policy priority entrenched in law in 2017. It was submitted for consideration a second time in 2018, and NATO membership became a constitutional obligation via ratification of the Law on National Security. The aim was reiterated in 2019 via constitutional change and again in the 2020 National Security Strategy, strengthening Ukraine's trajectory for Euro-Atlantic integration long-term.

In response to the huge invasion in 2022, Ukraine doubled down on reform. It had already adopted 318 of NATO standards through the start of 2024 and will have 581 more than 50% of NATO's interoperability framework by 2026. Its engagement with NATO increased: more than 100,000 Ukrainian troops were trained overseas by NATO allies, and a NATO-Ukraine Joint Training Center was opened in Poland to facilitate joint

¹³³Jens Stoltenberg, remarks made ahead of the NATO Summit, June 2022, quoted in Lili Bayer, "NATO to Boost High-Readiness Forces to Over 300,000 Troops," *Politico*, June 27, 2022.

¹³⁴North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine*, NATO Fact Sheet, July 2016.

training and operational compatibility. The Defence Ministry also launched an ambitious plan to make English literacy the standard for each and every member of the military by 2026, spreading the language to all grades of study and operations training. But still, there remains a giant job to be finished in Ukraine, nevertheless. The conflict disproportionately draws in resources, makes reform hard to enact, and involves walking the tightrope between abandoning institutions and short-term battlefield expediency. Transparency in defence buying, valuable in avoiding corruption, can jeopardize strategic exposure. High-profile crisis buys are expensive and thus contribute to fueling difficulty of control. But NATO's great strategic, institutional, and logistical support has taken a uniquely great role in ensuring the sovereignty of Ukraine and leading it towards the transatlantic security order.

Even though Ukraine is not a NATO member and hence not protected by Article 5 direct military intervention, the alliance's reaction to Russian actions in 2022 emphatically reaffirmed its domestic political cohesion as well as external deterrence posture. As the article bears witness, "the Ukraine crisis is a complete reminder of why NATO is useful"¹³⁵ affirming the alliance's ongoing strategic value. Even though NATO is not replacing direct combat operations in Ukraine, its massive strategic, institutional, and logistic support has played a key role in bolstering Ukrainian sovereignty and integrating it into the transatlantic security system.

Effect and consequences for the EU:

The effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have been revolutionary for the European Union, both internationally and within its own borders, as far as governance is involved. The war was a tipping-point "critical juncture"¹³⁶ in EU foreign policy, in the sense of historian institutionalism, that brought with it displacements that were unthinkable before. Compared with the relatively restrained reaction to Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, EU action in 2022 was strong, multi-dimensional, and swift. This change was not only a result of the record intensity and scale of Russian violence, such as bombing civilians and key infrastructure, but also due to the path-dependent cumulated building of EU–Ukraine relations after 2014. The state-and

¹³⁵Steven Erlanger, "Russian Aggression Puts NATO in Spotlight," *New York Times*, March 18, 2014.

¹³⁶Giselle Bosse, "Values, Rights, and Changing Interests: The EU's Response to the War Against Ukraine and the Responsibility to Protect Europeans," *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (2022): 531–546.

resilience-crafting Association Agreement had created a rich matrix of institutional, technical, and personal links between EU and Ukrainian policymakers.¹³⁷ They constructed what academics refer to as positive feedback, strengthening two-way identification and solidarity. EU representatives had clearly experienced a real sense of relatedness with Ukraine in interview-based research increasingly viewing it as a member of the European political family. This proximity at the institutional and emotional levels had its resonance in principled policy action. The EU made use of the European Peace Facility for the first time to provide lethal assistance to an aggressor state, thereby breaking a long-standing taboo on the sale of arms to regions of persistent conflict.¹³⁸

Economically, the EU sent billions of macro-financial assistances, imposed a temporary customs duty suspension on Ukrainian goods, and initiated long-term preparation for post-conflict reconstruction of Ukraine through public-private partnership and alignment of the Green Deal and digital agenda.

Politically, the Ukrainian conflict accelerated the European Union's enlargement policy into directions inconceivable hitherto, and Moldova and Georgia are two of the prime examples thereof. Moldova, which made its membership application in March 2022, received candidate status mere three months later in June 2022, and began accession negotiations in June 2024 as a historic pace in EU accession history¹³⁹. Similarly, Georgia's trajectory was changed by being made a candidate country in December 2023, even though its government subsequently put application on hold until 2028.¹⁴⁰ All of this is part of a broader geopolitical realignment of the EU's policy along its eastern flank, making enlargement a tool of stabilization and power rather than a slow, merit-based process. But this speeding up also raises doubts on the EU's own preparedness, institutional capacity, and the feasibility of conditionality in future enlargements.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷European Commission, *Association Implementation Report on Ukraine*, SWD(2022)202 final, July 22, 2022.

¹³⁸European External Action Service, “#StandWithUkraine,” European Union, accessed May 13, 2025,

¹³⁹ European Council, Conclusions on Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, 23–24 June 2022.

¹⁴⁰ European Council, Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process – Georgia, 14 December 2023.

¹⁴¹ European Commission, 2023 Communication on Enlargement Policy, COM (2023) 690 final, 8 November 2023.

Finally, domestically, the crisis prompted the EU to accelerate reforms towards increasing its geopolitical independence. These are the REPowerEU plan¹⁴² of reducing Russian energy reliance, boosting joint arms procurement and defense cooperation in PESCO, and re-prioritizing the focus on Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) equipment to facilitate faster and more collective external reactions. Moreover, the EU imposed sweeping sanctions targeting Russian banks, oligarchs, and state-owned enterprises, and moved rapidly to reduce its dependency on Russian energy; a dependency that still accounted for over 37% of the EU's energy imports in 2020.

Finally, Hungary's vetoing of Ukraine's route to EU membership has jeopardized the credibility, cohesion, and strategic consistency of the European Union when its geopolitical redefinition is most important. The use by Hungary's government of veto threats in the approval of financial assistance, accession talks, and sanctions packages has put the EU at vulnerabilities against intra-EU conflicts, particularly with its rule of unanimity over common foreign policy choices. This exercise has not only delayed critical decisions but has also sent confusing signals to Ukraine as well as other outside actors, most notably Russia, about the resolve of the EU. In addition, Budapest's promotion of Russian propaganda and economic vulnerability to Moscow undermined the EU's image as a united actor in upholding a strong stand against aggression, eroding its normative capability and constraining collective diplomacy. In so doing, Hungary was able to reinforce domestic cleavages, frustrating the Union's capacity to respond promptly during an occasion of strategic crisis.

3.2 Prospect after the Ukraine war for the EU and NATO:

3.2.1 Prospect after the Ukraine war for the EU

The European Union is at a strategic crossroads with Ukrainian conflict ongoing continuing to redefine the politics of the continent. The EU's most poignant consequence of Russian aggression, perhaps, has been its fast-paced dash to Ukrainian membership as a little-publicized but historic geopolitics rebalancing. On 23 June 2022, four months into bare-faced invasion, the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine in a

¹⁴² European Commission, *REPowerEU: Affordable, Secure and Sustainable Energy for Europe*, accessed May 1, 2025.

poignant demonstration of political solidarity.¹⁴³ The Council valued Ukraine's "European perspective"¹⁴⁴ and tied its future to the common European project. The decision was not based on grounds of technical interpretation of Article 49 TEU, but on a new "logic of accession through war"¹⁴⁵ because Ukraine's defense of common European values was felt to merit rapid-track membership. In effect, the war has made Ukraine's accession a moral, strategic, and symbolic challenge. This has remade the logic of enlargement. Ukraine's application, put forward under fire, brought urgency to a centuries-long process that had bogged down. It challenged the EU to meet its high moral rhetoric and sped up a membership process that had taken centuries to remit. The Granada Declaration of October 2023 further solidified this stance by delineating enlargement as a "geostrategic investment"¹⁴⁶ in peace, security, and stability. The open EU doorway to Ukraine is a robust European identity in geopolitics, an very effective deterrence message to Russia, and gains Ukraine a place in the European family.

The potential gains to Ukrainian future membership are substantial. Economically, Ukraine would be bringing the EU's internal market and transportation network further to the east, creating increased trade and integration on the continent.¹⁴⁷ Energy-wise, membership would diversify EU supply chains and lower external power dependence. Politically, Ukrainian accession would enhance the EU's global power and extend its normative power to the East. Ethically, awarding candidate status amidst a war was a deeply symbolic act of solidarity, putting the EU firmly side by side with an evidently struggling democracy which is defending democratic values and sovereignty.¹⁴⁸

These benefits come at a price. The EU will be required to implement deep institutional changes to accommodate such a large-scale accession: chiefly in decision-making, the budget, and cohesion policy. Ukraine's low administrative capacity is an issue as far as implementing EU law in areas such as the judiciary, anti-corruption, media freedom, and

¹⁴³European Council, *Conclusions of the European Council Meeting (23 and 24 June 2022)*, EUCO 24/22 (Brussels: Council of the European Union, June 24, 2022).

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, Section III: "Membership Applications of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia," paras. 10–12.

¹⁴⁵Roman Petrov and Christophe Hillion, "Accession through War – Ukraine's Road to the EU," *Common Market Law Review* 59 (2022): 1291.

¹⁴⁶European Council, *Granada Declaration*, October 6, 2023.

¹⁴⁷European Commission. (2022). *Commission Opinion on Ukraine's application for membership of the European Union*, COM (2022)407 final.

¹⁴⁸Von der Leyen, U. (2022). *Joint statement with President Zelenskyy*, Kyiv, 8 April 2022.

de-oligarchization is concerned.¹⁴⁹ While "accession by war" offers symbolic legitimacy, it also sacrifices the conditionality stringency as a typical feature of the EU enlargement strategy. Furthermore, the integration of a country with Ukraine's large and displaced population is a severe social and economic challenge to the EU's solidarity capacity, adjustment of the labor market, and longer-term population strategy. This clash between political uncertainty and institutional preparedness runs the risk of slowing down the Union's cohesion were it to be carefully balanced.

Moreover, Ukrainian integration is geopolitically more dangerous. The EU's open-door policy may lead to further daring moves from Russia, while other Western Balkan countries have complained about what they perceive as the "rapid track treatment" of Ukraine at the expense of other countries such as tarnishing the reputation of the enlargement policy for being based on merit. The ultimate outcome of the war will also determine the accession of Ukraine. Options range from pure freedom and rapid accession to partial occupation and juridical ambiguity over sovereignty and jurisdiction over land, each with radically different implications for the EU's ability to integrate Ukraine as a fully integrated member. Lastly, Ukrainian EU membership is a moment of generations to reclaim European sovereignty, to bring peace and prosperity to the east, and to reassert the Union's ability to transform. But to understand this moment, the EU itself must prepare not only by balancing its enlargement policy and institutions, but by being loyal to the promise of solidarity through sustained political, financial, and structural engagement. Ukraine's path will be slow and painful, but its accession may signal the renaissance of a more united, efficient, and strategically confident Europe.¹⁵⁰

As the war in Ukraine reshapes the security context of Europe, the European Union is prepared to confront not so new challenges, but an escalation of already existing fissures; most of which were already visible five years ago and diagnosed under the name of "Westlessness." The "Westlessness" term of the Munich Security Conference in its 2020 report is a term used to convey the whirlpool condition of a no-longer-defined, unified, or world-leading West. The symptoms of the free fall both internally and externally are indicated. Internally, it accounts for the closing ranks processes of ideological, political,

¹⁴⁹ European Commission. (2022). *Association Implementation Report on Ukraine*, SWD (2022)202 final, 22 July 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Roman Petrov and Christophe Hillion, "Beyond the Current Crisis: Rethinking the Legal and Political Relationship Between the EU and Ukraine," *Common Market Law Review* 59, no. 5 (2022): 1293–1295.

and strategic disintegration of Western democracies, most glaringly apparent within the European Union and transatlantic community. Externally, this means the loss of Western domination of the global system with rising powers like China and assertive Russia that increasingly challenge the liberal international order hitherto marked by Western norms. The MSC, being a symbolic “family reunion of the West”¹⁵¹ is today a stage on which cleavages on issues of burden-sharing within NATO, migration, sovereignty, and rule of law are barefaced for all to witness. This division of common purpose and cohesion is not illusory but has direct strategic implications. Politically and culturally, Westlessness is also increasingly spurred by rising illiberalism, nationalism, and anti-multilateralism in most Western societies. These forces target the same democratic norms and institutions that were the ideological center of the post-WWII Western order. As Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, and Jacinda Ardern have written, the failure to coalesce around a shared vision has undercut the West's capacity to speak as one voice to crises, thereby dissipating its strategic power and moral authority in the international arena.

The European Union represents a concentrated case of *Westlessness* in action. In fact, the Ukraine conflict has starkly naked inherent EU fault lines, particularly on defense policy and strategic commitment, to lay bare a patchwork security landscape. The Eastern European states have registered stunning defense budget increases in NATO's latest 2024 projections: Poland leads all EU and NATO countries at 4.12% of GDP on defense expenditure, closely followed by Estonia (3.43%), Latvia (3.15%), and Lithuania (2.85%) well ahead of NATO's 2% threshold. Conversely, the big West European countries of Italy (1.49%), Spain (1.28%), and Belgium (1.30%) miss the goal, despite geopolitical imperatives. This variance is not only a function of differing threat perceptions wherein the Eastern states perceive Russia as a short-term threat but also differing political agendas and budgetary priorities.

These breaks have put the EU in jeopardy to be an independent strategic actor in an increasingly militarized and competitive international order. The crisis has also reaffirmed the structural EU dependency on NATO and more narrowly on the United States, undermining decades of debate about the establishment of European “strategic autonomy.” Despite adopting rude rhetoric, the EU is essentially still tied by transatlantic

¹⁵¹Munich Security Conference, *Munich Security Report 2020: Westlessness* (Munich: Munich Security Conference, 2020), 6.

security arrangements since the United States remains the only provider of hard security guarantees to Europe. To these internal and transatlantic pressures are to be added the geopolitical change on the outside marked by heightened divergence among the West and the Global South. India, Brazil, and China have opted for non-alignment or tacit solidarity with Russia, and this makes EU efforts at uniting world opinion and further diminishing Western presence in the world even more tenuous. Such world fragmentation of alignment, as well as Europe's diminishing ability to shape security trends independently, means that unless the EU rapidly increases its strategic consistency and military strength, it will find itself outside a multipolar world increasingly controlled by power blocs such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and CSTO.¹⁵²

3.2.2 Ukraine as a test case for Franco-German leadership in the EU

The French and German positions, being two of the central actors within the European Union, are enlightening as to how the stance of the EU is shifting with regards to Ukraine. They reflect the overall dynamics discussed in Chapter 2, and this model applied to the situation of Ukraine is what makes sense of where the Union is going in the future based on the role played by these two states in influencing EU policy.

French' s perspective

First, France sees the war in Ukraine not only as a serious transgression of European security but also as an experimentation laboratory for its dearly held concept of an autonomous and strategically insulated Europe. Emmanuel Macron, one of the loudest advocates for the strategic autonomy doctrine, at first attempted to contain the war through diplomacy reaching out to President Vladimir Putin and not taking action that would continue to push Russia toward isolation from Europe. As discussed in Chapter 2, Macron's 2019 criticism of NATO's "brain death,"¹⁵³ in which he questioned the alliance's strategic direction and called for a Europe that could operate as an independent power balancer, free from Cold War-style divisions and less reliant on the United States, was comparable to this early idealistic stance.

¹⁵²Raitis Rublovskis, "Balance of Power After Ukraine War – Transatlantic Futures: NATO 2030," *Security Dialogues* 15, no. 1 (2024): 1–19.

¹⁵³ Emmanuel Macron, interview with *The Economist*, November 7, 2019.

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion compelled an abrupt reversal. The crisis exposed deep contradictions in Macron's position: while he had been critical of NATO, soon afterward he acknowledged its strategic necessity and sent French troops to help secure NATO's Eastern front in Romania.¹⁵⁴ While France's military assistance to Ukraine €1.8 billion so far in early 2024 has been relatively modest compared to Germany or Britain, Macron himself has been publicly pro-Ukraine and pro-NATO even before the Biden administration.¹⁵⁵ He did so with the specific intention of demonstrating how much France is willing to support collective defense efforts whenever European security is immediately threatened. But in the wings throughout was his original prudence: France didn't wish to be offering principal weaponry systems, and Macron's dogged and maddening insistence that the EU, and France with it, shouldn't "humiliate Russia" annoyed and flummoxed European partners. As the report continues. This change in rhetoric to language of "loyalty" instead of "voice" also highlighted the policy's strategic imprecision: balancing France's sovereign imagination with general Western defense requirements.

This diversion, however, is not equivalent to relinquishing strategic autonomy but rather rebalancing based on the necessities of war. Macron's position post-2022 requires that NATO must be Euro-Atlantic centered and not too deeply invested in US-led global endeavours like the Indo-Pacific pivot. His new policy is not anti-American or anti-NATO but rather to ensure that Europe should be capable of acting independently in case American commitment becomes uncertain or diverted. With increased defense spending, greater NATO involvement, and reinforcing EU defense mechanisms, Macron has re-tuned his agenda of independence in consonance with current geopolitical realities. His appeal for "strategic intimacy" with Washington betrays not submissiveness, but convergent strategy; France wanting to preserve transatlantic cohesion yet remaining committed to the ultimate prize of an autonomous, militarily powerful, and diplomatically cohesive Europe.¹⁵⁶ On this point, France's Macron policy oscillates between ambition

¹⁵⁴ Samuel B.H. Faure, "Coping with the Rise of Sino-American Rivalry: Why Macron Has Not (Yet) Succeeded in Strengthening Strategic Autonomy," in *Turbulence Across the Sea: Transatlantic Relations and Strategic Competition*, eds. Elie Baranets and Andrew R. Novo (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024), 139.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 140–142.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

and realism, throwing its anchor to NATO but constantly reaching towards the dream of a self-contained Europe, unified in speech, defense, and action when needed, independent

German's perspective

However, Germany viewed the war in Ukraine as an existential geopolitical turn that shattered its traditional presumption of peace through alignment with Russia. The Russian invasion catalyzed a *Zeitenwende*, an open break from Berlin's strategic culture of restraint, propelling Germany further into integration in an order based on NATO. Although Germany is one of the tough allies of Ukraine today, it is still cautious about, say, providing weapons like Taurus missiles. It is reflective of deeply rooted suspicions of military involvement, polarisation of public views and political polarization on security policy.¹⁵⁷

Despite such concerns, Germany's function within NATO has appreciably increased since 2022. Within the European pillar of the NATO, Germany committed to deploy a permanent combat brigade in Lithuania and forcefully increased its contribution to the position of NATO deterrence. The National Security Strategy of 2023 reiterated NATO as the cornerstone of German defense. To fund this transformation, Germany amended its constitution to relax fiscal restraints and created a dedicated €100 billion fund to outfit its military forces with upgraded weaponry.¹⁵⁸ Defense expenditures were increased from 1.38 percent of GDP in 2022 to 2 percent in 2024 and will accomplish even more. Procurement choices involving strategic policy, including the acquisition of U.S. F-35 fighter jets and helicopters, are pragmatic alignment with transatlantic defense industries. Germany certified 97 defence deals worth €45 billion during the year 2024 that permanently shifted its defense role.¹⁵⁹

And yet this transformation remains politically disputed. Deterrence, escalation, and sovereignty anxieties still shape domestic discussions of the direction of German security

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin Pommer, "Return of the 'Honest Broker'? Examining Germany's Potential as Transatlantic Anchor Point in the Light of Strategic Competition," in *Turbulence Across the Sea: Transatlantic Relations and Strategic Competition*, ed. Elie Baranets and Andrew R. Novo (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024), 97–117.

¹⁵⁸ Federal Government of Germany, *National Security Strategy: Robust, Resilient, Sustainable – Integrated Security for Germany* (Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, 2023).

¹⁵⁹ Frank Gardner and Toby Luckhurst, "Germany votes for historic boost to defence and infrastructure spending," *BBC News*, March 18, 2025.

policy. NATO is also now a party-political cleavage, with the alliance influencing party manifestos and election campaigns. Short of exogenous shocks precipitating more urgency, Germany's future moves will more plausibly be cautious and determined by the interplay between its post-war history and the exigencies of collective defense.

Both strategic concepts are elements of a larger rift in Europe's geopolitical strategy. France favors independent action, even at the risk of controversy, while Germany favors multilateral action through transatlantic institutions. Practically, the European Union is moving towards a future where it reinforces defense instruments such as the European Peace Facility, joint ammunition procurement, and the EUMAM Ukraine training mission, all within the NATO framework. Europe is not decoupling from the United States but seeking to balance the strategic burden more evenly within a reinforced transatlantic partnership. Under current circumstances, the path being taken is increasingly reflective of the German perspective in that the realization of full strategic autonomy is appearing increasingly impossible. This will be even more obvious in the following section.

3.2.3 Prospect after the Ukraine war: NATO

Since the Cold War's end, NATO enlargement has been seen in Moscow as a political reorientation, but increasingly as a menacing dismemberment of the buffer states that had kept the Soviet Union at arm's length from the West. During the early 1990s, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states were among the former Eastern bloc countries that rushed to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, shattering the first layer of a geopolitical buffer zone between East and West. The second buffer zone, countries like Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and former neutral Finland, is the new frontier fought over today. From the realist point of view, whenever NATO was expanding its political or military influence into these regions, Moscow viewed this as an extension of its own strategic overreach. The 2008 war in Georgia, 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine are a manifestation of Russia's coercive pushback to counter NATO expansion into what Russia sees as its vital interests and red lines.

Some analysts even contend that the war in Ukraine represents not only a manifestation of Russian aggression but the repercussions of Western strategic error, especially NATO's

strategic error. In the realist tradition, particularly as articulated by the work of John Mearsheimer¹⁶⁰, the alliance's eastward expansion, in addition to the 2008 announcement regarding potential NATO membership for Ukraine, raised defensive responses in Russia. Offensive realism posits that great powers have an inherent motivation to dominate their own region and defend their sphere of influence from emerging rival alliances. War in Ukraine becomes a predictable reaction from a power that felt threatened by an existential security threat and an action that is not seen as pathological in its origin. Realist theorists reject the idea that the invasion should be explained by Putin's motivations, or ideology, and instead focus on the structure of an anarchic international system that drives actions.

This response trend points out that as NATO moves closer toward Russia's perceived sphere, divisions within the Alliance start to manifest, especially when expansion means high-stakes security bets like Ukraine. Despite boisterous proclamations of Ukraine's "irreversible path" towards NATO membership, political will within the Alliance is precisely divided. Of the 32 members of the Alliance, only nine countries: the majority of which are Eastern and Nordic countries like Poland, Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and the United Kingdom have always and really been in favor of Ukraine's membership. These members, being closer geographically to Russia and having experienced the Soviet occupation, view the Ukrainian membership as necessary camouflage for their security. Their political clout in the alliance is limited by thin defense budgets and personnel. The bigger members such as the United States, Germany, France, and Italy remain suspicious and provide rhetorical assurances, avoiding firm commitments. This hesitation results in NATO, as politically cohesive as it is now standing against Russian aggression, not being willing to welcome Ukraine; at least this much out of fear of further fueling the war and the additional burden of having to defend an actively involved country. Ironically, Vladimir Putin could use this discord to his benefit by actively supporting Ukrainian membership to cause dissonance among alliance members. But more reasonably, the answer would be to upgrade the Ukrainian military to NATO level short of bringing it into the alliance, thus taking up a deterrence posture without entangling it in the Article 5 commitment. This would keep alliance cohesion, as well as put NATO in the position to be best qualified to

¹⁶⁰John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77–89.

re-engineer its role for a multipolar world in which political flexibility and conventional deterrence might be determinative ahead of extending the lines of control.

A critical perspective of the topic

From my point of view, today's conflict is less over Ukraine's willingness to join NATO and more over redesigning the post-Cold War order in Europe, when Russia was not afforded a permanent stake. The West did not consider in Moscow's mind the geopolitics of carefully eliminating buffer states without any security guarantees that acknowledged Russia's perception of its own sphere of influence. The liberal West's repeated view of self-determination as utopian as it is ethically correct did not consider the strategic prudence of this act and underestimated the resistance it would face. So going, effectively, the ever-widening enlargement of NATO has itself become symbolic of the scale of Western idealism and the return to backroom great power politics by which territorial buffer states and spheres of influence end up re-defining Eurasian security architecture across the board again.

The real leverage is not in the negotiating with Putin but in deciding the nature and degree of Western aid to Ukraine after a ceasefire. Even without NATO membership, Europe and the U.S. appear committed to upgrading Ukraine's military to NATO standards as a policy that raises deterrence without the legal and political complexities of full membership. In line with NATO's 2030 agenda¹⁶¹ with emphasis on expanded interoperability, capacity building, and sustained defense expenditures, the Alliance has already enhanced its input into training, standardization, and force readiness in the neighborhood to the east. This revised structure allows for Ukraine to become more integrated in the security setting of NATO to a greater degree, strengthening its defence without setting off outright membership formalization. Under this perspective, the transformation of NATO is not merely defense of the current members. It is also about building a larger strategic perimeter where Ukraine becomes a focal, but unofficial, point.

¹⁶¹NATO. *NATO 2030: Factsheet*. Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, June 2021.

3.3 Future fault lines: How EU-NATO differences on China and Russia threaten Transatlantic unity

Growing divergence between the EU and NATO on how to manage China and Russia spotlights a strategic disconnect that, if not overcome, will likely pose significant obstacles to transatlantic cohesion in the years ahead.

Although NATO and the EU are similar in attitude to the most threatening powers to the world, namely Russia and China, they differ in substance as well as in grading and interpreting the threats, and the mismatch of transatlantic cohesion's approach has a durable consequence.¹⁶² Both to America, nonetheless, Moscow and Beijing signify the identical order of right away and pressing strategic precedence, with Beijing the more distant regional competitive system and Moscow the near-term destabilizer of European stability.¹⁶³

This two-pyramidal vision has led the United States to rebalance strategic priority to the Indo-Pacific, a priority shift to the region of the "Tilt" or "Pivot to Asia," one that distracts political, economic, and military resources from the Euro-Atlantic.¹⁶⁴ European powers, however, continue to view Russia first and foremost as the hegemonic security threat due to its territorial expansionism, revisionist agenda, and efforts to destabilize post-Cold War Europe. While China is known to be a global power economically and technologically, it appears distant and non-military threat. This gap is not just spatial and temporal but also structural, and one which reflects institutionally based and strategic culture difference in readiness underlying.

This divergence was acted out in the Huawei 5D controversy¹⁶⁵, with the United States moving quickly to exclude Chinese presence from key infrastructure, and most European governments hedging before capitulating to US coercion. The AUKUS deal between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, excluding France and causing alliance

¹⁶²François Heisbourg, *Can NATO Survive the Geostrategic Pivot to Asia?* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), 261.

¹⁶³Elie Baranets, "What Is Europe Caught in the Middle Of? A Theoretical Look at the US-China Competition," in *Turbulence Across the Sea: Transatlantic Relations and Strategic Competition*, ed. Elie Baranets and Andrew R. Novo, University of Michigan Press, 2024, 78–79.

¹⁶⁴François Heisbourg, "Can NATO Survive the Geostrategic Pivot to Asia," in *NATO 2030: Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, eds. Jason Blessing, Katharina Emschermann, and Stanislav Secrieru (Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), 261.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 261.

diplomatic pushback, is another example, illustrating the risk of desynchronized strategic decision-making.¹⁶⁶ These events illustrate the way differences in threat perception can erode trust and hinder collective action, the risk to internal cohesion in NATO.

Policy responses¹⁶⁷ to this deficit have been swift. One proposition is the transatlantic division of labor, in which the US will focus on China in the Indo-Pacific and the continent falls within Europe's bailiwick. But this step was undercut by the Ukraine crisis, which revealed Europe's continued dependence on U.S. military leadership, particularly in the areas of intelligence, logistics, and high-end capability. More realistic progress is in risk management together. France and Britain, to mention but a few, issued Indo-Pacific strategies and sent naval task forces into the region and conducted combined exercises with regional allies such as Japan and Australia.⁷ Small as these are, these mark the increasing tendency of Europe to extend its support for transatlantic interests beyond its neighborhood region to the wider region. For NATO to be unified and credible in this new world, however, these contributions will have to be founded on a more flexible institutional structure that can take on differentiated roles under strategic solidarity. Otherwise, growing divergence between the U.S. and the EU is likely to erode the pillars of transatlantic security in a multipolar world.

3.4 Future of NATO: American dependence

Ever since its founding in 1949, NATO has been central to U.S. grand strategy; not just as a collective defense partnership but as an American tool of power in Europe and globally. Shortly after WWII, the US viewed NATO as a convenient means for hedging Soviet encroachment while binding a broken Europe to a new American-led liberal world order. Events like the Berlin Airlift demonstrated the extent of Europe's reliance on Uncle Sam. In exchange for America's continued security commitment, the Western European nations agreed not to hawk their own military materials through think-tanking organizations like the European Coal and Steel Community, opened their markets up to U.S. sponsored ventures (Marshall Plan) and derided on US dictated things. Everyone got a bit of something but let's be real, the US's direction was a little more audible. A singular,

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 265-274.

humane, democratic and non-communistic Europe was not only humanitarian, but a military strategy to contain communism and open markets for the US.

NATO's purpose evolved in tandem with the international system. After the Cold War, rather than evaporating with the evaporation of Soviet threat, NATO expanded radially to 31 from 12 through eight successive rounds of enlargement in an American-protege package. That expansion cast American strategic depth into eastern Europe, diluted local sovereignty, and placed NATO and ipso facto America on Russian soil. Meanwhile, NATO deepened its functional agenda. No longer constrained to defend member territory, it undertook "out-of-area" operations against Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya. These missions allowed the United States to extend its power under the cover of a multilateral shield, distributing both political risk and material burdens across allies.

Yet US dependence on NATO has never been blind. Though the alliance helped to provide political sanctioning and a coordination mechanism, Washington has never hesitated to bypass it when it needed freedom of action. Following the 9/11 strike, NATO invoked Article V for the first time in its history, but the United States preferred to head an independent "coalition of the willing" in Iraq and effectively marginalized NATO to the sidelines in Afghanistan. This two-track strategy which utilizing the alliance when it is convenient to U.S. interests, setting it aside when it is not, is the hallmark of U.S. policy under both administrations. Even in NATO-led operations like 2011 in Libya, America contributed the lion's share of the most critical capabilities without ceding control of operations to others.

Burden-sharing has been a consistent problem in these adaptations. NATO since 2006 called for members to devote at least 2% of GDP to defense spending, but most of the European allies never did. This fueled increasing anger in Washington. President Obama bemoaned "free riders," but President Trump took it to a new level with public embarrassment of allies and even threatening withdrawal from NATO. At the 2018 Brussels Summit, he demanded members not only meet but double the 2% target; a benchmark level much higher than is presently committed.

To me, the idea of "free riding" oversimplifies coalition action. NATO defense is an impure public good; nations retain command of their forces, and threat perceptions vary. Equal-sized nations contribute unequal shares through varying strategic concepts, not

opportunism. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 provided the addendum to this narrative. Nearly all the European NATO members increased defense expenditures—sixteen in nominal terms, twelve as a share of GDP with some making provision for future rises. That is to provide additional emphasis that allies do respond energetically when danger is close and imminent.

Disparities do exist, however. In 2024, the United States itself spent \$997 billion on defense which is 66% of all NATO expenditure. And 37% of total global military expenditure, for good measure. Germany had spent \$88.5 billion, the UK \$81.8 billion, and France \$64.7 billion, according to SIPRI. Poland was the exception, at 4.2% of GDP on defense. While 18 NATO members have reached the 2% target in 2024, only 11 did last year, therefore the whole burden still falls disproportionately on the United States.¹⁶⁸

Meanwhile, NATO remains at the U.S. strategic beck and call. It provides political cover, operational capability, and contemporary power-projection bases most helpful as American attention shifts toward the Indo-Pacific since Obama's mandate. As identified in Chapter 2, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept officially identifies Russia as its primary adversary and, for the first time, as a strategic competitor, firmly linking the alliance to U.S. global interests. The application of NATO as an American tool for strategy is evidenced by the apparent congruence between the US National Defense Strategy priorities and the priorities of NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, empathizing “detering aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary, prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russia challenge in Europe.”¹⁶⁹ This explicit matching guarantees NATO's role as a significant means of enabling the US to further its geopolitical goals and defend itself against strong powers, like Russia. Moreover, the strategic realignment is also occurring against the backdrop of the larger U.S.-China competition as it dramatically escalated on July 6, 2018, when U.S. President Donald Trump approved a 25% tariff on Chinese imports beginning the new trade war between the United States and China.¹⁷⁰ In subsequent years, the U.S. extended the tariffs to almost \$360 billion worth of Chinese products. While President Biden left most tariffs in place, former President Trump, as he campaigns for the 2024-2025 presidential election,

¹⁶⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024* (Stockholm: SIPRI, April 2025).

¹⁶⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy*, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Chad P. Bown, *The US–China Trade War and Phase One Agreement*, Working Paper 21-2 (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, February 2021), 8.

resumed his economic war: in March 2025, he proposed a 60% tariff on imports from China, an extraordinary escalation that continues to intertwine economic with strategic resistance against Beijing.

But the alliance's future is now uncertain. In his second presidential campaign in 2024, Donald Trump once again brought into doubt the long-term viability of U.S. commitments to NATO. Former President Donald Trump during his own election rallies said he would “encourage” Russia to action against NATO allies that did not meet defense spending commitments and openly pondered whether the same NATO allies would stand by America should the roles be flipped.¹⁷¹ This transactional conception of alliance commitments upends the spirit of NATO’s collective-defense principle embodied in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Given this uncertainty, the European Union has become increasingly interested in developing a more autonomous military posture (not with the goal of weaning itself from NATO so much as to de-escalate its excessive dependence) from the alliance and its U.S. insurance policy

The United States is supportive of greater European defense responsibility, provided it remains firmly anchored within the US ‘umbrella and into NATO framework. The US encourages greater European leadership in security, but still a leadership under its power. America's preference is to “channel those calls [for European responsibility] toward a stronger (though still pliable) European pillar in NATO rather than allowing full independence.”¹⁷² What this means is that while America would prefer a more powerful Europe, it is not willing to place absolute strategic decision-making authority in the hands of the EU. The emphasis is on an EU contribution that reinforces NATO, not an alternative or a competing power. One clear illustration of this managed cooperation is the Berlin Plus deal whereby the EU can “borrow capabilities where the alliance refused to engage militarily.” That was observed in the EUFOR mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2004 when the EU led a peacekeeping mission under NATO assets but only because NATO had chosen not to do it itself. But the Berlin Plus as expanded the

¹⁷¹ Donald Trump, campaign speech in Conway, South Carolina, February 10, 2024, as reported by Lalee Ibssa and Soo Rin Kim, “Trump Says He’d ‘Encourage’ Russia ‘to Do Whatever the Hell They Want’ If a NATO Country Didn’t Spend Enough on Defense,” *ABC News*, February 11, 2024.

¹⁷² Carolyn V. Davidson, *Stuck in the Middle with You: A Historical Perspective on NATO and Great Power Competition*, in *Turbulence Across the Sea: Transatlantic Relations and Strategic Competition*, eds. Elie Baranets and Andrew R. Novo (University of Michigan Press, 2024), 67.

focus on capabilities beyond independent decision-making or responsibility which as emphasized the limitations of European independence. It was typical of a stereotypically American policy to promote European independence only to the extent that it helps build U.S. leadership. As Henry Kissinger warned in the Cold War period, there was a danger of assuming that the imbalance between the United States and Europe in NATO would remain the status quo and he cautioned against “nostalgia for the patterns of action that were appropriate when America was predominant and Europe impotent”.¹⁷³ In spite of this, the U.S. has gone on to mold NATO in a manner where any raising of European responsibility is kept in close step with American strategic objectives, keeping NATO a U.S.-dominant alliance and not a genuinely balanced transatlantic partnership.

During this uncertainty, it is necessary to ensure that the future of NATO does not necessarily need to be held hostage to institutional performance. Previously, the alliance endured the period of functional hibernation. So long as Article 5 is *de jure* and *de facto*, NATO can persist as a binding security commitment even if organizational processes ceased or disbanded. This is no longer speculative. With recurring political instability in America only increasing, the effectiveness of Article 5 as a genuine threat is one of highest precedence. And lastly, the U.S. must decide. If it gives up leadership of NATO, the alliance will collapse, undermining European security as American power. The irony is that a split Europe is precisely what NATO was designed to prevent. Transatlantic stability and with-it U.S. global hegemony depend not only on the defense budgets but on the constant credibility of collective security.

3.5 Toward a sovereign Europe? The feasibility of EU defense leadership

The European Union is now audaciously repositioning its defense posture, with potential broader implications for the ground-breaking strategic decision that was catalyzed by concerns about the U.S. commitment to Europe.

While this path aligns with Macron's long-standing beliefs regarding European strategic autonomy, it is unclear whether a model of strategic autonomy can be viable without NATO political buy-in. The absence of a clear line of demarcation between the division of labor between the EU and NATO made European strategic autonomy an unachievable

¹⁷³ Henry Kissinger, *The Troubled Partnership: A Re-appraisal of the Atlantic Alliance* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 5.

proposition; the EU was constructing an economic union and NATO, administered again by the U.S., maintained Europe's military-security architecture. Yet the distinction has continuously eroded as mounting global insecurities put stress on the partition. Russia's attack on Ukraine and aggressive foreign actions on the part of China have left Europe in an increased vulnerability to the external risks, along with eroding trust in the security guarantees from America. From the 2003 Iraq War to the 2021 American withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington's unilaterally initiated military interventions carried out without proper consultation within NATO under Article 4, has triggered most European countries to regard U.S. unpredictability as a destabilizing force in itself.¹⁷⁴ This has spurred growing demands for strategic autonomy in Europe on the assumption that dependence on the U.S. for security has strategic costs. Consequently, the EU has sought to bolster its defense function by means such as we previously seen with its Strategic Compass and more active EU-NATO cooperation. Yet this reorientation is also contentious: whether these steps really set the stage for European independence or simply lock Europe into a subordinate role in a U.S.-led NATO order is arguable.

In this context, In March 2025, European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen formally initiated the ReArm Europe plan with a letter to EU leaders before the European Council summit. On 6 March, the plan was formally approved at the emergency session that the European Council held, which was a commitment to strengthen European defense against security threats, including Russia's continuing war against Ukraine, and the uncertainty about the future of U.S. military assistance.

Once announced, the initiative was then renamed Readiness 2030 after member states such as Italy and Spain criticized the forceful nature of the initial title "ReArm Europe." The EU's release of the White Paper on European Defence – Readiness 2030 therefore demonstrates not just rhetorical tact but a fierce preoccupation with urgency to react to radically evolving security environments. The report is a response to a convergence of strategic necessities that have finally reshaped Europe's defense agenda. At the forefront are Russia's outright invasion of Ukraine, which has been described as “full-scale high-intensity war on the borders of the European Union”¹⁷⁵ and an era-defining event of far-reaching consequences for the security architecture on the continent. Russia is not merely

¹⁷⁴ Philip H. Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe, and the Crisis over Iraq* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004).

¹⁷⁵ White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030, 2.

waging a traditional war, but is also allegedly operating a "war economy," having raised defense spending to 9% of GDP in 2025 and coordinating with authoritarian allies such as Belarus, Iran, and North Korea to destabilize the periphery of Europe.¹⁷⁶ Further, Russia has weaponized migration specifically through Belarus and is actively destabilizing countries directly to its south, including Moldova, Georgia, and portions of the Western Balkans, with hybrid influence and disinformation campaigns. The White Paper continues that cyberattacks, sabotage, interference with satellite navigation systems, and other categories of hybrid threats are increasingly frequent sources of pressure against European infrastructure and political cohesion.

Concurrently with that, the EU also see Washington, even as a crucial transatlantic partner, now "over-committed in Europe and needs to rebalance" especially with its gaze increasingly set on the Indo-Pacific.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, in the meantime, China is made a systemic competitor. While continued to be a significant trading partner, China is viewed as an autocratic power whose bellicose military expansion, enigmatic strategic agenda, and bullying economic conduct, most significantly in Taiwan are challenging Europe's economic and security interests in a vital manner. The White Paper itself warns in plain language that a Taiwan Strait crisis would unleash extreme disruptions in Europe's access to critical technologies and raw materials, revealing deeply ingrained vulnerabilities in European supply chains and strategic dependencies.¹⁷⁸ Under such circumstances, the Readiness 2030 plan offers a blueprint to the restoration of the EU's defense readiness and industrial base. It aims to render the Union an autonomous and respectable security actor that can operate in a risky and multipolar world marked by renewed great power rivalry, competition in technologies, and contested global governance.

To put its vision into practice, the European Union establishes in the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 a set of ambitious measures that represent a paradigm shift for EU defence policy. First, the EU will materially enhance its military infrastructure by establishing four priority multimodal mobility corridors and over 500 targeted upgrades of infrastructure that will facilitate the rapid movement of troops and equipment within Europe and into Ukraine. This is supplemented by the establishment of

¹⁷⁶White Paper: Russia's "War Economy," Hybrid Threats, and Use of Migration and Destabilization, 4.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷⁸ White Paper: China's Coercive Role, Taiwan Contingency, and Supply Chain Vulnerabilities, 5.

the “Eastern Border Shield” to deter hybrid Russian and Belarusian aggression by introducing surveillance technology and cross-border security coordination. Simultaneously, the EU will create geographically spread “defense industrial readiness pools” and joint strategic stockpiles of critical military equipment and raw materials, addressing long-standing supply chain weaknesses and industrial resilience. One of the key pillars of the plan is the strategic long-term partnership with Ukraine, which will receive consistent military support in the form of two million artillery shells every year, top-of-the-line air defense systems, and co-production, all under a system of incorporating Ukraine into the greater EU defense system. Concurrently, the EU will densify its fragmented defense industrial base through cross-border merger incentives, multi-year procurement contracts, and enhanced support to small and medium-sized defense firms. This will be complemented by raising defense spending under the SAFE Regulation, unleashing up to €150 billion in EU-supported loans, in addition to more generic fiscal tools to leverage up to €800 billions of aggregate investment. Finally, the White Paper demands more strategic partnerships with NATO, Britain, Norway, and Indo-Pacific democracies on the pattern of a "variable geometry" that is flexible. Collectively, these proposals are meant not just to rearm Europe in the short term against current threat, but to establish the institutional, industrial, and geostrategic foundation for a more autonomous and stronger European defense system by 2030.

To provide substance to the strategic goals outlined in the White Paper in the form of real policy, the European Commission proposed the SAFE Regulation, an economic instrument designed to underpin the defense rearmament policy with real finance and industrial planning. The SAFE Regulation (Security Action for Europe) of the European Commission, which was created on 19 March 2025, is a short-term crisis finance tool to enable a rapid and enormous expansion of the European defence industrial base amid worsening geopolitical threats, namely Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷⁹ It seeks to mobilize up to €150 billion in EU-funded loans to Member States to speed up the collaborative procurement and production of key military capabilities such as missile systems, drones, cyber capabilities, and cutting-edge defence technologies. The SAFE Regulation is a core building block of the wider ReArm Europe Plan and puts into effect the financial dimension of the EU's White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030,

¹⁷⁹ SAFE Regulation, 1.

which establishes the strategic imperative for rearming on an urgent basis as well as long-term security resilience. Member States must engage in collaborative procurement usually between two or more of them and thereby promote industrial integration, economies of scale, and reduced dependency on non-EU sources, to be eligible for SAFE support.¹⁸⁰ SAFE also reinforces other EU defense tools such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and EDIP, in addition to supporting the defense of Ukraine by facilitating faster transfer of equipment and ramping up production.¹⁸¹ In effect, the SAFE Regulation provides flesh and blood to the strategic vision of the White Paper as a concrete financing tool to make Europe's aspiration to be a more capable, efficient, and integrated defense actor a reality.

The White Paper European Defence – Readiness 2030 and the SAFE Regulation, both affirm continued relevance of NATO as the pivot of collective defence in Europe as well as reflect increasingly mounting pressure on the EU for taking up a leadership role within such a setup. The accounts add that Europe's security has “benefited immensely”¹⁸² from both NATO and the EU, but acknowledge recent geopolitics, notably Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have shown gaps that NATO cannot fill. Rather than attempting to replace NATO, the EU's approach is to enhance its own military-industrial capacity and readiness in ways that are “complementary to NATO” and in accordance with existing “EU and NATO capability priorities.”¹⁸³ This reflects a vision of strategic convergence not competition. The SAFE Regulation supports this by stating in no uncertain terms that activities financed by the EU must advance the security interests of the Union and of NATO and promote common procurement and interoperability between Member States. Together, these are a defense posture more in the German vision of a stronger European pillar in NATO, than the French vision of an independent EU defense system per se. While the EU is advancing more strategic sovereignty, it does so in a transatlantic context that continues to hold the first-order place of NATO, showing an ambition to cultivate European capability without forsaking its founding alliance ties.

Ultimately, the EU's changing defence agenda, as articulated in the White Paper on European Defence – Readiness 2030 and further supported by the SAFE Regulation, is a

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸² European Commission, *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030*, 2025, 2.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3.

pragmatic step towards enhanced strategic autonomy without simultaneously abandoning the transatlantic system. The EU desires to be more autonomous, more effective but in a way that maintains and not replaces, its original security partnership with NATO. It is neither wanted nor thought practical in the prevailing security environment, the concept of complete separation. Instead, the current trend is towards balance, greater European involvement while still retaining interoperability and dependence on already established NATO structures. The EU “calls for those states that are willing to take responsibility and are able to act autonomously are growing in volume”¹⁸⁴ but the U.S. priority remains to “channel those calls toward a stronger (though still pliable) European pillar in NATO” rather than allowing full independence. This highlights a bedrock truth about European defense: strategic autonomy is not a question of unpegging from NATO but one of maximizing Europe's capacity to act, particularly where transatlantic backing cannot be taken for granted; without becoming inactive within the alliance that remains the foundation for European security.

The EU defense policy's future rests in large measure on the European Union's ability to imaginatively use its existing legal framework, rather than waiting on the unrealistic expectation of complete political agreement. While Article 42(2) TEU makes incremental progress toward a shared Union defense policy possible, integration has been piecemeal and slow. The Member States continue to have national interests, and it is therefore difficult for the shift towards greater supranational cooperation in the face of growing emergent geopolitics and EU's self-declared necessity to seek strategic autonomy.¹⁸⁵ A departure from this complacency must be negotiated through the existing legal instruments invested in the existing Treaties, which provide realistic avenues of action. Such alternatives as tighter coordination and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) provide willing Member States a vehicle for improving defence cooperation beyond the unanimity straitjacket. PESCO, in return, provides a platform on which member states can plan, invest, and develop jointly military capabilities in the context of the Union's institutions with the added incentives provided by instruments like the European Defence Fund.¹⁸⁶ The use of constructive abstention in Article 31(1) TEU also reduces the

¹⁸⁴ Carolyn V. Davidson, *Stuck in the Middle with You: A Historical Perspective on NATO and Great Power Competition*, in *Turbulence Across the Sea: Transatlantic Relations and Strategic Competition*, eds. Elie Baranets and Andrew R. Novo (University of Michigan Press, 2024), 67.

¹⁸⁵ Ramses A. Wessel et al., “The Future of EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy,” *Common Market Law Review* 59, no. 2 (2022): 380.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 378–379.

possibility of vetoes against institutional stability. Apart from these CFSP-specialised articles, general external action powers in the TFEU allow the EU to get around some of the procedural restrictions, yet again further solidifying the "normalisation" of CFSP and more integration into overall external policy. All this legislative and institutional advance works in defiance of structural sustainability of EU defense autonomy. They are, however, made subject to the guarantee that deep-rooted political resistance within Member States to waiver of real sovereignty in matters of defense will be overcome.

Critical perspective on the topic

In my perspective, the European way to defense today possesses vital fundamental weaknesses that will not be fixed purely by investment. With the geopolitical landscape increasingly unstable in a world of a war in Ukraine, European industrial fragmentation, and strategic energy dependency replete in Europe, it makes sense to revisit a founding idea. Should we consider a reimagined European Coal and Steel Community that lays the material underpinnings of strategic sovereignty not coal and steel trade? Europe is currently devoid of energy sovereignty and military capacity and most importantly, a sensible military vision. In 2025, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that 80 percent of EU defense investment would be committed outside of the Union. This number indicates not only the ongoing reliance on external actors but also limited strategic alignment on internal capability-formation.¹⁸⁷

Such an investment-first approach exposes a deeper problem. Defense budgets are typically the outcome of a strategic threat assessment that defines priorities, risks, and resource allocation. In the European Union's case, this process has been reversed. Days after announcing new defense investments, von der Leyen proposed establishing a European Security Council to conduct a threat analysis, which is supposed to be the initial step in any coherent strategic planning process. One week later, she pledged a European Defence White Paper. This sequence reveals a fundamental gap between resources and doctrine, between financial commitment and strategic direction.

Furthermore, the budgeted spending primarily focuses on material capability, including procurement, infrastructure, and industrial support instead of solving the problems that limit European strategic autonomy. These problems are the fragmented defense industry,

¹⁸⁷ European Commission, *State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen* (Brussels, March 2025).

a lack of integrated military command structures, the reluctance of Member States to exercise military sovereignty collectively, slow decision making on force deployment, and, more broadly, the absence of a common strategic culture. No matter how much money is budgeted, the forces in the field will not be better. U.S. Senator Marco Rubio responded to EU efforts stating a viable option does not exist for the United States to not be part of Europe's defense architecture. As long as, collective political will in Europe continues to be nonexistent to convert capability into usable force under a common purpose, NATO will continue to be indispensable.¹⁸⁸

Strategic autonomy cannot be attained solely by engaging in purchasing of assets. It demands an articulated military strategy with clear targets and the possibility to act militarily for a common European interest. The lack of vision further confirms that the defense deficit in Europe is not a technical one, it is political. If there are no strategic visions for or common understanding of power, Europe will not emerge as a credible security actor. The real issue is not a lack of the 'right' investments, but it is a lack of purpose. Without a common military direction and sense of European responsibility, the EU will remain a fragmented actor without a systematic contribution to international security.

3.6 The capability gap: why the EU cannot replace NATO

As mentioned previously, whereas once there had been a functional division achieved with the European Union being focused on economics and commerce and NATO being focused on defense and security. The Russia's invasion of Ukraine had upset this division and pushed both institutions toward greater overlap. But while the EU can keep pushing ahead with its strategic autonomy and increased assertiveness in its security role, it is not quite powerful enough yet to replace NATO as the lead actor for high-end military missions.

NATO is not merely a wholesale military coalition but a defensive alliance, an operational bloc with inherent capabilities, a coalition doctrine, and a strategic culture forged in the Cold War and reinvigorated in the 2000s through the scope of operations. Its ability to

¹⁸⁸ “Marco Rubio Tells NATO That US Committed to Alliance; Says It Must Be ‘Stronger,’” *The Economic Times*, April 3, 2025.

conduct full-spectrum warfare is demonstrated by past interventions in Afghanistan, Libya, and Kosovo, all of which required large-scale coordination and hostile force projection which the EU never came close to approximating. NATO derives gain from enduring military headquarters like SHAPE and operating command agencies like the Joint Force Commands (JFCs) and joint Allied Command Operations (ACO) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT), providing immediate command, strategic planning, and doctrinal effort. Besides, NATO has rapid reaction forces like the NATO Response Force (NRF) and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) that can deploy heavy assets in a matter of days. Conversely, EU military capability is low-keyed, based on humanitarian and crisis-management operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The EU does not possess a standing military command; its Developing Rapid Deployment Capacity is due to be ready by 2025 but will be established on intergovernmental consensus and ad hoc coordination. The EU also does not have highly integrated NATO capabilities in air, naval, cyber, and nuclear terms, with the lion's share of the EU's military capability remaining bifurcated between national contributions. This institutional and doctrinal shortfall illustrates why, with greater political momentum, the EU is still not capable of acting as a surrogate for NATO in high-intensity conflict zones.

This gap is also visible in public opinion. Public faith in NATO grew after Russia's 2022 invasion, particularly in frontline countries Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, where citizens more resolutely reaffirmed NATO as the existential bedrock of European defense. According to Eurobarometer reports, this was "a historic turning point for European security"¹⁸⁹, signifying that Russia's invasion shattered the post-Cold War order and re-established NATO as the strategic defense pillar for Europe. The war again demonstrated that European security remains heavily reliant on NATO, especially during survival crises. While the EU remains a proponent of strategic autonomy, this is more and more being done not as a step towards decoupling from America but as a condition of necessity to render the Union more resilient from within even as it remains reliant on the unmatched military might of NATO. NATO popular support grew in 16 of the EU's 27 members between February and July 2022, with largest growth in most impacted nations

¹⁸⁹ Athina Economou and Christos Kollias, "In NATO We Trust(?): The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and EU27 Citizens' Trust in NATO," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 29, no. 2 (2023): 131.

such as Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. While temporary declines in trust were observed as waves of violence flared up for short durations such as during Kharkiv and Kremenchuk¹⁹⁰ bombings, overall approval for NATO grew with the ongoing conflict. The figures confirm a cliché: NATO remains the linchpin of European security, unreplaceable in preventing external attack and assuring stability across the continent.

3.7 The EU and NATO as complementary actors: Why the German vision of a European pillar requires the Atlantic alliance?

The European Union and NATO's interdependence is increasingly marked by strategic complementarity, reflective of a vision promoted by Germany under which the EU strengthens its defense without relying on NATO's individual military capabilities.

This indicates recognition that even an autonomous Europe is still susceptible, and thus highlights the importance of a durable transatlantic core to guarantee our collective security. The EU-NATO relationship is complementary instead of competition, based on their unique yet interdependent capabilities. Strategic papers of both organizations focus on this engagement, matter-of-factly asserting that “the principles that govern the relations between the two organisations demonstrate that they are not intended to compete with each other”.¹⁹¹ The establishment of a stronger European defense capacity is in transatlantic security interests because “a more credible European defence is essential also for the sake of a healthy transatlantic partnership with the United States”.¹⁹² NATO and the EU thus must be complementary actors in the security area, combatting the new threats together.

The complementarity must become what Baciú and Kunertová call “co-relational power”¹⁹³ as a partnership paradigm based on mutual help, compatible strategic interests, and positive-sum interaction. Rather than continuing with outdated zero-sum dynamics, co-relational power enables synergy in which NATO's hard security strengths and the EU's civilian and normative power can be developed collaboratively. This model not only increases operational performance but also builds strategic credibility so that both the

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Cornelia Baciú and Dominika Kunertová, “Evolutionary Stable Global Orders: Co-Relational Power and Multilateral Security Organisations,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 18, no. 1 (2022): 150.

institutions are able to make significant contributions to an enduring world and European security environment. Co-relational power involves more than declaratory synchronization; it needs coordinated operational support in issues such as cyber defense, hybrid threats, resilience, and crisis management. Efficient coordination is not duplicative capacity, is needed to ensure that scarce resources are used effectively, and political unity is being preserved. The concept acquires a second order of urgency in the current multipolar world order, with transnational and emerging threats now ubiquitous blurring the civilian/military distinction. Under such a setting, the EU's peace-making role, regulatory powers, and resilience capacity must be able to interact with that of NATO's strategic command system and swift reaction forces.

Notwithstanding this, effective collaboration remains hampered by extreme structural imbalances between the two organizations. The European Union does not yet have a well-established defense strategy and were it ever to become a full-fledged military player, it would likely need to suffer the same structural and operational deficiencies that have bedeviled NATO. It is logical to accumulate cooperation rather than duplicating complicated and expensive capabilities. This is attested to by the fact that the only EU-NATO Center of Excellence is a hybrid warfare center, as current and relevant as this area of study is. This cooperation is unique since hybrid threats are usually targeted at the civilian population and domestic infrastructures, areas subject to the jurisdiction and social supervision of the European Union and wherein it can be augmented by the powerful military weight of NATO. Since 22 states are dual members of both institutions, a good foundation exists for cooperative work. As Chapter 2 describes, hybrid threats are one of the most significant newly emerging security threats and thus must be addressed in collective terms. Creating different responses can lead to duplication and pointlessness if work on defense by the European Union continues without great coordination with NATO. Even the EU and NATO, sharing a common membership and threats, are different institutions with autonomous objectives, capacity, and culture. An effective coordination ought therefore to be created based on such differences, and not notwithstanding them, to ensure a genuine and durable Euro-Atlantic security policy.

While the EU and economics were long separate with the EU having economics and NATO security, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 undermined this division, compelling both organizations toward greater levels of strategic convergence. The EU

does this, however, through its pursuit of strategic autonomy knowing that it cannot yet complete or replace NATO as the organization for providing high-end military capability.

Finally, as the notion of strategic complementarity develops there is nothing to suggest that it is not time for Europe to adopt a two-track defence posture that accepts the necessity of NATO, while making progress on EU independent capabilities. This is not about achieving sufficient military capabilities comparable to NATO or playing into the complexity of 'adverse' or 'pro-competitive' defence structures. The EU must give a longer-term, capabilities-based framework that commits EU strategic ambitions to current real capabilities. The goal is not to challenge NATO but an assurance to NATO based on less dis-proportionality for the US in ongoing burdens whether on regard to energy security or military long-term sustainable readiness. Europe's systemic dependencies continue to inhibit its ability for relevant decision-making ability in crises. As long as, the EU lacks the capacity to project force, deter threats, or manage high-intensity conflict on its own, it will be structurally dependent on NATO. Thus, the way forward, at least for the next few years, must focus on the EU boosting its operational credibility in areas where it can genuinely add value, including resilience, cyber, crisis management, and civilian missions, while simultaneously increasing its contribution to collective defence. This would allow the EU to transition from a complementary actor in principle, to a co-responsible actor in practice.

3.8 Solution to strengthen NATO-EU relationship

Emerging out of the realization that legal frameworks for EU defense integration do exist but remain politically constrained, one very appealing option has now become available: reviving the European Defense Community (EDC) Treaty.¹⁹⁴ This line of argument is consonant with the emerging consensus that the EU does not have to go outside to replace NATO but to increase its own contribution to the transatlantic partnership.

Against the background of new geopolitical turmoil and mounting disbelief in the credibility of the American security guarantees, particularly in the wake of Donald Trump's re-election, the resurrection of the 1952 European Defense Community (EDC) Treaty offers a legally feasible solution to the defense integration of Europe. As outlined

¹⁹⁴ Federico Fabbrini, "European Defence Integration after Trump's Re-election: A Proposal to Revive the European Defence Community Treaty," *European Law Journal*, 2024.

in the initial chapter, the EDC Treaty was a pioneering and ambitious attempt to institutionalize a unified European defense system, one that remained relevant to this day in addressing Europe's long legacy of reliance on NATO. The EDC, originally signed by six Western European states, suggested a supranational military entity underpinned by a shared budget and governed by common institutions, precisely designed to operate in close coordination with NATO. Although the treaty was never applied due to France's refusal to ratify it in 1954, four of the original signatory states, namely Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, ratified it and never withdrew it by a formal act. Depending on the principles of international law codified in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, the ratifications are operative, and the treaty is not null. Fabbrini argues that the EDC would today only need French and Italian ratification to enter into force, avoiding politically risky EU treaty reform.¹⁹⁵ At home, France and Italy have no legal barriers to ratification today. In the case of France, ratification refusal was experienced during the Fourth Republic, while the current system of the Fifth Republic constitution permits a new vote by parliament.¹⁹⁶ Constitutionally, the re-birth of the EDC would give the European Union an operational institutional instrument for defense cooperation with NATO compatibility in the context of joint command. If political obstacles exist, then the proposal offers an outstanding opportunity to apply a pragmatic rule-of-law option to increase European strategic autonomy. The intention will be to create a more autonomous European pillar under NATO's umbrella, especially in light of continuing external threats and increasing uncertainty regarding U.S. commitments to European security.

General Conclusion

In addressing the central question of this thesis—namely, to what extent NATO and the EU act as complementary actors in European defence—it is shown that while a degree of complementarity currently exists, it remains incomplete. The future development of this relationship will largely depend on political decisions made within an evolving geopolitical landscape.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

Present analysis suggests increased cooperation, or 'coherency', between NATO and the European Union, along strategic, doctrinal and capability lines, especially in the current context of the war in Ukraine. However, this interaction is asymmetrical. NATO remains the operational pre-eminent force, while the EU struggles with the assertion of fully effective strategic autonomy, irrespective of ambitious initiatives like the Strategic Compass and more recently the White Paper on European Defence. At this stage, the EU is more a complementary pillar of the Atlantic Alliance than an independent actor.

In fact, firstly we have reviewed In Chapter 1, the historical path of the EU and NATO as security actors, influenced by increasing strategic interdependency which began in the years after World War II with early regional treaties in Europe that failed to provide adequate military capacity, resulting in the creation of NATO in 1949 under US leadership. The first genuine attempt at European defense independence, The European Defence Community, did not survive in 1954, while the Western European Union continued to develop but maintained NATO as the primary security actor. European Political Cooperation was an introduction to some foreign policy coordination, however, during the Balkan wars in the 1990s, it became clear that the EU was incapable of acting in crisis without NATO and the US, exposing the limits of EU foreign policy instruments. This led to the Saint-Malo Declaration that called for the necessity of an EU ability to act independently, but concern from the US about European ambitions, led to the elaboration of the "Three Ds" doctrine restricting EU ambitions in the defense realm. At the same time, the U.S. placed continuous pressure to keep European security under NATO control, and many EU states, feeling secure from the American guarantee, had scant incentive to develop their military capabilities. Hence, the EU's first military operation, Operation Concordia, in 2003, planned through NATO and commanded under NATO, highlighted the gap between ambition and capability despite institutional reform, through treaties since Agreement, among others. These observations of historical trajectories illustrate one aspect in the continuing challenges of demonstrating itself as a credible and independent security actor.

In chapter 2, we have seen that the evolution of the EU-NATO partnership reflects a gradual convergence in the face of threats that have become both more diffuse and more interwoven. From the first technical agreements, such as the 2003 Athens agreement on

the protection of classified information, to the current operational coordination mechanisms, each stage has brought the two organisations closer together while raising their common security standards. This maturation is a response to a strategic reality where the boundary between peacetime and wartime is disappearing, and where the vulnerability of one member can rapidly become that of all.

In this context, new forms of conflict, particularly hybrid and cyber threats, are profoundly changing the logic of collective defence. Since these attacks can, in certain circumstances, justify the invocation of Article 5, the credibility of collective deterrence has increased, but its application has become more delicate: attributing a cyber-aggression, measuring its scale and obtaining the political agreement of the Allies involves much more subtle thresholds of evidence and solidarity than a traditional armed invasion. Article 5 thus gains in symbolic significance while losing in immediate legibility.

Confronted with this strategic restructuring, the strategic documents of both organisations have a structuring function. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept underscored a return to the center stage of collective defence while taking stock of the new threats, notably cyber, hybrid and space threats, that should be integrated into its response. The Atlantic Alliance is adopting a security and offensive tone, distinguishing Russia as being the most direct and substantial threat to Euro-Atlantic security. The EU, for its part, has condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine, but is taking a more diplomatic route to focus on European stability and multilateral order. NATO sees China as a systemic challenge with global ambitions, coercive practices, hybrid operations and a lack of strategic obscurity. In contrast, the EU Strategic Compass is at least more complicated still: China is described as a cooperation partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival putting the balance between firmness and commitment front and centre. In this sense, then, the EU's Strategic Compass launched in 2022 provides a more compelling attempt for the EU: to be a security provider as part of a new rationale of strategic autonomy presented as a complement to NATO partnership. While NATO seems to entice deterrence and defence, the EU relies on resilience, prevention, multilateralism and independent action.

That said, the cooperation between the EU and NATO has been enhanced through the addition of joint exercises, improved coordination to address hybrid threats and the terminology of strategic partner in both documents.

Last but not least, within the EU, at the political level, the strategic visions and visions of NATO differ from one Member State to another. France defends strategic autonomy as a capability for European action when the Alliance fails to act. Germany seeks to reinforce NATO's European pillar. The Baltic States and Poland, where the Russian threat is most immediate, require a literal reading of Article 5 and total attachment to the Alliance.

Moreover, EU-NATO cooperation represents both a duty of solidarity in the face of an evolving environment, and an avenue for discussion on European strategic sovereignty. The challenge in the years to come will be to build this tension between interdependence and autonomy into a coherent, credible and agile security architecture in the face of mutable threats.

Finally, as reviewed in Chapter 3, the war in Ukraine has been a key game-changer, changing the strategic outlook of both organisations. NATO has reaffirmed the main function of the conventional collective defence mission, by substantially reinforced the eastern flank and increasing both the number and readiness of its rapid response forces thereby moving in a fundamental manner back to rearmament. In addition, Sweden and Finland's fast-tracked membership has provided NATO with greater strategic depth in Northern Europe increasing its overall deterrent posture. This has also enhanced NATO's cooperation with Ukraine through military training, defense reforms and interoperability assistance, even though it is able to assist Ukraine by adopting NATO-standard practices without Ukraine formally joining the alliance. That said, the committee divisions on their future accession to NATO and the fear of instigating a escalation of a conflict with Russia has put NATO on a path of integration without the benefits of Article 5 commitment. Lastly, and more importantly, this has transformed NATO into an organization with a more nuanced role, in presence of a multi-polar world, utilizing not only deterrent potential, and with greater agility, but also expansion of formal mechanisms to assist them to better defend their sovereign territory.

Confronted with the war in Ukraine and with Donald Trump back in the saddle as President of the United States, the European Union is making a significant strategic pivot, exemplifying a 'Saint-Malo Declaration 2.0'. The EU is clearly delineating its desire to ramp up its autonomy in terms of security and break free from the NATO vision, meaning the American vision of defence. The White Paper on European defence presented in 2024 is clear evidence of this: that it intends to add capabilities, fuse into the Ukrainian defence industry, and re-orient to preparedness in the face of threats, especially in the East. This orientation marks a shift, to a powerful Europe that is less reliant on the American umbrella.

However, despite recent efforts in favour of an autonomous European defence architecture, the European Union faces major internal divergences. The idea of an intergovernmental defence system has caused anxiety among some Member States about a potential loss of national sovereignty, an issue that was already on the table in previous failed attempts to create the European Defence Community (EDC). Tensions are particularly apparent in crisis situations, such as the war in Ukraine, where what is claimed to be the unity of the EU is in fact partially compromised: this is evident by Hungary's unwillingness to certify previously agreed policies and create a '26+1' pattern.

Simultaneously, the EU is trying to keep pace with NATO responsiveness and effectiveness - a unique organisation solely devoted to security, with strong bureaucratic structures, integrated decision-making, and a unified military doctrine. The EU, as a multidimensional actor, is unable to formulate a coherent, rapid defence response because of institutional constraints, the variety of political priorities and an enduring strategic autonomy deficit.

In this context, the dynamics of European defence are moving away from the French model of full strategic autonomy towards the German model of anchorage in NATO, with the Union acting as a 'European pillar' of the Alliance. This reflects the tension between the ambition for independence and the reality of enhanced cooperation that is subordinate to the Atlantic architecture. Thus, despite the voluntarist declarations and the multiplication of initiatives (such as the recent 2025 White Paper for European defence), the construction of a European defence remains marked by a fragile balance between strategic assertion and structural dependence on NATO.

Outlook: prospects for future research

In the long run, there are several different approaches available. One alternative is to refresh the transatlantic partnership in face of the unknowns and uncertainty around Donald Trump's current second term. To do this would require that Europe make a stronger commitment to NATO, namely, a better splitting of the strategic burden. Secondly, and on a more hypothetical note, if we were to see a sustained US disengagement from the European theatre, the EU could strategically realign itself towards China. Finally, a third plan of action is predicated on the assertion of European strategic autonomy, especially as it is gaining traction in political circles and within the academic literature. This strategy is to prepare the EU not only for scenarios of abandonment, but to remain a credible and useful partner to NATO.

In this situation, investing in strategic autonomy could serve two purposes: simultaneously reinforcing the EU's ability to take charge of its own security while also deepening the transatlantic alliance which depends on Europe's reputation in America. The goal would be to reinforce Europe to reassure its ally, not to separate from it.

In addition, the resurgence of a sovereigntist reflex in a portion of Member States implies a future in which European security would be determined with intensified national logics. Thus, each State would firstly ensure its defence before contributing to collective security. This turn of events, already evidenced in Article 3 of the NATO Treaty, would signal a turn to a more functional approach to solidarity than systematic. Cooperation could no longer be structured around a homogeneous bloc but around a formation of concentric circles based on real capabilities and converging interests.

In conclusion, while NATO and the European Union today function as complementary actors in the defence of Europe, this complementarity is still in the works. In the future, it depends on Europeans being able to surmount their differences, to reinforce their strategic autonomy and to reposition their relationship with the United States on a more equal footing. Strategic autonomy should be considered as a tool not to reject the Alliance, but to ensure that European defence is more credible, coherent and resilient.

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