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Contemporary Security Challenges after 2022 ”

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INTRODUCTION

EU strategic autonomy (hereinafter ESA) is a distinctive and, to a considerable extent, indispensable concept in contemporary debates on European security and defence. It is difficult to find another notion that is at once so comprehensive, contested, ambiguous and yet seemingly simple in its original intuition. ESA has become a recurrent reference point in the rhetoric of EU institutions, Member States and European political leaders. It is frequently invoked as an ultimate objective of European security policy, although its precise meaning remains far from settled. Scholars have long pointed out that this conceptual ambiguity is precisely what makes ESA politically attractive. As the lack of a fixed essence “invites a variety of agents to fill the concept with life,” different actors are able to attach divergent, and at times even contradictory, meanings to the same idea.¹ As a result, ESA can be used to justify a wide range of political positions, from deeper European defence integration to the preservation of national sovereignty and transatlantic dependence.

Few would dispute the claim that Europe should become stronger. Yet the more difficult questions concern the conditions, methods and strategic environment in which this strengthening should take place. Debates about the need for Europe to develop its own capabilities and assume a greater share of the security burden have been ongoing for decades. However, the historical development of EU security and defence policy shows that the Union often acts reactively, with major institutional advances usually occurring only under the pressure of external shocks. Without a powerful stimulus, Member States have generally remained reluctant to expand the scope of collective action in the field of security and defence.

ESA is therefore worth studying for several reasons. First, it requires conceptual clarification: it is necessary to determine what the term means, in which contexts it can be applied, and where its analytical limits lie. Second, such a conceptual understanding can be compared with the positions of key actors, including the EU institutions and the Member States, in order to assess how the same idea may be used differently across political contexts. Third, few concepts are currently as central to the geopolitical and security discourse of the EU as strategic autonomy. In a world in which the post-Cold War liberal order is either eroding or already significantly transformed, questions of hard power, sovereignty and Europe’s capacity to act have inevitably moved to the centre of political debate.

The relevance of this topic is captured particularly well by Niklas Helwig, one of the leading scholars of ESA. In the introduction to a volume devoted to ESA, he recalls the statement that “the

¹ Niklas Helwig / Ville Sinkkonen, ‘Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term’, in: *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27 (2022) Special Issue, p. 17.

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,” and asks how relevant these words sound in the contemporary security environment.² The answer to this question demonstrates why any study of greater European assertiveness remains highly topical. Although the quotation could easily be mistaken for a recent statement by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy or another European official, it in fact comes from the Franco-British Saint-Malo Declaration of 1998, which laid important foundations for the emergence of the ESDP/CSDP and for the idea of the EU’s autonomous capacity to act in security and defence. This continuity shows that the question of European capabilities has remained relevant throughout the twenty-first century and has only become more pressing in recent years.

Against this background, the debate on ESA acquired renewed urgency under the pressure of the two security challenges addressed in this thesis. The first of these challenges is evident: the return of high-intensity conventional war to Europe as a result of Russia’s unjustified and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine and the full-scale invasion of a sovereign state. This external shock generated what is often described as Europe’s “geopolitical awakening” and forced the EU to confront the scale of its own capability gaps. The second challenge concerns the return of Donald Trump to power. His first presidency was often interpreted by many European actors as a temporary deviation that could simply be outlasted. Yet his return demonstrates that uncertainty regarding the United States’ long-term security commitment to Europe cannot be treated as an exception. Together, these two challenges make the question of ESA politically and strategically unavoidable.

The literature review makes it possible to identify a specific gap in the existing scholarship. While the concept of ESA has been widely discussed in relation to its historical evolution, conceptual ambiguity, EU–NATO relations and the war in Ukraine, less attention has been paid to its transformation under the combined pressure of two contemporary security challenges: Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the renewed uncertainty generated by Donald Trump’s return to power. Existing studies often examine these developments separately. However, the transformation of ESA after 2022 can be better understood as a broader process in which the war in Ukraine triggered a reassessment of the EU’s internal capacity to act, while changes in US foreign and security policy further problematised Europe’s external dependence on the transatlantic security framework. This thesis therefore addresses the transformation of ESA as a

² Niklas Helwig, ‘Introduction: the EU’s Choices in Advancing Strategic Autonomy’ in Niklas Helwig (ed.), *Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU: New Agendas for Security, Diplomacy, Trade and Technology* (FIIA Report 67, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, April 2021), p. 15.

dynamic and multidimensional process affecting both the EU's internal capacity-building efforts and its external room for manoeuvre.

Accordingly, the research question of this thesis is: how have the meaning and practical pursuit of EU strategic autonomy in security and defence evolved under the impact of contemporary security challenges, namely Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the second Trump administration? The aim of this thesis is to trace the transformation of EU strategic autonomy in security and defence under the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the renewed uncertainty surrounding US security commitments under the second Trump administration.

In order to achieve this aim, the thesis sets the following research tasks:

1. to outline the historical evolution of EU strategic autonomy in security and defence;
2. to examine the main definitions, debates and academic approaches to the concept of ESA;
3. to develop an analytical framework for operationalising ESA in the field of security and defence;
4. to analyse the political recalibration of ESA after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine;
5. to assess the institutional and material dimension of ESA after 2022;
6. to examine the transformation of ESA within the Atlanticist–Europeanist debate after Russia's full-scale invasion;
7. to evaluate the implications of the second Trump administration for ESA.

The object of the research is EU strategic autonomy in the field of security and defence. The subject of the research is the transformation of EU strategic autonomy in security and defence under contemporary security challenges after 2022.

The methodological basis of the thesis is a qualitative research design. The study relies on a two-case study approach, which makes it possible to analyse the transformation of ESA under the impact of two selected security challenges. Conceptual analysis is used to clarify the meaning of ESA and distinguish between its broader and narrower interpretations. Historical analysis is applied to trace the evolution of the concept and its institutional roots in European security and defence cooperation. The systemic and structural-functional methods allow ESA to be examined as a multidimensional phenomenon composed of political, operational, industrial and external dimensions. Qualitative content analysis is used to examine the main body of EU strategic, legal and policy documents related to CFSP/CSDP, defence procurement and the European defence-industrial base. Elements of discourse analysis are also employed to examine how ESA is framed over time in official statements and EU policy communications. Comparative analysis is then applied to assess changes in ESA across the pre- and post-2022 security environment and to compare the impact of the two selected challenges. The institutional method is applied to examine

the role of EU institutions, treaty provisions, decision-making procedures and key EU defence instruments.

The theoretical framework of the thesis combines several approaches. Realism provides the analytical vocabulary for examining hard power, security, capability gaps and shifts in the global balance of power that directly affect Europe. Intergovernmentalism is used to explain the central role of Member States in CFSP/CSDP decision-making and the persistence of unanimity and national interests as constraints on deeper defence integration. The concept of hedging is applied as an intermediate logic between balancing and bandwagoning, allowing ESA to be understood as an attempt to preserve European strategic flexibility under conditions of uncertainty, particularly in relation to the United States. Finally, insights from the literature on EU actorness help to connect ESA with the Union's capacity to define priorities, mobilise instruments and act as a security provider.

The source base of the thesis consists of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include EU treaties, the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the 2022 Strategic Compass, annual progress reports on its implementation, Council decisions and conclusions, European Commission and EEAS communications, as well as official documents concerning the EU post-2022 security and defence instruments. Secondary sources include academic literature on ESA, CFSP/CSDP, EU actorness, transatlantic relations and the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine and Trumpism on European security.

The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, conclusions and a bibliography. The first chapter establishes the theoretical foundations for the study of ESA by examining its historical evolution, conceptual debates and analytical operationalisation. The second chapter analyses the transformation of ESA in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, focusing on political recalibration, institutional and material adaptation, and the changing balance between Atlanticist and Europeanist approaches. The third chapter examines the implications of the second Trump administration for ESA, with particular attention to the reliability of US security guarantees and the limits of EU autonomy within the transatlantic security architecture. The overall volume of the thesis is 85 pages.

CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

1.1 HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Debates on ESA long predate the post-2022 security environment and have evolved through several waves. Niklas Helwig, a leading researcher at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs who explores the concept in a number of his publications, notes that the debate “goes back over twenty years” and distinguishes four waves of the development of ESA.³ These waves reflect shifts in emphasis from the EU’s capacity to act toward persistent concerns about capability shortfalls and the EU’s geopolitical role. However, the broader idea of ESA has even deeper historical roots. If we focus on the security and defence context, the emergence of the concept was preceded by a long history marked by repeated tectonic shifts in the EU’s security environment, military conflicts across the world, and periods of strained relations with the United States (hereafter the US).

The earliest proto-ideas of ESA are rooted in the post-Second World War order, as “the idea of a collective European defence is as old as the story of European integration itself”.⁴ There were widespread concerns about revisionist sentiments in Germany, and all the efforts of the key actors were directed toward preventing another war in Europe. The treaty signed at Dunkirk between Britain and France in 1947, a year later expanded to include the Benelux countries and renamed the Treaty of Brussels, laid the foundations for post-war cooperation and established the principles of “maintaining international peace and security”.⁵ In effect, it marked the creation of the Western Union, which was intended both to prevent potential aggression from Germany or the Soviet Union and to limit excessive American influence within the alliance.⁶

The next step towards the development of a common European defence was the ambitious, yet ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to establish the European Defence Community (hereafter EDC). Initially, the plan emerged as a French initiative, associated in particular with Jean Monnet, who, inspired by the success of the Schuman Plan for the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community, “expressed his will to organise European defence on a supranational basis”.⁷ Although the idea was met with mixed reactions internationally, and neither the US nor the United Kingdom (hereafter the UK) immediately supported a proposal that could have altered the foundations of the Western security order and potentially competed with NATO, it later gained support and developed into what became known as the Pleven Plan.⁸ The French minister put

³ Helwig / Sinkkonen, ‘Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor’, p. 3.

⁴ European Defence Agency, ‘Our History’.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Giedrius Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy: The Origins Story’, p. 15.

⁷ European Defence Agency, ‘Our History’.

⁸ Ibid.

forward a proposal to create a supranational army for the ECSC, which “foresaw the composition of military units from six MS directed by the Council of Ministers.”⁹ At the same time, the immediate objective was not merely to strengthen Europe’s defence capabilities. The Pleven Plan therefore sought to solve the problem of West German rearmament by embedding it within a supranational European framework. As David Klemm notes, France sought to “create a European military organisation and gain common control over any troops of West Germany.”¹⁰

The idea of creating a supranational army with a common command structure and a common budget was indeed revolutionary and highly promising, and it enjoyed the support of several key countries. However, at the decisive moment, after five Member States (hereafter MS) had already ratified the EDC Treaty, an unexpected development occurred: the French National Assembly rejected the project. Although the Pleven Plan had initially been a French initiative, the treaty eventually came to be perceived among Gaullists as a threat to national sovereignty and France’s independent role in European defence. As Victor Gavin argues, “the outcome of the EDC would signify a reduction, rather than an increase, in French power,” which “led Paris to reject a project that it had itself launched four years previously.”¹¹ In the longer term, the failure of the EDC contributed to the primacy of NATO in the European security architecture, as it reinforced the separation between economic and political integration within the European Communities and military integration under NATO. As Sebastian Graf von Kielmansegg notes, after the failure of the EDC, “European security could only be guaranteed by the US and therefore had to be organized within an Atlantic framework.”¹²

The collapse of the EDC marked a decisive setback for supranational ambitions in European defence. As Martin Trybus notes, the EDC Treaty “had envisaged nothing less than the creation of a supranational organisation to supervise integrated European Defence Forces.”¹³ Its failure therefore contributed to a more cautious and predominantly intergovernmental trajectory of European defence cooperation. Thus, the next important step was the signing of the Modified Brussels Treaty in 1954, “establishing the Western European Union (WEU), with the participation of the same countries and with Italy and West Germany added to the list.”¹⁴ The WEU was less

⁹ Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy’, p. 16.

¹⁰ Dávid Klemm, ‘An Attempt to Establish the European Army: The Pleven Plan’, in: *Journal on European History of Law* 7 (2016) 1, p. 105.

¹¹ Victor Gavin, ‘Power through Europe? The Case of the European Defence Community in France (1950–1954)’, in: *French History* 23 (2009) 1, p. 69.

¹² Sebastian Graf von Kielmansegg, ‘The Historical Development of EU Defence Policy: Lessons for the Future?’, in: *Verfassungsblog*, 25 March 2019.

¹³ Martin Trybus, ‘The Legacy of the European Defence Community and the Future of European Defence and Security Integration’, pre-print version of chapter 2 in: Martin Trybus / Nigel White (eds.), *European Security Law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 2.

¹⁴ Oleksandra Bulana / Mariia Holubytska, ‘European Defense Integration and the Role of Ukraine’, Ukrainian Centre for European Policy, 25 June 2025, p. 5.

ambitious in nature, and its significance for the subsequent development of ESA is rather difficult to assess. Česnakas, for instance, emphasises the weakness of this organisation, arguing that “it did not duplicate NATO functions and was in the shadow of NATO domination.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, the WEU should not be dismissed as entirely irrelevant for the later development of European defence integration. Although it relied on NATO for military structures and mechanisms for responding to armed threats, it provided MS with an institutional framework for developing a “European pillar” in defence outside both the European Community and NATO’s integrated military structure.¹⁶

A telling example of an early attempt to pursue ESA was the 1961 Fouchet Plan, which envisaged creation of the Union of the European peoples. It was designed to strengthen Europe’s defence capabilities by reinforcing the role of the MS. Once more it reflected the persistence of an intergovernmental alternative to supranational defence integration. As Anthony Teasdale argues, de Gaulle’s initiative sought to alter the institutional balance of the European Community “away from the supranational model of the Founding Fathers ... towards a looser, intergovernmental approach based on cooperation among ‘sovereign’ nation states.”¹⁷ In practice, the initiative of the French president was clearly aimed at strengthening France’s position in Europe and reducing the influence of the US and NATO on the continent. Negotiations over the plan proved difficult, and ultimately “the parties failed to reach an agreement.”¹⁸

The reason for this lies in the fact that European countries have historically been broadly divided into two camps, differing in their attitudes towards dependence on the US and the future development of transatlantic relations. In the academic discourse, this division is often referred to as the “Atlanticist-Europeanist debate”. France, in particular, has traditionally seen itself as a leading European power, with aspirations to global influence and a distinct role as a security provider. Accordingly, in both the Pleven Plan and the Fouchet Plan, “France was behind the idea to increase the autonomy of Europe from the US in defence and security matters.”¹⁹ Germany, in turn, has shifted between different positions over time. By contrast, Eastern European countries, as well as the Baltic states, have generally expressed stronger security concerns and have been more sceptical of Europe’s defence capabilities outside NATO. Consequently, they have tended to favour maintaining strong transatlantic links. Returning to the Fouchet Plan, the Benelux countries considered the idea of allowing France to strengthen its position while potentially

¹⁵ Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy’, p. 16.

¹⁶ Bulana / Holubytska, ‘European Defense Integration’, p. 5.

¹⁷ Anthony Teasdale, ‘The Fouchet Plan: De Gaulle’s Intergovernmental Design for Europe’, LEQS Paper No. 117/2016, London: London School of Economics and Political Science, October 2016, p. 1.

¹⁸ Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy’, p. 16.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 16.

undermining the strategic interests of smaller MS to be too risky. De Gaulle prioritised bilateral approaches, conducting negotiations with the German Chancellor and the Italian Prime Minister, which the Dutch and Belgian representatives “saw as presaging their own exclusion from the power politics of the future Union.”²⁰

Different views on the desirable degree of closeness with the US have also shaped European states’ attitudes towards ESA. Nordic countries, the Baltic states, and Eastern European countries have generally approached the idea of ESA with considerable skepticism. As Helwig and Sinkkonen observe, there is a “critical attitude to the concept in European defence circles, especially in the transatlantic-minded Member States,” where ESA is regarded “as a distraction at best, or a dangerous escapade at worst.”²¹ This scepticism stems above all from their heightened perception of threat, shaped by geographical proximity to Russia and by the capability constraints associated with small-state status, such as smaller territory and more limited human, economic, and industrial resources for self-defence. In the event of a direct security threat, relying on close cooperation with the US and NATO assistance has therefore long been perceived by many Atlanticist-oriented states as the safer option.

Since “detering Soviet expansionism” and “forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe”²² were among the key objectives behind NATO’s creation in 1949, the end of the Cold War, together with Germany’s already long-standing membership in the Alliance, created a kind of identity vacuum for NATO and a need to reassess its purpose. This, in turn, served as one of the impulses for a certain revival of European security integration. This primarily refers to the creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (hereafter CFSP), established by the Maastricht Treaty, which was signed in 1992 and entered into force on 1 November 1993. Importantly, Article J.4 provided that the CFSP would include “all questions related to the security of the Union, including the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence.”²³ As the European Parliament notes, the Union was tasked with defining and implementing CFSP “by intergovernmental methods.”²⁴ Thus, Maastricht was significant because it placed security and defence cooperation within the second, intergovernmental pillar of the newly created European Union (hereafter the EU).

At the same time, the significance of the previously mentioned WEU became more visible after the 1984 Rome Declaration, which marked a partial reactivation of the organisation. This process

²⁰ Anthony Teasdale, ‘The Fouchet Plan: De Gaulle’s Intergovernmental Design for Europe’, LEQS Paper No. 117/2016, London: London School of Economics and Political Science, October 2016, p. 46.

²¹ Helwig / Sinkkonen, ‘Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor’, p. 12.

²² NATO, ‘A Short History of NATO’, NATO, accessed 29 April 2026.

²³ Treaty on European Union, signed at Maastricht on 7 February 1992, Title V, Article J.4(1).

²⁴ European Parliament, ‘The Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties’, in: *Fact Sheets on the European Union*, accessed 30 April 2026.

was further reinforced by the 1992 Petersberg Declaration, which defined “humanitarian missions, rescue operations, peacekeeping, and crisis-management” tasks as areas of WEU involvement.²⁵ These so-called Petersberg tasks later became important for the development of the EU’s own security and defence policy, as “the main activities of the WEU were gradually transferred to the EU by 1999.”²⁶ Nevertheless, despite the ambitious nature of these innovations on paper, the EU proved unable to translate them into effective action in practice. The Balkan crisis clearly demonstrated that the management of military conflicts, even on Europe’s own territory, still depended primarily on the US. As a French Senate report notes, the wars in Yugoslavia were “quite revealing in regard to Europe’s inability to act outside NATO.”²⁷

The first reference to “strategic autonomy” can be found in the French White Paper on Defence of June 1994. In this document, the concept was initially framed in national French terms and closely linked to nuclear deterrence and the avoidance of excessive dependence on NATO guarantees.²⁸ The White Paper warned that the failure to seek alternatives would create “dependencies contrary to the principle of our strategic autonomy.”²⁹

The Kosovo conflict required urgent intervention. At the same time, the US representative in the UN Security Council stated that “his country and its allies had begun military action with the greatest reluctance.”³⁰ This configuration of forces, namely the EU’s inability to act independently and the realisation that the US commitment to using force on the European continent was rather fragile, forced Europe to reassess the situation. Overall, this contributed to the British-French summit at Saint-Malo, which would later become a decisive milestone in the development of ESA. This refers to the well-known Saint-Malo Declaration of December 1998, which “marks the beginning of the contemporary approach to the strategic autonomy concept in the EU.”³¹ Its significance lay in the first clear statement that Europe needed “the capacity for autonomous action.”³² As Howorth argues, Saint-Malo “sidelined the WEU and conferred agency on the EU itself, asserting the objective of European autonomy.”³³ In this sense, Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac largely agreed on the need for a credible European defence policy that would allow the EU to conduct autonomous military operations and to act independently where the Alliance as a whole

²⁵ Western European Union Council of Ministers: Petersberg Declaration, Bonn, 19 June 1992.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ French Senate, *European Defence: The Challenge of Strategic Autonomy*, Information Report No. 626, 3 July 2019.

²⁸ Livre blanc sur la défense, Paris: La Documentation française, 1994, pp. 49–51.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ United Nations Security Council, ‘NATO Action against Serbian Military Targets Prompts Divergent Views as Security Council Holds Urgent Meeting on Situation in Kosovo’, Press Release SC/6657, 24 March 1999.

³¹ Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy’, p. 18.

³² British-French Summit, ‘Joint Declaration on European Defence’, Saint-Malo, 3–4 December 1998.

³³ Jolyon Howorth, ‘The CSDP in Transition: Towards “Strategic Autonomy”?’ in: Ramona Coman / Amandine Crespy / Vivien A. Schmidt (eds.), *Governance and Politics in the Post-Crisis European Union*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 691.

was not engaged. At this stage, however, the issue was not autonomy from NATO, but rather the strengthening EU capabilities “through strategic cooperation with NATO” and “on the existing NATO collective assets.”³⁴

In the early 2000s, the EU sought to translate the lessons of the Balkan crises and the Saint-Malo legacy into more concrete institutional and military instruments. One such step was the development of EU Battlegroups, conceived as a crisis-management tool for “early and rapid responses.”³⁵ However, despite reaching full operational capability in 2007, they have never been deployed. Another important measure was the creation of the European Defence Agency (hereafter EDA) in 2004, designed to support armaments cooperation and the development of the European defence technological and industrial base.

The Saint-Malo Declaration provided the political impetus for the development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). With the Lisbon Treaty, the ESDP was renamed and further institutionalised as the Common Security and Defence Policy (hereafter CSDP) in the form in which it largely continues to function today. Its purpose was to provide a “policy framework through which Member States can develop a European strategic culture of security and defence, address conflicts and crises together, protect the EU and its citizens, and strengthen international peace and security.”³⁶ In this sense, the CSDP can be interpreted as an ambitious attempt to enhance the EU’s geopolitical role. However, in retrospect, this ambition has only been partially realised, since the EU has remained dependent on NATO and the US for hard security and collective defence. An important feature of the CSDP was its intergovernmental character, a logic that persists to this day. As Josep Borrell notes, “Defence remains a national competence of our Member States.”³⁷ This creates a number of structural problems, since the “intergovernmental and consensus-based” nature of the CFSP and CSDP tends to make them “slow, indecisive and susceptible to blockades and vetoes of single member states.”³⁸

Traditionally, the emergence of the term itself in the EU official policy discourse is associated with the 2016 EU Global Strategy (hereafter the 2016 EUGS), in which it is mentioned four times and primarily established as an ambition necessary “to promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values.”³⁹ The document is also significant because it calls

³⁴ Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy’, p. 18.

³⁵ Council of the European Union, ‘EU Battlegroups’, Common Security and Defence Policy Factsheet, updated April 2013, p. 1.

³⁶ European Parliament, ‘Common Security and Defence Policy’, in: *Fact Sheets on the European Union*, accessed 30 April 2026.

³⁷ Josep Borrell, ‘A Joint Effort and Clear Direction for European Defence’, in: *European External Action Service*, 14 February 2020.

³⁸ Barbara Lippert / Nicolai von Ondarza / Volker Perthes (eds.), *European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests*, SWP Research Paper 4/2019, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2019, p. 9.

³⁹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy* (Brussels, June 2016), p. 4.

for “an outward- and forward-looking European foreign and security policy” and acknowledges that, “in this fragile world, soft power is not enough.”⁴⁰ In other words, it confirms that security and defence remain central priorities for the EU, even though the concept of ESA has expanded into other policy areas. In fact, this institutional consolidation of the term was preceded by a number of other references in official EU documents using different formulations related to ESA. For example, the 2012 Foreign Affairs Council conclusions “call to retain and further develop military capabilities for sustaining and enhancing the CSDP” and emphasise “the need for a strong and less fragmented European defence industry” in order to strengthen “the EU's autonomous action”.⁴¹

The adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022 marked the next stage in this evolution, as the EU sought to translate the ambition of strategic autonomy into more concrete objectives in security and defence. In presenting the Compass, Borrell stressed that, given the new level of challenges facing Europe, the EU needed a “quantum leap forward on security and defence, similar to other big jumps we have made in European history.”⁴² What makes this document particularly interesting is that it was largely drafted before 24 February 2022, but adopted only after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a result, several amendments were introduced under these extraordinary circumstances, while the practical significance of the Strategic Compass for ESA will be examined in the following chapter.

Political developments also played a role in elevating ESA within EU-level agendas. In his prominent 2017 Sorbonne speech, French President Emmanuel Macron highlighted sovereignty as a central theme, thereby underscoring the importance of enhanced ESA.⁴³ First and foremost, he drew attention to such important instruments as the newly established Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund, which laid the foundations for enhancing capacities and improving coordination at the European level. At the same time, he pointed to the importance of “ensuring Europe’s autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO,” since even for the French, who have traditionally supported a greater degree of autonomy from the US, the issue at that time was not about severing ties.⁴⁴ In the context of strategic autonomy, this speech is particularly significant for its emphasis on the lack of a common strategic culture and for its call

⁴⁰ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action*, p. 5 and p. 44.

⁴¹ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Towards a More Competitive and Efficient Defence and Security Sector*, COM(2013) 542 final, Brussels, 24 July 2013.

⁴² Mario Damen, *EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023: From Concept to Capacity*, Briefing, EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor, European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2022, p. 6.

⁴³ Emmanuel Macron, ‘President Macron Gives Speech on New Initiative for Europe’, Élysée, 26 September 2017.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

that “At the beginning of the next decade, Europe needs to establish a common intervention force, a common defense budget and a common doctrine for action.”⁴⁵

The 2020 German Presidency subsequently placed the issue on the official Council agenda, where the concept became further institutionalised at the EU level.⁴⁶ Although attention had shifted away from the security dimension, it was still important to see the concept reappear on the agenda in the October 2020 European Council conclusions, which stated that “achieving strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy is a key objective of the Union.”⁴⁷ Assessments of the degree to which ESA had been achieved were, however, often rather pessimistic. In his 2017 interview with *European Defence Matters*, General Mikhail Kostarakos, then Chairman of the European Union Military Committee (EUMC), observed that, despite considerable efforts, “Europe still lacks those strategic enablers that would render it capable of independently performing the full range of tasks” and that “the so desired European strategic autonomy, always speaking strictly within the context of CSDP operations, remains an unaccomplished objective.”⁴⁸

Thus, the historical evolution of ESA demonstrates that the ambition to strengthen Europe’s security and defence capacity has repeatedly emerged in different institutional forms, ranging from supranational projects such as the EDC to more intergovernmental frameworks such as the WEU, CFSP and CSDP. While supranational initiatives largely failed to materialise, intergovernmental cooperation proved more politically acceptable, but remained constrained by limited capabilities, consensus-based decision-making and continued dependence on NATO and the US. By the eve of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ESA had already become an established concept in EU policy discourse, but it remained only partially operationalised in practice. This historical trajectory reveals a persistent tension between the ambition of European autonomy and the structural limits of European security and defence cooperation. It is precisely this tension that explains why ESA remains a contested concept and why its definition, scope and practical meaning require closer conceptual analysis in the following section.

1.2 CONCEPTUALISING ESA: DEFINITIONS, DEBATES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There are multiple approaches to conceptualising ESA in both academic debates and EU policy discourse. To begin with, there is the distinction between broad and narrow understandings of ESA. In its broad reading, often associated with the notion of “open strategic autonomy”, the concept extends beyond foreign and security policy and “emphasises the EU’s ability to make its

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Helwig, ‘Introduction: the EU’s Choices in Advancing Strategic Autonomy’, p. 18.

⁴⁷ European Council, *Special meeting of the European Council (1 and 2 October 2020) – Conclusions*, Brussels, 2 October 2020, EUCO 13/20, para. 3.

⁴⁸ Mikhail Kostarakos, “Military Capabilities: ‘Europe Still Lacks Strategic Enablers’,” interview in: *European Defence Matters*, no. 11, 2017, ed. by the European Defence Agency.

own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its strategic interests and values,” as stated in the Commission’s Trade Policy Review (February 2021).⁴⁹ Accordingly, open strategic autonomy refers rather to resilience in trade policy and covers a wider range of issues, namely “the EU’s answer to global economic upheavals from supply chain disruptions to unfair trade practices.”⁵⁰

By contrast, the narrow understanding refers primarily to the EU’s capacity to act in security and defence with reduced reliance on external actors. It is worth noting that the origins of ESA lie precisely in the security sphere. However, at a certain point, the classical understanding largely receded into the background, when the so-called “geopoliticisation of the term”⁵¹ took place and ESA found “its way into the domains of industrial, trade, telecommunications, energy, climate, agricultural and even financial and monetary policy.”⁵² To some extent, this is linked to the fact that the EU’s insufficient capacity to act as an autonomous security actor became evident, and the focus of attention shifted to areas that are easier in terms of consolidating efforts and less sensitive with regard to the transfer of a share of sovereignty by each MS. Michaels and Sus argue that “the notion of strategic autonomy experienced a thematic shift away from traditional security and defence questions”, which has been described in the literature as a ‘hijacking of the concept’ and may indicate either a decline in the EU’s interest in advancing ESA in security and defence or a subjective perception that there was no longer an acute need to do so.⁵³ The increasing emphasis on strategic economic interests can also be explained by structural factors, namely a specific geopolitical environment shaped by Brexit, Trump’s election, and China’s increasingly assertive posture.⁵⁴

One of the key problems associated with ESA, highlighted by most scholars, is its vagueness and contested nature. At the same time, the literature suggests that the term has proved “remarkably resilient”⁵⁵, perhaps even more than might have been expected. The ambiguity of the concept stems from the fact that it encompasses multiple dimensions and is used in different contexts. Helwig and Sinkkonen rightly emphasise that ESA has effectively become “the term of choice that EU

⁴⁹ European Commission, *Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy* (Communication) COM(2021) 66 final, 18 February 2021, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, ‘Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term’ (2022) 27 *European Foreign Affairs Review* 1, p. 2.

⁵¹ Eva Michaels / Monika Sus, ‘(Not) Coming of Age? Unpacking the European Union’s Quest for Strategic Autonomy in Security and Defence’, in: *European Security* 33 (2024) 3, p. 384.

⁵² Joan Miró i Artigas, *The Polity Implications of the EU’s Drive towards Strategic Autonomy*, SOLID, 21 February 2023.

⁵³ Michaels / Sus, ‘(Not) Coming of Age?’, p. 384.

⁵⁴ Mario Damen, *EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023: From Concept to Capacity*, Briefing, EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor, European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2022, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Kathryn Levantovskaia, ‘Pax Americana vs. Autonomy: How the US and EU Defense Industrial Strategies Diverge’, in: *Atlantic Council*, 17 April 2024.

and Member-State representatives use in order to describe the Union's response to global challenges."⁵⁶ This "semantic ambiguity"⁵⁷ also partly results from the political convenience of leaving the term undefined. By avoiding a precise definition, MS could bypass the highly sensitive question of autonomy "from" and autonomy "to". Autonomy "to" pursue a certain objective would have required new horizons of debate and significant political effort, while autonomy "from" would have shifted the discussion onto the fragile ground of reducing dependence on, or cooperation with, the US. In fact, only France was genuinely prepared to implement what was potentially implied by the term.⁵⁸ There is also a dimension of autonomy "through", which focuses on the "capabilities, such as the EU policies, budget, or legislation needed to achieve the desired autonomy".⁵⁹

In this context, it is also important to distinguish autonomy from related concepts, above all "sovereignty" or "independence". ESA should not be understood as a synonym for the latter, since the "concept does not denote a binary choice between dependence and independence or engagement and decoupling."⁶⁰ The need to use the term carefully has therefore resulted in a certain degree of terminological balancing, as well as in the absence of a clear definition that would risk implying the EU's full self-sufficiency in terms of capabilities. Alternatively, especially from a legal perspective, ESA can be understood as concerning the effective exercise of sovereignty and the means of guaranteeing it.⁶¹ The 2022 EPRS briefing *EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023: From Concept to Capacity*, one of the key policy-oriented documents on ESA, illustrates this terminological overlap by using "strategic autonomy" and "strategic sovereignty" as largely equivalent and interchangeable terms.⁶² Daniel Fiott offers a detailed analysis of the distinction between these two terms in a Chaillot Paper. He suggests that "sovereignty" may have a more positive connotation, as it focuses attention on what the EU is capable of doing rather than on autonomy "from" another actor.⁶³ At the same time, the term remains problematic in the EU context, since it inevitably evokes the discourse of national sovereignty and may therefore appear difficult to apply to the EU as a supranational polity.

Thus, the 2016 EUGS is important not only as a historical milestone, but also because it illustrates the conceptual ambiguity of ESA: the term is used several times, yet no precise definition is

⁵⁶ Helwig / Sinkkonen, 'Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor', p. 1.

⁵⁷ Michaels / Sus, '(Not) Coming of Age?', p. 385.

⁵⁸ Michaels / Sus, '(Not) Coming of Age?', p. 385.

⁵⁹ Damen, *EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023*, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Helwig / Sinkkonen, 'Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor', p. 2.

⁶¹ Charlotte Beaucillon, 'Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor', in: *European Papers* 8 (2023) 2, pp. 417–428, p. 421.

⁶² Damen, *EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023*, p. 1.

⁶³ Daniel Fiott (ed.), *European Sovereignty: Strategy and Interdependence*, Chaillot Paper No. 169, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 2021, pp. 11–12.

provided. Despite this, the EUGS associates the concept with the EU's capacity to act more autonomously in defence matters and develop the "ability to foster peace and safeguard security within and beyond its borders."⁶⁴ Particular attention is devoted to the development of "a solid European defence industry, which is critical for Europe's autonomy of decision and action."⁶⁵ By contrast, the 2022 Strategic Compass comes closer to defining ESA by presenting it as an objective centred on the EU's ability "to take more responsibility for its own security by acting in its neighbourhood and beyond, with partners whenever possible and alone when necessary."⁶⁶ These two foundational documents approach EU–NATO relations in somewhat different ways. According to Howorth, the 2016 EUGS implied that the long-term objective of ESA was "a multi-national and integrated defence capacity enabling the EU to engage in high-intensity military and civil–military operations with minimal assistance from the US."⁶⁷ In comparison, this framing is largely absent from the Strategic Compass. Instead, the document attempts to manage the politically sensitive issue of greater autonomy from the US by presenting the strengthening of European capabilities as a contribution to NATO. Thus, in order to accommodate, at least to some extent, MS with different views on the future of transatlantic relations, a compromise formula emerged. According to this consensus, a higher level of ESA did not imply weakening EU cooperation with the US. On the contrary, strengthening MS capabilities was expected to contribute to "a stronger European pillar within transatlantic cooperation in NATO."⁶⁸

In academic discourse, there is also a wide range of definitions of ESA, each emphasising particular aspects of the concept. Thus, a group of scholars edited by Niklas Helwig define strategic autonomy as "the political, institutional and material ability of the EU and its member states to manage their interdependence with third parties, with the aim of ensuring the well-being of their citizens and implementing self-determined policy decisions."⁶⁹ This understanding of ESA is relatively broad and goes beyond its narrow interpretation in security and defence terms. Barbara Lippert and Nicolai von Ondarza, in turn, argue that ESA should be understood as "a process of gradual autonomisation, rather than an absolute condition", meaning "being able to set, modify and enforce international rules, as opposed to (unwillingly) obeying rules set by others."⁷⁰ In this interpretation, the ability to assert one's own principles regardless of the preferences of other actors

⁶⁴ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, p. 19.

⁶⁵ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, p. 11.

⁶⁶ European 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, 24 March 2022, p. 23.

⁶⁷ Jolyon Howorth, *For a True European Defence Union*, Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, December 2017, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Damen, *EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023*, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Helwig, 'Introduction: the EU's Choices in Advancing Strategic Autonomy', p. 21.

⁷⁰ Lippert / von Ondarza / Perthes (eds.), *European Strategic Autonomy*, p. 5.

comes to the fore, bringing ESA conceptually close to what is often described as “actorness” in foreign policy. The same group of scholars also emphasises that autonomy can only be meaningfully discussed in relation to another actor, which, in the context of this thesis, is primarily the US. In other words, ESA cannot be understood as an abstract or self-contained idea detached from the broader international system. At the same time, ESA does not imply autarky, which “is neither possible nor desirable.”⁷¹

Similarly, Charlotte Beaucillon points out that ESA is intended “to achieve both defensive and projectional objectives.”⁷² From this perspective, ESA should not be reduced to the EU’s ability to withstand security threats independently, that is, without relying on partnerships. Rather, it also implies the ability to act strategically on the international stage by projecting the EU’s foreign policy interests and objectives through its own external action. In this sense, ESA again becomes closely connected to the EU’s global actorness, as it presupposes both freedom of action and the capacity to contribute to shaping the international order. In some cases, ESA and actorness are used almost synonymously. For example, Hill argues that “true actorness” requires “a self-contained decision-making system” as well as “practical capabilities to have effective policies.”⁷³ These elements can also be regarded as components of ESA, since it similarly rests on independent decision-making and effective implementation capabilities.

In her article “Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor”, Beaucillon also proposes understanding ESA as an ambition, an objective, and a political dynamic.⁷⁴ While the first two dimensions refer to the achievement of a certain condition that would enable the EU to acquire the attributes of a global actor, the political dynamic concerns the behaviour and awareness of MS themselves. It is this dynamic that allows them to recognise and pursue common European interests collectively. The EU’s think tank, in its study *Strategic Autonomy, Strategic Choices*, proposes understanding ESA not as “a zero-sum game, but rather a sliding scale between full autonomy and full dependency.”⁷⁵ This indicates that there is no clear threshold at which the EU can be considered fully strategically autonomous. Michaels and Sus offer a similar non-linear interpretation, arguing that “ESA should be seen as a dynamic and malleable process rather than an endgame.”⁷⁶

Fiott developed an interesting conceptual approach by distinguishing between “three different conceptual visions” of ESA: “autonomy as responsibility”, “autonomy as hedging” and “autonomy

⁷¹ Lippert / von Ondarza / Perthes (eds.), *European Strategic Autonomy*, p. 5.

⁷² Beaucillon, ‘Strategic Autonomy’, p. 418.

⁷³ Christopher Hill / William Wallace, ‘Introduction: Actors and Actions’, in: Christopher Hill (ed.), *The Actors in Europe’s Foreign Policy*, London / New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 13.

⁷⁴ Beaucillon, ‘Strategic Autonomy’, p. 422.

⁷⁵ Damen, *EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023*, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Michaels / Sus, ‘(Not) Coming of Age?’, p. 396.

as emancipation.”⁷⁷ These visions can be read as a gradual scale, reflecting different degrees to which the EU can develop as a geopolitical actor. The first one is centred on so-called burden-sharing, which refers both to the transatlantic distribution of defence responsibilities between Europe and the US and to the intra-European distribution of costs and political responsibility among MS. The issue of burden-sharing has been a recurrent theme in US alliance policy for decades. As Ford and Goldgeier note, “U.S. presidents since Dwight Eisenhower have complained that NATO allies were not doing enough to contribute to the common defense.”⁷⁸ Hedging, in turn, is understood as a specific strategy that is most suitable under conditions of uncertainty, especially regarding US commitments, and that aims “to ensure that EU defence structures and policies are autonomous and effective enough to take on a range of military tasks should the US gradually withdraw from Europe over time.”⁷⁹ Finally, emancipation implies the highest level of ESA, in which Europe is fully self-sufficient and does not have to rely on any other actor in order to achieve its goals, thereby allowing it to “reach its full potential as a global power.”⁸⁰

Among the scholars already discussed in this chapter, Niklas Helwig deserves particular attention in the context of the war’s impact on ESA. He argues that “the war showcases the gulf between ambitions and realities of European strategic autonomy.”⁸¹ Mazziotti di Celso and Sguazzini show that the war did not fully overcome internal divisions within the EU: “the strategic cacophony persists,” although it has not prevented a relatively cohesive response to Ukraine.⁸² Ünalldilar, Aydoğan Ünal and Kumova Metin conclude that the Russia–Ukraine war accelerated ESA mainly at the discursive level, since “external crises can accelerate strategic autonomy in discourse,” while genuine independence still requires long-term capability development.⁸³ Ossa argues that Russia’s attack strengthened the political momentum behind ESA, since it “fortified the political will to speed up” the build-up of ESA and military capabilities.⁸⁴ Puglierin and Shapiro argue that the full-scale invasion questioned Europe’s claims to ESA and “exposed it as almost entirely empty,” because US leadership again became central to the Western response.⁸⁵ Overall, these assessments

⁷⁷ Daniel Fiott, *Strategic autonomy: towards ‘European sovereignty’ in defence?*, EUISS Brief, no. 12, European Union Institute for Security Studies, November 2018, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Lindsey W. Ford and James Goldgeier, “Who are America’s Allies and Are They Paying Their Fair Share of Defense?”, *Brookings Institution*, 17 December 2019.

⁷⁹ Fiott, *Strategic Autonomy*, p. 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸¹ Helwig, “EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” p. 57.

⁸² Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, “The Road to Strategic Autonomy: Reflections from the Russia–Ukraine War,” *De Europa* 7, no. 2 (2024): 109–134, p. 109.

⁸³ Sinem Ünalldilar, Betül Aydoğan Ünal and Senem Kumova Metin, “Navigating the Storm: The Impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on EU’s Quest for Strategic Autonomy,” *European Security* (2025).

⁸⁴ Heljä Ossa, “European Strategic Autonomy in a Transatlantic Security Context: From Dependence to Independence?”, in *Inevitable Instability in Russia* (Cham: Springer, 2026), pp. 203–223.

⁸⁵ Jana Puglierin and Jeremy Shapiro, “The Art of Vassalisation: How Russia’s War on Ukraine Has Transformed Transatlantic Relations,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 April 2023.

show that the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion on ESA cannot be described as either clearly positive or clearly negative. Rather, it requires a nuanced interpretation. Although MS managed to demonstrate a certain degree of cohesion and a relatively coordinated response, the war also exposed the extent to which European security still remains structurally dependent on the US.

A number of scholars have also examined changes in ESA in light of Trump's re-election and the policies of his second administration. The first group of authors emphasises Trumpism as a catalyst for the renewed relevance of ESA. Thus, the already mentioned Ossa states that "the second Trump administration has dramatically altered transatlantic relations and forced Europe to rethink its security and defence architecture and ideas of strategic autonomy."⁸⁶ According to Kotzur, the EU's response to this new reality is "a claim to or rather quest for strategic autonomy," while Trumpism causes "fundamental changes" in the geopolitical, economic and normative dimensions of EU actorness.⁸⁷ Lehne similarly argues that Trump 2.0 forces the EU to move beyond its previous hesitation on ESA. He notes that such debates have long been constrained by the tension "between Europe's desire for independence and its fear of losing essential U.S. support," but concludes that "the time has come to break the deadlock."⁸⁸

A second trend in the literature focuses more explicitly on the crisis of transatlantic dependence and the need for Europe to develop a more autonomous strategic position. Biscop provides a particularly critical interpretation of Europe's position under Trump 2.0. He argues that Europe still remains attached to its "decades-old role of most loyal ally of the US," although Trump's approach suggests that he does not seek allies, but "vassals."⁸⁹ Michaels, in turn, argues that a renewed concept of ESA should not be framed as anti-Atlanticist, but rather as a way of strengthening Europe's ability to act. She stresses that Europe "cannot afford to be a bystander" in its own neighbourhood, especially when Washington's long-term priorities lie elsewhere and future US political developments may undermine NATO.⁹⁰ Bond makes a similar point by arguing that Trump's possible return had already undermined the credibility of NATO's Article 5 guarantee before the election. In this context, he concludes that Europe "cannot afford to hope for the best" and instead has to prepare for a scenario in which US security commitments become less reliable.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Ossa, "European Strategic Autonomy in a Transatlantic Security Context," p. 203.

⁸⁷ Markus Kotzur, "Europe's Quest for Strategic Autonomy in Response to Trumpism", in: *Global Public Policy and Governance* 5 (2025), pp. 457–466, here pp. 457, 460.

⁸⁸ Stefan Lehne, "What Can the EU Do About Trump 2.0?", Carnegie Europe, 12 February 2026.

⁸⁹ Sven Biscop, "Diplomatic Pursuits", Egmont Institute, 25 November 2025.

⁹⁰ Eva Michaels, "European Strategic Autonomy 2.0: What Europe Needs to Get Right", Carnegie Europe, 29 June 2023.

⁹¹ Ian Bond, "Seven Expert Views: America First, Europe Alone?", Centre for European Reform / Clingendael Spectator, 19 March 2024.

Despite these valuable contributions, insufficient attention has so far been paid to the transformation of ESA under the combined impact of these two factors. This is partly because only a relatively short period has passed since Trump's re-election, leaving limited time for more systematic academic research on the consequences of his second administration. Moreover, the existing literature still lacks an approach that would examine the transformation of ESA after 2022 as a coherent process of change affecting both the EU's strategic position and the positions of individual MS. This process can be understood as a chain reaction triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and further reinforced by shifts in US foreign and security policy. Accordingly, the literature gap addressed by this thesis concerns the transformation of ESA under contemporary security challenges, which, with certain reservations, also include Trump's policy, insofar as it challenges some of the foundations of the previously established liberal international order.

Overall, the concept of ESA has undergone several stages of conceptualisation and remains contested, multidimensional and highly context-dependent. Its meaning ranges from a broad understanding of open strategic autonomy to a narrower focus on security and defence, while academic debates link it to questions of actorness, sovereignty, burden-sharing, hedging and emancipation. Taken together, these approaches show that ESA should be understood as a gradual process that can take different forms depending on the level of ambition, the degree of dependence on external actors and the political willingness of MS to develop common capabilities. This conceptual ambiguity also explains why the operationalisation of ESA remains methodologically challenging and requires a clear analytical framework.

1.3 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND OPERATIONALISATION OF ESA IN SECURITY AND DEFENCE

The previous section has demonstrated the plurality of approaches to the conceptualisation of ESA. Such a wide range of definitions inevitably complicates the study and operationalisation of this phenomenon. One of the main difficulties lies in defining the immediate objective of ESA: it is reasonable to assume that each MS interprets ESA somewhat differently. More precisely, due to the contested nature of the concept, European states may differ considerably in their understanding of the purpose and scope of ESA. This is also confirmed by the European Council on Foreign Relations, which notes that "EU member states do not agree on the geographical and functional level of ambition they should adopt in pursuing strategic autonomy."⁹²

If we turn to France, which has traditionally been favourable towards the concept of ESA, a certain tension emerges: does France genuinely support the idea itself, or does it primarily seek to

⁹² Ulrike Franke / Tara Varma, *Independence Play: Europe's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 18 July 2019, p. 1.

strengthen its own defence capabilities? As Česnakas notes, “France, which is the driving force of the ESA, perceives it instrumentally.”⁹³ In this sense, ESA appears as an instrument for pursuing national interests and expanding France’s room for sovereign action. This formulation of the problem leads to different approaches to understanding the very essence of ESA. For Tardy, for instance, there is no contradiction here, since he sees this as “a shift in the meaning of autonomy by putting its military dimension in the hands of (European) states rather than the EU as such.”⁹⁴ In fact, he suggests that ESA can be understood as the comprehensive strengthening of capabilities not only at the European level, but also at the level of individual MS.

On the one hand, ESA should be distinguished from the enhancement of the defence capabilities of each MS individually. On the other hand, if Europe’s overall capacity to act increases as a result of such capability development, this still contributes positively to the pursuit of ESA, regardless of the extent to which it strengthens each state separately. Therefore, this thesis proceeds from the assumption that, given the predominantly intergovernmental character of the EU security and defence sphere, ESA is difficult to reduce exclusively to supranational European institutions within the CFSP or CSDP. Rather, ESA may also provide “capabilities not for the EU as a unitary actor but for the actions of MS.”⁹⁵ Accordingly, this study examines some dimensions of ESA at the level of common EU policies, while others are better analysed through the positions of individual MS. This is especially relevant, for instance, when considering the speed of decision-making as one component of ESA, since CFSP/CSDP procedures often depend on unanimity among MS. Thus, this thesis assumes that the development of defence capabilities by individual MS can be seen as contributing to ESA, although ESA clearly cannot be reduced to this dimension alone. Rather, such capability development should be understood as complementary to supranational structures and their further strengthening.

Having clarified the conceptual ambiguity of ESA, this thesis now turns to the theoretical lens through which its transformation will be analysed. The EU’s ambition to act as a global security and defence actor immediately points to the analytical prism and vocabulary offered by realism as a theory of international relations. Issues of the balance of power, the anarchic structure of the international system and power competition make it possible to focus on what is most important in the context of ESA, namely the significance of hard power capabilities and national interests. Two foundational principles of realism are particularly relevant for this analysis: Morgenthau’s

⁹³ Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy’, p. 26.

⁹⁴ Thierry Tardy, ‘What Division of Tasks between the EU, NATO, and States?’, in: *Encompass*, March 2021.

⁹⁵ Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy’, p. 26.

power-centred understanding of national interest⁹⁶ and Waltz's argument that, in an anarchic international system, security becomes "the highest end."⁹⁷

Further basic categories of realism useful for this analysis are balancing and bandwagoning, which represent two traditional opposing strategies of actors in international politics. Posen, for instance, argues that "the Europeans are hard balancing in the traditional realist way of balancing internally and externally to generate military capability."⁹⁸ This refers to "balancing against the unipolar power of the United States,"⁹⁹ which takes place both through the development of internal capabilities and through the formation of external alignments aimed at reducing excessive dependence on the US. There is, however, another logic, according to which the EU develops its capabilities not in order to balance the US, but rather "to pursue a more independent foreign policy."¹⁰⁰ A further group of scholars rejects the balancing interpretation even more directly. Brooks and Wohlforth, for example, argue that the strengthening of European capabilities does not undermine American power, but rather complements it, thereby reinforcing US unipolarity.¹⁰¹ In this sense, the EU's external behaviour may also be interpreted as alignment with the stronger actor and, therefore, as an example of classical bandwagoning.

This thesis argues that hedging offers a more appropriate theoretical lens for analysing ESA, as it can be understood as an intermediate strategy between balancing and bandwagoning. It allows actors to maximise short-term benefits while preserving long-term options in case the distribution of power changes. As Evelyn Goh defines it, hedging refers to cultivating "a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another."¹⁰² Kuik similarly defines hedging as "insurance-seeking behavior under situations of high uncertainty and high stakes,"¹⁰³ where a rational actor avoids taking sides and pursues opposite measures vis-à-vis competing powers in order to preserve a fallback position. This logic corresponds closely to the EU's pursuit of ESA. Given the significant differences among MS regarding the future of transatlantic relations, hedging is also reflected in the permanent search for a common position that could reconcile Atlanticist and Europeanist preferences. In this sense, MS, while protecting

⁹⁶ Hans J. Morgenthau: *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed., rev. by Kenneth W. Thompson, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985, p. 5.

⁹⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz: *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979, p. 126.

⁹⁸ Barry R. Posen: "European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?", in: *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2006, pp. 149–186, here p. 164.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁰⁰ Helwig / Sinkkonen, 'Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor', p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Stephen G. Brooks / William C. Wohlforth, 'Hard Times for Soft Balancing', in: *International Security* 30 (2005) 1, pp. 72–108, p. 75.

¹⁰² Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies*, Policy Studies 16, Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington, 2005, p. 8.

¹⁰³ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective', in: *China International Strategy Review* 3 (2021) 2, p. 300.

their national interests, are forced to search for common ground “for collective and impactful decision-making.”¹⁰⁴

This leads to another important theoretical perspective: classical intergovernmentalism. By placing the nation-state at the centre of the integration process, this approach is particularly relevant for understanding CFSP and CSDP, given their predominantly intergovernmental character. Hoffmann’s claim that “the state is still the highest possessor of power” is central to this logic, as is his view that the authority of supranational institutions remains “limited, conditional, dependent, and reversible.”¹⁰⁵

Liberal intergovernmentalism, developed by Moravcsik, is even more useful for this thesis because it links interstate bargaining with domestic preference formation. Moravcsik argues that “state behaviour reflects the rational actions of governments constrained at home by domestic societal pressures and abroad by their strategic environment.”¹⁰⁶ Applied to ESA, this means that EU-level decisions are strongly conditioned by national interests, domestic political constraints, threat perceptions and different strategic cultures. Consequently, the search for a common European position in security and defence, a highly sensitive area for every nation-state, remains structurally difficult.

The first step in operationalising ESA is to identify the main variables through which the concept can be analysed. This thesis draws on Beaucillon’s argument that “the current war in Ukraine reveals an interesting prism” for understanding ESA.¹⁰⁷ First, the war shows how the EU defines its position in relation to its allies, reflecting an “outward-looking logic”. Second, it demonstrates the importance of securing the EU’s own capacity to sustain its foreign policy choices, which corresponds to an “inward-looking logic”. Following this observation, for the purposes of this thesis, ESA is divided into two dimensions: an internal and an external one. This distinction is, of course, analytical and simplified, since in reality the two dimensions are closely intertwined and difficult to separate. The phenomenon of autonomy itself can hardly be understood outside the external context in which it is embedded. The internal dimension concerns the EU’s own capacity to act and includes military and defence capabilities, institutional decision-making mechanisms, the defence-industrial base, financial and technological resources, and the instruments through which policy choices can be implemented.

¹⁰⁴ Niklas Helwig, ‘EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Europe’s Capacity to Act in Times of War’, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies* 61 (2023) S1, p. 58.

¹⁰⁵ Stanley Hoffmann, ‘Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation-State and the Case of Western Europe’, in: *Daedalus* 95 (1966) 3, p. 909.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach’, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31 (1993) 4, p. 474.

¹⁰⁷ Beaucillon, ‘Strategic Autonomy’, p. 423.

The external dimension, by contrast, refers to the EU's degree of freedom of action vis-à-vis external actors, above all the US. It concerns the extent to which the EU depends on the US in security and defence, how far Washington shapes the framework of European decisions, whether the EU can act without the US, or, if necessary, against US preferences, and what room for manoeuvre the EU has within transatlantic relations.

One study examining the “transformation from abstract political rhetoric to concrete policy action” suggests that strategic autonomy may manifest itself on two levels: a rhetorical or conceptual level, and a practically oriented one.¹⁰⁸ In this sense, the internal dimension of ESA primarily concerns practical policies and capability-building, whereas the external dimension is more closely linked to conceptual and discursive debates about what level of cooperation with the US is acceptable, justified and beneficial.

A useful auxiliary framework can be found in the literature on EU actorness, which is closely related to ESA. Bretherton and Vogler identify three key components of the concept: opportunity, presence and capability.¹⁰⁹ “Opportunity” refers to “the external environment of ideas and events which constrain or enable actorness”; “presence” denotes “the ability of the EU, by virtue of its existence, to exert influence beyond its borders”; and “capability” concerns “the internal context of EU external action”, namely “the availability of policy instruments and understandings about the Union’s ability to utilize these instruments.”¹¹⁰ Jupille and Caporaso, in turn, conceptualise actorness through four criteria: recognition, authority, autonomy and cohesion.¹¹¹ These approaches are useful because they make it possible to assess actorness through a set of clearer analytical criteria. At the same time, ESA does not have an equally established tradition of measurement. There is no classical set of categories that would allow one to measure the level of ESA and provide a definitive assessment of its achievement. Moreover, this thesis does not seek to measure ESA in a strictly methodological sense. Rather, it traces the transformation of ESA over a specific period of time under the influence of two selected cases.

For this purpose, the thesis draws on the widely used distinction between the political, operational and industrial dimensions of ESA, which was introduced in the aftermath of the 2016 EUGS.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Giedrius Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy: The Origins Story’, in: Giedrius Česnakas / Justinas Juozaitis (eds.), *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States’ Security: In the Shadow of Power* (Abingdon, Oxon / New York, NY, 2022), p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ Charlotte Bretherton / John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor*, 2nd ed., London / New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 24.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 24.

¹¹¹ Joseph Jupille / James A. Caporaso, ‘States, Agency, and Rules: The European Union in Global Environmental Politics’, in: Carolyn Rhodes (ed.), *The European Union in the World Community*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 214.

¹¹² Ronja Kempin / Barbara Kunz, *France, Germany, and the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy: Franco-German Defence Cooperation in a New Era*, Notes du Cerfa No. 141, Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, December 2017, p. 10.

These components constitute the internal dimension of ESA and “refer respectively to the *capacity to take autonomous decisions*, the *ability to own and deploy the capabilities that will enable implementing them*, and the *possession of an industrial base* that will produce such capabilities.”¹¹³ Taken together, these three components provide the basis for operationalising the internal dimension of ESA.

As a working definition, this thesis adopts a slightly modified version of the formulation proposed in the volume edited by Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza and Volker Perthes, as it captures the main elements outlined above. They define ESA as “the ability to make decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone.”

Since the subject of this thesis is the transformation of ESA, it is necessary to identify the dependent and independent variables. The dependent variable is ESA’s transformation, analysed through its internal and external dimensions. Methodologically, the thesis relies on a two-case study design aimed at examining the impact of two independent variables: first, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and second, the policy of the second Trump administration.

Although the distinction between the internal and external dimensions provides the analytical framework, the empirical chapters are structured around the two selected cases. The second chapter focuses on Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and assesses its effects on both dimensions of ESA. The internal aspect is examined, first, through its political component, understood as “the capacity to take security policy decisions and act upon them.”¹¹⁴ This part of the analysis considers decision-making speed, political cohesion, the search for consensus and the ability of MS to reach a common position. Second, the operational and industrial dimensions are analysed through the impact of the war on the EU’s institutional framework and on the emergence or activation of mechanisms aimed at strengthening military and defence capabilities. This includes the ability “to plan and conduct civilian and military operations independently”, as well as the capacity to develop and build the required capabilities.¹¹⁵ A separate section examines how the war affected Member States’ positions towards ESA within the Atlanticist–Europeanist debate, thereby linking the EU’s internal capacity for common decision-making to the broader transatlantic context. The third chapter then turns to the second case: the second Trump administration and its implications for ESA. It focuses primarily on ESA’s external dimension, including Europe’s continued reliance on the US, the reliability of American security guarantees and the limits of EU autonomy within the transatlantic security architecture.

¹¹³ Oriol Costa / Esther Barbé, ‘A Moving Target: EU Actorness and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine’, in: *Journal of European Integration* 45 (2023) 3, p. 437.

¹¹⁴ Kempin / Kunz, *France, Germany, and the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy*, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Overall, this section has established a framework within which ESA can be analysed as a dynamic and contested concept rather than as a fixed end state. It has shown that ESA is multidimensional, involving both supranational EU action and the defence capabilities of individual MS, while also being shaped by constraints arising from the EU's strategic environment. The section then argued that hedging, complemented by realist and intergovernmentalist perspectives, provides a suitable theoretical lens for analysing the EU's attempt to preserve strategic flexibility under conditions of uncertainty. Finally, ESA was operationalised through its internal and external dimensions, which make it possible to trace both the EU's capacity-building efforts and its external room for manoeuvre. On this basis, the following chapters examine its transformation through two selected cases: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the second Trump administration.

CHAPTER 2. THE TRANSFORMATION OF EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

2.1 POLITICAL RECALIBRATION OF ESA AFTER RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

A useful starting point for analysing the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion on the understanding of ESA is the 2022 Strategic Compass (hereafter – the Compass), already discussed in the previous chapter. Its significance lies in the fact that it is a carefully elaborated strategy that sets the framework for the EU's security and defence policy for the years ahead. The Compass establishes objectives and lines of action up to 2030 and seeks “to make the EU a stronger and more capable security provider.”¹¹⁶ While the previous key strategic document was the 2016 EUGS, the Compass represents a more operational and action-oriented framework. Unlike earlier, more declaratory strategic texts, it provides “an ambitious plan of action for strengthening the EU's security and defence policy,” as stated in the official press release of the Council of the EU.¹¹⁷ In her detailed analysis “Putin's War and the Strategic Compass,” Nicole Koenig similarly describes it as “the most concrete and realistic roadmap for the EU as security provider.”¹¹⁸

The Compass was the result of approximately two years of work by the expert community, EU institutions and political actors. What makes it particularly important is that, in preparation for the Compass, the first threat analysis was conducted in 2020 with the involvement of the intelligence services of all 27 MS.¹¹⁹ This is especially significant, since one of the EU's long-standing problems has been the absence of a shared strategic vision, largely due to different threat perceptions among MS. The first version of the text “was tabled by the High Representative in

¹¹⁶ 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*, 7371/22, Brussels, 21 March 2022, p. 14.

¹¹⁷ Council of the European Union, “A Strategic Compass for a Stronger EU Security and Defence in the Next Decade,” Press Release 301/22, 21 March 2022.

¹¹⁸ Nicole Koenig, *Putin's War and the Strategic Compass: A Quantum Leap for the EU's Security and Defence Policy?*, Jacques Delors Centre Policy Brief, Hertie School, 29 April 2022, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ European External Action Service, “Questions and Answers: A Background for the Strategic Compass”, 21 March 2022.

November 2021.”¹²⁰ However, only a few weeks before its official adoption, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, bringing large-scale war back to the European continent. The final revisions therefore had to be made under conditions of emergency and uncertainty. Although the Compass was revised after the beginning of Russia’s aggression, its underlying logic still largely reflected the pre-24 February security environment. This is evident, for instance, in the extensive sections on tailored partnerships in Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as in the emphasis on increasing the EU’s presence in the Indo-Pacific. As Witney sharply puts it, the Compass was “brand new, already obsolete”: conceived as a foundational document for a geopolitical EU, it had been “simply overtaken by events” by the time of its adoption.¹²¹ The problem, therefore, was that the reality to which the document was supposed to respond had changed more radically than the text itself could fully absorb.

A comparison between the initial version and the final text reveals three main areas of change.¹²² First, the final version defines the priorities much more clearly, with stronger emphasis placed on Russia as a major source of threat. The full-scale invasion is explicitly condemned, and the document repeatedly refers to Russia’s “unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine.”¹²³ Given that ESA is conceptualised, among other things, as the “ability to set priorities,” the Compass demonstrates a clearly defined and consensual “shared assessment of our strategic environment,” in which Russia appears as an aggressor with whom no further cooperation in other domains is envisaged, unlike the rhetoric that had often circulated in different forms within the EU before.¹²⁴ Russia’s full-scale invasion thus marked the end of any remaining illusions about the possibility of returning to normal relations with Moscow.

This is also confirmed by a number of other statements. In particular, the European Parliament noted that Russia’s invasion “led to the suspension of all remaining political, cultural and scientific cooperation” and described it as “another turning point in EU-Russia relations” that “triggered a fundamental redefinition of Europe’s security policy.”¹²⁵ Von der Leyen later described this change as the shattering of “many European illusions,” including the belief that economic prosperity would matter more to Putin than aggression against Ukraine.¹²⁶ The Compass summarises this shift by stating that Russia’s aggressive and revisionist actions “constitute a long-

¹²⁰ Council of the European Union, “A Strategic Compass for a Stronger EU Security and Defence in the Next Decade.”

¹²¹ Nick Witney, “The EU’s Strategic Compass: Brand New, Already Obsolete”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 31 March 2022.

¹²² Koenig, *Putin’s War and the Strategic Compass*, p. 2.

¹²³ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, p. 17.

¹²⁴ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, p. 11.

¹²⁵ European Parliament, “Russia,” *Fact Sheets on the European Union*.

¹²⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on Strengthening European Defence in a Volatile Geopolitical Landscape,” European Commission, 28 February 2024.

term and direct threat for European security.”¹²⁷ Thus, in terms of priorities, the document indicates a certain regionalisation of the EU’s security and defence agenda. While it does not abandon the EU’s global role, it clearly places greater emphasis on the Union’s immediate strategic environment and on its capacity to act as a security provider in response to crises close to home. In addition, it demonstrates the EU’s “united and steadfast” position in support of Ukraine in the face of a direct and immediate threat.

The second major change concerns the unprecedented mobilisation of financial resources. First, MS committed themselves to increasing defence spending in order “to reduce critical military and civilian capability gaps” and to strengthen the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base.¹²⁸ Second, the Compass envisages a more effective use of a range of instruments, including the European Peace Facility (hereafter EPF), which will be examined in more detail in the following subsection. In the context of the political dimension of ESA, however, what matters most is the political will demonstrated by the speed and decisiveness with which the EU activated financial assistance to Ukraine under the EPF. Nicole Koenig emphasises that “the speed and scale with which the EU deployed this new instrument was staggering.”¹²⁹ Only four days after the start of the full-scale invasion, the EU adopted a €500 million assistance package, more than sixteen times larger than the previous €31 million package for Ukraine. For comparison, the latter had been adopted within the first year of the EPF’s existence after what was described as “a long and fruitful discussion” between Ukrainian diplomats and EU institutions.¹³⁰

The third aspect focuses on the increased sense of urgency and the emphasis on rapid implementation, including in practical areas such as the movement of goods for military purposes. The Compass sought to create “a common strategic vision,” while the EU declared that it would “immediately start its implementation.”¹³¹ This logic is reflected in the document’s “precise timetable for implementation”¹³² and “clear deadlines to measure progress,”¹³³ as well as in the fact that “51 of its 81 deliverables” were expected “to be completed by the end of 2022.”¹³⁴ In this respect, the Compass does not represent a typical example of an EU strategic narrative, which are

¹²⁷ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, p. 18.

¹²⁸ Council of the European Union, “A Strategic Compass for a Stronger EU Security and Defence in the Next Decade.”

¹²⁹ Koenig, *Putin’s War and the Strategic Compass*, p. 4.

¹³⁰ Dmytro Kuleba, quoted in Ukrinform, “EU to Allocate EUR 31M to Ukraine for Defense,” *Ukrinform*, 2 December 2021.

¹³¹ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, p. 15.

¹³² Council of the European Union, “A Strategic Compass for a Stronger EU Security and Defence in the Next Decade.”

¹³³ Josep Borrell, “The Strategic Compass Is Out: Now We Have to Implement It,” *European External Action Service*, 25 March 2022.

¹³⁴ Sebastian Clapp, *Implementation of the Strategic Compass: Opportunities, Challenges and Timelines*, European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, 9 December 2022.

often less centred on urgent timelines. This is also confirmed by Borrell himself, who emphasises that it differs significantly from previous strategic documents.¹³⁵

Returning to the working definition, which understands ESA as the ability to “make decisions in matters of foreign policy and security,” the part of the Compass dealing with “greater flexibility” in the “decision-making process, without compromising on political and financial solidarity” is particularly relevant.¹³⁶ It should be noted that this logic was already present in the first version of the Compass in 2021. However, for understanding the subsequent transformation of ESA, it is important to clarify which mechanisms the EU initially relied on. Under Article 31(1) of the Treaty on European Union (hereafter TEU), decisions in CFSP and, consequently, in CSDP are generally taken unanimously.¹³⁷ This means that each member state effectively retains a veto power and can block a decision. In the terminology of classical intergovernmentalism, these are areas of “high politics,” namely sensitive policy fields related to sovereignty, foreign policy and core national interests. Accordingly, the EU has traditionally shown a high degree of respect for political solidarity in security matters. At the same time, the inefficiency resulting from the unanimity rule has been debated for many years, leading to the search for alternative ways to address this problem. In this context, the Compass refers to Article 44 TEU, which provides for a specific form of using defence capabilities of MS. All of them must first agree unanimously in the Council on the political mandate of the mission, including its objectives, scope and general conditions. Only after that may the implementation of the task be entrusted to a group of MS, “which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task.”¹³⁸ To a considerable extent, this mechanism still presupposes subordination and accountability, since the action remains under the political oversight of the Council. Nevertheless, it may serve as a potentially useful instrument when the EU needs to act despite the unwillingness or reluctance of some MS to participate directly. This reference is important primarily at the rhetorical level, since Article 44 TEU has never been applied in practice. Consequently, due to the lack of practical experience, “there are still many unknowns surrounding the purpose, implications and added-value of the Article.”¹³⁹ In terms of its potential contribution to ESA, Article 44 TEU thus remains more of an unrealised possibility for more flexible action than a mechanism that has been translated into concrete policy practice.

¹³⁵ Josep Borrell, “A Strategic Compass to Make Europe a Security Provider,” in 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*, 7371/22, Brussels, 21 March 2022, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, p. 26.

¹³⁷ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, OJ C 326, 26 October 2012, Art. 31(1).

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Thierry Tardy, *In Groups We Trust: Implementing Article 44 of the Lisbon Treaty*, EUISS Brief no. 27, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 7 October 2014.

Another mechanism worth mentioning is constructive abstention, which is also emphasised in the Compass and could potentially make EU decision-making more flexible and effective. Under Article 31(1) TEU, a member state may abstain from a decision and qualify this abstention by making a formal declaration.¹⁴⁰ In such a case, the state is not obliged to apply the decision, but it must accept that the decision commits the Union as a whole and must refrain from any action that could obstruct its implementation. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, constructive abstention had been used only once, in 2008, when Cyprus abstained from the decision establishing the EU's civilian CSDP mission in Kosovo.¹⁴¹ Cyprus did not support the EULEX mission because the question of Kosovo's independence was highly sensitive for Nicosia in light of its own unresolved issues of territorial integrity.

By contrast, Russia's war against Ukraine gave a real impetus to the use of constructive abstention, which has been applied at least three times since 2022.¹⁴² First, on 28 February 2022, Austria, Ireland and Malta constructively abstained from decisions concerning the supply of lethal military equipment to Ukraine under the EPF. This allowed other MS to proceed with military assistance, while the neutral states did not participate in the financing of lethal support. Second, Hungary used constructive abstention when the Council established the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (hereafter EUMAM). Euronews quoted Szijjártó as saying that "Hungary was the only one not to vote on this proposal."¹⁴³ As a result, Hungary was not obliged to apply the EUMAM decision, but had to avoid any measures that could undermine its implementation. Third, in 2024, Hungary again relied on constructive abstention in relation to the creation of the Ukraine Assistance Fund (hereafter UAF) under the EPF, through which the Council allocated €5 billion to support Ukraine militarily.

"Despite the practical value of this voting arrangement," constructive abstention remains politically difficult to activate in practice, since it is not easy to fulfil its purpose of "reconcil[ing] the position held by the majority of Member States with the reservations and concerns of others."¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, post-2022 practice shows that a major external security crisis can push the EU to make use of a mechanism that had previously remained largely exceptional. In this sense, Russia's aggression had a direct impact on ESA by producing a concrete change in EU decision-making practice.

¹⁴⁰ TEU, Art. 31(1).

¹⁴¹ European Commission, *A Stronger Global Actor: A More Efficient Decision-Making for EU Common Foreign and Security Policy*, COM(2018) 647 final, Brussels, 12 September 2018, p. 5.

¹⁴² Charles Grant, *Does EU Enlargement Require Voting Reform?*, Centre for European Reform, 9 May 2025.

¹⁴³ Alice Tidey, "EU Countries Agree to Train Ukrainian Soldiers as Part of New Mission," *Euronews*, 17 October 2022.

¹⁴⁴ Maria Eugenia Bartoloni, "Simple Abstention and Constructive Abstention in the Context of International Economic Sanctions: Two Too Similar Sides of the Same Coin?", *European Papers* 7, no. 3 (2022): 1121–1131, here p. 1124.

In order to trace the transformation of ESA after 2022, this thesis develops a comparative table of ESA-related criteria based on the Compass and the Annual Progress Reports on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence published in 2023 and 2024 (see Table 1). For 2025, the analysis uses the Report of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to the Council. This comparative framework makes it possible to assess how selected elements of ESA evolved over time, particularly within its internal dimension and, to a more limited extent, its external dimension.

ESA criterion	Strategic Compass 2022	Annual Progress Report 2023	Annual Progress Report 2024	Annual Progress Report 2025	Implication for ESA
Strategic prioritisation	Shared assessment of threats; first EU threat analysis	The war is framed as a tectonic shift for European security	Ukraine is presented as defending European security	Support for Ukraine is framed as directly linked to the EU's own security	A regionalisation of the EU's security agenda
Decision-making	Calls for more rapid, flexible and effective decision-making	Practical modalities for Article 44 TEU are developed	A more pragmatic use of existing mechanisms	Reliance on existing legal mechanisms	Unanimity and control of MS remain central
Self-perception as a Security Union	Aim to strengthen its role in its neighbourhood and globally	Exercises on Article 42(7) TEU in cyber, hybrid and space-related scenarios	Preparedness for mutual assistance under Article 42(7) TEU	Operationalisation of mutual assistance and solidarity clauses	A renewed discussion of the clause without its actual activation
Partnerships	ESA is framed together with the US	EU-NATO and EU-US cooperation are presented as stronger than before	Stronger European pillar within NATO and tailored partnerships	EU-NATO structured dialogue, wider security partnerships	ESA develops as autonomy <i>with</i> partners, hedging logic

Table 1.

The first criterion indicates that the EU became more capable of defining a common security priority. The 2024 report states that MS “have pledged to support Ukraine with whatever it takes,

for as long as it takes,”¹⁴⁵ which points to a considerable degree of political unity. This is particularly relevant for ESA, which presupposes capacity to agree on priorities and act upon them collectively.

With regard to the second criterion, the 2023 report appears particularly relevant, as it refers to the “practical modalities” for Article 44 TEU. However, it does not specify what these modalities actually entail or which concrete steps were taken to operationalise them. The information provided is limited to the statement that, “following Member States’ agreement,” MS are now, if necessary, in a position to activate this provision by allowing a group of willing and able MS to plan and conduct a mission or operation “within the EU framework.”¹⁴⁶ This is expected to provide “greater flexibility and swiftness” in EU decision-making.¹⁴⁷ Yet the subsequent reports for 2024 and 2025 do not return to Article 44 TEU, and there is still no evidence of its practical application. Instead, they focus on the broader operationalisation of existing mechanisms, such as toolboxes, response teams, exercises and CFSP-based procedures. In other words, the EU has not moved towards greater supranationalisation in CFSP/CSDP, nor has it overcome the institutional constraints associated with the principle of unanimity, which “delivers unsatisfactory results that please no one.”¹⁴⁸

The third criterion concerns the EU’s evolving self-perception as a Security Union. In the Compass, Article 42(7) TEU is mentioned in a broader context of increasing “its presence, effectiveness and visibility in its neighbourhood and on the global stage.”¹⁴⁹ This clause introduces a logic of mutual assistance in the case of armed aggression against a member state and is therefore often discussed in relation to NATO’s collective defence mechanism. As Virkkunen notes, Article 42(7) TEU is “very similar to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty,” since both provisions are based on “the idea that an attack against one member state [...] is an attack against all.”¹⁵⁰ However, this comparison has clear limits. Unlike NATO, the EU does not possess comparable military structures, procedures or command arrangements. In practice, due to its “organisational weaknesses,” it is therefore “other member states, not the institutions of the EU,” that would provide assistance in the event of an attack.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, Report to the Council, March 2024, p. 4.

¹⁴⁶ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, Report to the Council, March 2024, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Henna Virkkunen, “The EU’s Mutual Defence Clause? Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union,” *European View* 21, no. 1 (2022): 22–26, p. 25.

¹⁴⁹ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁰ Virkkunen, “The EU’s Mutual Defence Clause?”, p. 22.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 23.

Nevertheless, the renewed discussion of this clause is already significant at the conceptual level, even though many controversial questions remain as to the extent to which Article 42(7) TEU duplicates Article 5 of NATO. The Compass implementation reports address this ambiguity by embedding it in a broader understanding of security preparedness. Thus, the focus shifts from conventional armed aggression to multidomain threats, including space, hybrid and cyber operations. This development can be seen as a direct implication of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, since, as Virkkunen observes, "after the EU's historic sanctions package against Russia, there were warnings that Moscow would retaliate with hybrid and cyber-attacks."¹⁵² The 2025 report further develops this logic by considering how the EU could support MS in the event of an activation of NATO's collective defence mechanism.¹⁵³

The analysis of the final criterion suggests that Russia's full-scale invasion strengthened, and to some extent made unavoidable, close cooperation with the US and NATO. As Helwig argues in his 2023 article, "lingering questions on US commitment to European security are – at least for the time being – muted."¹⁵⁴ This is closely connected to the fact that the US provided Ukraine with crucial military assistance and, in practice, acted as a key guarantor of European security in the face of this threat, even if not in a formal legal sense. It can be assumed that Ukraine's ability to withstand the first phase of the invasion would have been much more limited without American intelligence support and weapons deliveries. Only two days after Russia's full-scale invasion, the US authorised an additional \$350 million military assistance package¹⁵⁵, with the first shipments reportedly arriving near Ukraine's border within 48 hours.¹⁵⁶ Although the EU approved its own military assistance package only a few days later, this should not obscure the asymmetry between European and American military support in the initial stage of the war.

This tendency is also reflected in the annual implementation reports of the Compass, which repeatedly refer to deepened consultations, operational cooperation and strategic partnership with NATO. In Ratti's interpretation, Russia's full-scale invasion restored NATO's centrality and reaffirmed the indispensable role of the US in European security.¹⁵⁷ Given the essence of the concept itself, this could not but weaken the case for ESA understood as independence *from* any other actor. At the same time, this does not imply the irrelevance of ESA. Rather, the war brought

¹⁵² Koenig, *Putin's War and the Strategic Compass*, p. 3.

¹⁵³ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, Report to the Council, 15 April 2025, p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ Helwig, "EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," p. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Steve Holland and Mike Stone, "Biden Approves \$350 Million in Military Aid for Ukraine," *Reuters*, 26 February 2022.

¹⁵⁶ "The U.S. Has Moved a Massive Amount of Arms into Ukraine Since Russia's Invasion," *The Week*, 7 March 2022.

¹⁵⁷ Luca Ratti, "NATO and the CSDP after the Ukraine War: The End of European Strategic Autonomy?," *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies* 16, no. 2 (2023): 73–89, p. 74.

to the foreground an interpretation of ESA based on complementarity with NATO and on the absence of contradiction between a stronger EU security role and the transatlantic alliance. It also elevated “critical voices that have been sceptical of the French-led aspirations to make the EU an independent power centre.”¹⁵⁸ Thus, the war exposed the well-known “capability-expectations gap”¹⁵⁹ so clearly that some scholars began to question whether ESA had reached its limits.¹⁶⁰ Yet Russia’s aggression shifted the meaning of ESA towards an understanding in which the EU’s role is to develop mechanisms and capabilities that strengthen the transatlantic alliance rather than replace it.

Although this subsection primarily examines the internal dimension of ESA, the final criterion already indicates the close connection between internal capacity-building and the transatlantic dimension, which will be addressed more directly in the following subsections. Overall, Russia’s aggression recalibrated ESA politically. It pushed the EU towards clearer strategic prioritisation, faster mobilisation of financial instruments and more flexible decision-making practices, as shown by the post-2022 use of constructive abstention. These changes, however, did not overcome the core contradictions of ESA, namely the intergovernmental character of CFSP/CSDP and Europe’s dependence on US and NATO capabilities. The war therefore strengthened ESA mainly as an operational and NATO-compatible project, highlighting the need for a greater European capacity to act within the transatlantic security framework.

2.2 INSTITUTIONAL AND MATERIAL DIMENSION OF ESA AFTER 2022

This subsection examines the mechanisms that emerged as a direct response to the war. These instruments created an institutional framework that enabled the EU to respond in a timely manner to challenges whose scale had been difficult to anticipate and which required a high degree of coordination at the EU level. However, in the broader context of ESA, a certain “security momentum” had already taken shape earlier, particularly after 2016, resulting in security and defence policy becoming “one of the most burgeoning fields of European cooperation” through the rapid emergence of several new security instruments.¹⁶¹ This referred primarily to the so-called “big bang” of initiatives, whose main rationale was to overcome intergovernmental competition in the defence-industrial sector and instead promote the practice of “designing and producing major military equipment together.”¹⁶² These initiatives included the European Defence Fund (EDF),

¹⁵⁸ Helwig, “EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” p. 1.

¹⁵⁹ Christopher Hill, “The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe’s International Role,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31, no. 3 (1993): 305–328.

¹⁶⁰ Judy Dempsey, “Judy Asks: Is European Strategic Autonomy Over?,” *Carnegie Europe*, 19 January 2023.

¹⁶¹ Carolyn Moser/Steven Blockmans: *The extent of the European Parliament’s competence in Common Security and Defence Policy*, European Parliament, In-Depth Analysis, PE 702.559, June 2022, p. 1.

¹⁶² Giedrius Česnakas, ‘European Strategic Autonomy: The Origins Story’, p. 25.

Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the European Peace Facility (EPF), and the European Intervention Initiative (EI2).

One of the key instruments shaping EU security policy in the pre-2022 environment and ensuring the development of ESA was PESCO, which was designed to strengthen the EU's position as an international security actor capable of conducting military operations abroad.¹⁶³ Established in 2017, PESCO introduced legally binding commitments for the participating MS. Nevertheless, its implementation revealed important limitations, including a "lack of compliance with binding commitments" and the risk of a "lowest common denominator approach."¹⁶⁴ In order to provide financial support for defence research and industrial projects, EDF was established in 2021.¹⁶⁵ By contrast, EPF was created to enable the EU to finance CFSP actions with military or defence implications, which cannot normally be funded from the regular EU budget.¹⁶⁶ However, despite the creation of a wide range of instruments, their operation remained procedurally complex. The main constraint, however, was the reluctance of most MS to increase defence spending; without sufficient national investment, these instruments could hardly produce the intended strategic effect. Yet the real acceleration of EU security and defence cooperation became visible only after 2022. Overall, Russia's aggression against Ukraine revealed the EU's legal and material unpreparedness to address "high-intensity conventional land warfare on its doorstep."¹⁶⁷ Consequently, the EU was forced to act rapidly and decisively in developing new institutional models of response, aimed at compensating for the lack of effective instruments available at the beginning of the invasion. Against the background of the 2022 Strategic Compass, this subsection examines its operational dimension. In this respect, however, the extent to which the document substantially enhances the EU's military relevance remains questionable.¹⁶⁸ The problem lies primarily in the limited scale of forces that can be deployed through the operational instruments introduced by the Compass. Thus, the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), one of the key new instruments, enables the Union to deploy up to 5,000 troops swiftly in response to crises beyond its borders.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, in the case of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the conduct of operations

¹⁶³ Council of the European Union: *Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315 establishing Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)*, in: *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 331, 14 December 2017, pp. 57–77, here Art. 1 and Annex.

¹⁶⁴ Tania Laïci: *Implementation and governance of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)*, European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 659.280, October 2020, p. 2.

¹⁶⁵ European Parliament/Council of the European Union: *Regulation (EU) 2021/697 establishing the European Defence Fund*, in: *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 170, 12 May 2021, pp. 149–177, here Arts. 1 and 3.

¹⁶⁶ Council of the European Union: *Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/509 establishing a European Peace Facility*, in: *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 102, 24 March 2021, pp. 14–62, here Art. 1.

¹⁶⁷ Davide Genini, "How the War in Ukraine Has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy," *Yearbook of European Law* (2025), p. 3.

¹⁶⁸ Genini, "How the War in Ukraine," p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ Council of the European Union, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence," 7371/22 (2022), p. 13.

involving more than 2,500 troops remains technically constrained by limited personnel capacity and insufficient operational guidance. Any comparison with the size of national armed forces makes evident the risk of the military marginalisation of such initiatives, especially when set against the scale of the aggressor state's army.

Particular attention should be paid to the EPF, whose original rationale and function were transformed after the outbreak of the war. Its initial advantage lay in making the EU's external security action more flexible by pooling national contributions into a common fund. The Facility evolved from "a conflict prevention tool to a powerful instrument at the EU's disposal" and became the central mechanism for financing military assistance to Ukraine.¹⁷⁰ In this sense, the EPF shows that institutional change within the EU can occur rapidly when political will coincides with a powerful external shock.

Although the EPF was endowed with an unprecedented level of CSDP funding, its original proposal had been significantly more ambitious.¹⁷¹ Moreover, the scale of military assistance to Ukraine rapidly depleted the original EPF ceiling, forcing the Council to increase the Facility's financial capacity several times.¹⁷² At the same time, the EPF remained embedded in the intergovernmental logic of the CFSP, and MS retained direct control over its governance and decisions generally requiring unanimity. What is crucial here is that the EPF broke an important political taboo by enabling the EU to finance lethal military assistance to Ukraine. Nevertheless, as Genini argues, this has not yet amounted to a "full paradigm shift in the CFSP" or transformed the EU into a genuine security provider in Europe.¹⁷³

The European Union Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM UA) clearly illustrates the operational dimension of the EU's post-2022 security response. The mission was established to train Ukrainian military personnel so that they could "continue their courageous fight" while the EU's broader role was to "finance, coordinate, and synchronise Member States' efforts."¹⁷⁴ Politically, EUMAM UA therefore functioned as a signal of the EU's long-term commitment to Ukraine, demonstrating both the Union's support and the ability of Member States to reach a coordinated decision within the CSDP framework. The added value of the mission is closely linked to its demand-driven character, as it "responded to a specific request from the Ukrainian government" for various forms of training for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. To this

¹⁷⁰ Michaels / Sus, '(Not) Coming of Age?', p. 394.

¹⁷¹ Genini, "How the War in Ukraine," p. 8.

¹⁷² Council of the European Union, "Timeline — European Peace Facility," 2026; Council of the European Union, "Ukraine Assistance Fund: Council Allocates €5 Billion under the European Peace Facility to Support Ukraine Militarily," 18 March 2024.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p. 9.

¹⁷⁴ Alexandra Hofer, "The EU and Its Member States at War in Ukraine? Collective Self-defence, Neutrality and Party Status in the Russo-Ukraine War," *European Papers* 8, no. 3 (2023), pp. 1698–1741, pp. 1704–1705.

end, the efforts and expertise of MS were embedded within a common EU framework tailored to Ukraine's priorities.¹⁷⁵ Genini describes EUMAM UA as the EU's "most ambitious military training mission" to date, which turned the Union into the world's largest provider of military training to Ukraine.¹⁷⁶ EUMAM UA became the first CSDP mission to be complemented by EPF-financed lethal assistance, thus combining military training with concrete material support.¹⁷⁷ Importantly, EUMAM UA also became part of a broader transatlantic training architecture, as close coordination with NATO and other partners remained a priority. In this respect, EUMAM UA further reinforced EU-NATO cooperation on military training and equipment support for Ukraine.

In 2023, the PESCO Strategic Review was launched with the aim of making PESCO "more strategic and effective" and adapting it to "the new geopolitical reality beyond 2025."¹⁷⁸ Russia's war against Ukraine created a need to reassess this key instrument in light of high-intensity conventional warfare in Europe and to align it more closely with the initiatives introduced by the Strategic Compass. In this context, the revitalisation of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) became increasingly central.

Particular attention should be paid to projects related to defence procurement. The ammunition initiative became one of the clearest examples of how military support for Ukraine was linked to the EU's broader objective of strengthening joint defence procurement. Faced with Ukraine's critical ammunition shortage, the Council agreed in March 2023 on a three-track approach to provide one million rounds of artillery ammunition within twelve months.¹⁷⁹ The EPF was used to support both immediate deliveries from MS' existing stocks and the subsequent joint procurement of 155-mm ammunition and, where necessary, missiles from the European defence industry.¹⁸⁰ In parallel, the EDA translated this political objective into a concrete procurement mechanism by signing eight framework contracts with European industry for such ammunition.¹⁸¹

The European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) was developed in 2023 to support this process. It is described by the European Commission as an "EU programme aimed at incentivising cooperation in defence procurement between Member

¹⁷⁵ Davide Genini, "How the War in Ukraine Has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy," *Yearbook of European Law* (2025), pp. 9–10.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁷⁷ Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/2245, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 294, 15 November 2022, pp. 25–28.

¹⁷⁸ Council of the European Union, "EU Defence Cooperation: Council Approves Conclusions on the PESCO Strategic Review," 19 November 2024.

¹⁷⁹ Council of the European Union, "Delivery and Joint Procurement of Ammunition for Ukraine," 7632/23, 20 March 2023, p. 1.

¹⁸⁰ Genini, "How the War in Ukraine," p. 13.

¹⁸¹ European Defence Agency, "EDA Signs Framework Contracts for Joint Procurement of 155mm Ammunition," 5 September 2023.

States.”¹⁸² Designed as a two-year instrument, EDIRPA seeks to enable MS to “jointly coordinate and acquire the most urgent and critical defence product needs,” thereby addressing capability gaps exposed by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.¹⁸³ The “financial envelope for the implementation of the Instrument,” understood as the EU budgetary allocation designed to incentivise joint procurement, amounted to €300 million.¹⁸⁴ EDIRPA was intended, *inter alia*, to move beyond fragmented national procurement and stimulate collective demand, which is why participation by at least three MS is required. At the same time, this financial envelope creates an incentive for joint procurement rather than covering the full cost of defence products. In any case, such procurement is intended to strengthen the European defence industry. The Regulation therefore provides that common procurement contracts should be concluded with contractors or subcontractors established in the Union or in associated countries and not controlled by non-associated third countries.¹⁸⁵ In practice, EDIRPA was operationalised through the 2024 calls for proposals, resulting in five common procurement projects worth €60 million each across three priority areas: air and missile defence, ammunition, and platforms.¹⁸⁶

The final component of this three-track approach was the Regulation on Supporting Ammunition Production (ASAP), which sought to support the rapid expansion of ammunition and missile production within the EU. In contrast to the preceding measures, ASAP focused on the industrial ramp-up dimension and aimed at strengthening “the responsiveness and ability of the EU defence industry to ensure the timely supply of ammunition and missiles in Europe.”¹⁸⁷ The instrument provides financial support for industrial projects designed to expand production capacities and address bottlenecks in supply chains. Its broader rationale was to help MS replenish their stocks while maintaining the flow of ammunition to Ukraine. In practice, ASAP operated through EU grants to defence industry undertakings. Following the evaluation of 82 proposals, 31 projects were selected, with a total budget of over €500 million to stimulate ammunition production across key segments, including “gunpowder and propellants, explosives, shells, testing capacities and missiles.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸² European Commission, “EDIRPA — Addressing Capability Gaps,” Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, 2024.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, “Regulation (EU) 2023/2418 Establishing an Instrument for the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry through Common Procurement (EDIRPA),” *Official Journal of the European Union* (2023), Art. 4.

¹⁸⁵ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, “Regulation (EU) 2023/2418 Establishing an Instrument for the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry through Common Procurement (EDIRPA),” *Official Journal of the European Union* (2023), Art. 9(5).

¹⁸⁶ European Commission, “EU Boosts Defence Readiness with First Ever Financial Support for Common Defence Procurement,” 14 November 2024.

¹⁸⁷ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, “Regulation (EU) 2023/1525 on Supporting Ammunition Production (ASAP),” *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 185, 24 July 2023, p. 7.

¹⁸⁸ European Commission, “Regulation on Supporting Ammunition Production (ASAP),” 2024.

Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, the ammunition initiative fell short at least in terms of its original timeframe. Within the first year, only “around 52%” of the objective had been achieved, with the full delivery target reached only by the end of 2024.¹⁸⁹ The European Commission attributed these difficulties to broader structural weaknesses of the EDTIB, noting that “decades of underinvestment and fragmented and uncoordinated demand” had left European defence production capacities “often tailored to the specific needs of narrow national markets.”¹⁹⁰ Genini offers an even more critical assessment of the initiative’s outcome. In his view, the eventual delivery of ammunition to Ukraine relied predominantly on MS’ existing stocks, which meant that the initiative largely remained confined to its first component rather than demonstrating the delayed success of the more ambitious joint procurement and industrial ramp-up measures.¹⁹¹

The publication of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) by the European Commission and the High Representative on 5 March 2024 marked a turning point in the EU’s defence-industrial agenda. Formally adopted as a Joint Communication, it outlines a long-term vision up to 2035, with its core logic captured in the full title: “Achieving EU readiness through a responsive and resilient European Defence Industry.”¹⁹² To a large extent, EDIS reflected the need to act under conditions of uncertainty after “decades of under-spending.” As the first comprehensive EU framework devoted specifically to the European defence-industrial sector, it urged MS not only to invest more, but to do so “better, together and European.”¹⁹³

The European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP), in turn, was designed as the implementing instrument of this logic, aiming to “boost cooperation in defence procurement among Member States” and to increase the European defence industry’s “manufacturing capacities.”¹⁹⁴ Backed by a financial envelope of €1.5 billion, EDIP seeks to consolidate the temporary logic of EDIRPA and ASAP into more permanent EU-level measures. In functional terms, EDIP seeks to reduce “lead production time for defence products,” thereby moving beyond short-term emergency instruments.¹⁹⁵ To this end, the programme introduces several mechanisms: support for European Defence Projects of Common Interest, measures to strengthen security of supply, a framework for

¹⁸⁹ European External Action Service, “Foreign Affairs Council (Defence): Press Remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell after the Meeting,” 19 November 2024.

¹⁹⁰ European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document on the European Defence Industry Programme*, SWD(2024) 482 final, 8 July 2024, p. 22.

¹⁹¹ Davide Genini, “How the War in Ukraine Has Transformed the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy,” *Yearbook of European Law* (2025), p. 14.

¹⁹² European Commission/High Representative, “A New European Defence Industrial Strategy,” JOIN(2024) 10 final, 5 March 2024.

¹⁹³ European Parliament, “Joint Communication on a New European Defence Industrial Strategy,” Legislative Train Schedule, 2024.

¹⁹⁴ Council of the European Union, “European Defence Industry Programme,” 2026.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

common procurement and instruments facilitating cooperation with Ukraine's defence industry.¹⁹⁶ Recent IAI analysis describes EDIP as completing the EU's emerging defence-industrial toolkit, while stressing that its budget remains modest and that its main value lies in providing a scalable framework for longer-term cooperation.¹⁹⁷

At the same time, scholars remain cautious about the effectiveness of this framework. These doubts are linked, first, to the ambitious targets set by EDIS: by 2030, 40% of defence procurement should be conducted collaboratively, 50% of procurement should come from the EDTIB, and intra-EU defence trade should reach 35%.¹⁹⁸ Bruegel therefore questions whether MS will be able to change their entrenched national procurement practices.¹⁹⁹ A second concern relates to the attempt to reduce import dependency. A rigid "buy European" logic could increase costs or limit access to faster and more effective solutions, especially when urgent defence needs require rapid delivery. Finally, the strategy itself cannot guarantee that MS will abandon national industrial preferences or consistently procure jointly. As a result, the reduction of fragmentation remains uncertain, while the available financial incentives may prove insufficient for a transformation of the EDTIB on the scale envisaged by EDIS.

The launch of the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 in March 2025 constituted a further step in the financialisation of EU defence policy. The plan "proposes to leverage over €800 billion in defence spending through national fiscal flexibility, a new €150 billion loan instrument (SAFE) for joint procurement, potential redirection of cohesion funds, and expanded European Investment Bank support."²⁰⁰ In this sense, it represents one of the most ambitious attempts to reshape defence procurement and investment within the EU. Its core innovation lies in the use of the national escape clause under the Stability and Growth Pact, which allows Member States to increase defence expenditure without immediately triggering excessive deficit procedures.²⁰¹

At the same time, ReArm Europe has generated several critical concerns, also highlighted by the European Parliamentary Research Service.²⁰² First, without stronger coordination, higher defence expenditure may simply reproduce parallel national procurement practices and, in the worst case,

¹⁹⁶ European Commission, "EDIP — Forging Europe's Defence," Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, accessed 4 June 2026.

¹⁹⁷ Istituto Affari Internazionali, "The European Defence Industry Programme: The Last Piece of the EU Defence Puzzle," 2 February 2026.

¹⁹⁸ European Commission, "First Ever European Defence Industrial Strategy to Enhance Europe's Readiness and Security," 5 March 2024.

¹⁹⁹ Guntram B. Wolff, "The European Defence Industrial Strategy: Important, but Raising Many Questions," Bruegel, 19 March 2024.

²⁰⁰ European Parliamentary Research Service, *ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030*, Briefing, European Parliament, April 2025, p. 1.

²⁰¹ Davide Genini, "How the War in Ukraine Has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy," *Yearbook of European Law* (2025), p. 16.

²⁰² European Parliamentary Research Service, *ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030*, p. 4.

deepen the fragmentation of the European defence market, thereby producing an effect opposite to the one the mechanism was intended to achieve. Second, SAFE is based on loans rather than grants, which may reduce its attractiveness for fiscally constrained MS. For these countries, accepting such terms would mean relying on fiscal flexibility under the national escape clause while also assuming a trade-off between rapid capability generation and long-term debt sustainability. Finally, the “buy European” logic may strengthen the EDTIB, but it could also increase costs or delay deliveries if European industrial capacity remains insufficient to meet urgent demand.

Overall, the post-2022 transformation of ESA demonstrates that the EU’s added value in defence lies less in direct military command than in its capacity to use “budgetary and regulatory tools” to help forge a European defence industrial base.²⁰³ The instruments examined in this subsection reveal a considerable degree of institutional flexibility: existing mechanisms such as the EPF were repurposed almost immediately, while new instruments such as EDIRPA, ASAP, EDIP and ReArm Europe were introduced to address procurement gaps, expand production capacity and mobilise financial resources on an unprecedented scale. In several cases, these tools enabled the EU to act in ways that had previously been politically or legally difficult, including the financing of lethal military assistance, the coordination of training for Ukrainian forces, and the creation of incentives for joint defence procurement. At the same time, this transformation remains incomplete. The effectiveness of these instruments continues to depend on MS’ willingness to coordinate demand, increase defence spending and overcome entrenched national procurement preferences. Thus, the EU’s response after 2022 should be understood not as a full transition towards autonomous military command, but as the emergence of a more flexible, financially empowered and defence-industrial model of ESA.

2.3 ESA BETWEEN ATLANTICISM AND EUROPEANISM AFTER 2022

This subsection examines how the war affected the positions of different MS, particularly elite preferences towards ESA. In this thesis, such changes are treated as one of the indicators of ESA’s transformation within the Atlanticist–Europeanist debate. The key question is whether Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine altered threat perceptions across Europe and pushed MS to reconsider the balance between reliance on the US and NATO, on the one hand, and the need to strengthen European defence capabilities, on the other. The subsection therefore traces whether a state’s position in this debate correlates with its attitude towards new capability-enhancing EU mechanisms and with possible shifts in preferences towards ESA under the conditions of war in Europe.

²⁰³ Sophia Besch, “EU Defense and the War in Ukraine,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 December 2022.

The analysis of national interests related to ESA should most naturally begin with France. It is the first country that comes to mind when this concept is mentioned, as France is usually associated with the strongest support for ESA. Historically, France has advocated the development of greater European capabilities and stood at the origins of many defence initiatives. At the same time, certain simplifications should be avoided. As Ringailė Kuokštytė argues, France's historical experience is too easily extrapolated onto present-day realities.²⁰⁴ In fact, France's leading role in the past does not automatically imply a sincere contemporary aspiration to achieve a higher degree of independence. This can be demonstrated by several points.

First, despite highlighting the need to strengthen the strategic and material basis for independent operational capacity, France nevertheless continues to deepen its cooperation with the US and "continuously invests in the transatlantic partnership."²⁰⁵ This is reflected, among other things, in the 2024 French-American Roadmap, agreed by Biden and Macron with the aim of reaffirming allied commitments.²⁰⁶ Among other issues, the two sides confirmed their joint deterrence of Russia and their commitment to supporting Ukraine. France is also one of the most important European allies within NATO, which is demonstrated by a number of practical steps. In 2024, the NATO Secretary General underlined "France's key role in the Alliance," referring in particular to its contribution to collective defence on NATO's eastern flank, its deployments in Romania and Estonia, participation in Baltic air policing, and its maritime presence, including the role of French naval forces in securing sea lanes.²⁰⁷ According to the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, France remains one of NATO's major European contributors, ranking third after the United States and Germany in funding the Alliance's military and civil budgets.²⁰⁸ The Ministry also emphasises that France complies with NATO's defence spending guidelines, including the 2 per cent target for defence expenditure and the 20 per cent benchmark for equipment spending. Such a position is, to some extent, at odds with France's traditional emphasis on a greater degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the US. This can be explained to a significant extent by the impact of the war, which made French-American interoperability and cooperation increasingly difficult to avoid. After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, US military supplies and intelligence support became deeply embedded in Europe's security architecture. As a result, even a country that had

²⁰⁴ Ringailė Kuokštytė, "Revisiting France's Commitment to Defence Integration: A Case of Political Functionalism," in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 34–50, p. 35.

²⁰⁵ Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, Special Issue (2022): 1–20, p. 6.

²⁰⁶ Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Emmanuel Macron, "Joint Statement by President Biden and President Emmanuel Macron of France — French-American Roadmap," 8 June 2024.

²⁰⁷ NATO, "Secretary General Praises France's Leading Role in NATO during Visit to Paris," 24 June 2024.

²⁰⁸ French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. "France and NATO." *France Diplomatie*. Accessed 17 May 2026.

traditionally articulated ESA in terms close to emancipation appears to have recalibrated its ambitions, placing greater emphasis on working together to strengthen the Alliance's deterrence. Second, there are grounds to argue that, for France, ESA does not function as a coherent political-strategic framework that determines the state's foreign policy choices. Rather, France's contemporary approach to ESA appears to be shaped to a considerable extent by defence-industrial considerations.²⁰⁹ In practice, this means that France invokes ESA primarily where it serves its interests in strengthening its industrial and technological base, reducing dependence on the US in these specific domains, and supporting its own defence industry. In this sense, in the French case ESA seems "devoid of substantive content" that would translate into a greater capacity to define future strategic objectives and coordinate their implementation.²¹⁰

Indeed, if France had both the ambition and the capacity to act as a fully autonomous defence actor, it would arguably have sought to demonstrate stronger leadership in response to Russia's war against Ukraine. Yet this was not the case. France's understanding of ESA therefore appears to be more operational and instrumental than genuinely political-strategic. As Maze-Sencier argues, "unlike the US and the UK, France has been perceived as a follower rather than a leader since February 24, with a halfhearted effort to arm Ukraine."²¹¹ France's difficulty in demonstrating political responsibility is also reflected in Macron's "repeated appeals to give Moscow a face-saving exit" and his frequent calls to Russian president, which "buttressed EU countries' decision to rely on US capabilities and reaffirm NATO's framework."²¹²

At the same time, this does not necessarily indicate a complete transformation of France's position. The war rather exposed a logic that had already been present, namely the strengthening of European capabilities as part of NATO's European pillar. Against the background of other MS that were indifferent or openly sceptical towards ESA, France's position could therefore appear more radical than it actually was. France's ambitions remain conditional and become especially relevant in a scenario where US security commitments prove insufficient. Nevertheless, in 2024, French high-level discourse continued to refer explicitly to the notion. Macron, for instance, argued that Europe had "delegated" too many strategic domains to external actors, including its security to the US, and stressed that Europeans "need to take them back."²¹³ This logic was again linked to technological and industrial sovereignty, since Macron defined ESA as the need to end "strategic dependencies in key sectors," from semiconductors to critical raw materials.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Kuokšytė, "Revisiting France's Commitment to Defence Integration," p. 35.

²¹⁰ Kuokšytė, "Revisiting France's Commitment to Defence Integration," p. 41.

²¹¹ Philippe Maze-Sencier, "Has European Strategic Autonomy Crashed Over Ukraine?", Institut Montaigne, 13 July 2022.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Emmanuel Macron, "Europe Speech," Élysée, 25 April 2024.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

Germany, by contrast, has traditionally adopted a more cautious position towards ESA, which was largely shaped by its historical experience and its reluctance to pursue political objectives through military power. As Andris Banka notes, Germany has repeatedly been criticised for the fact that its defence investment has not matched its economic weight, while it has often been described as “Europe’s reluctant hegemon.”²¹⁵ For Germany, it was generally safer to use the language of sovereignty rather than autonomy, since the latter carried the risk of implying a distancing from the US, something in which Germany had never been genuinely interested. According to an SWP Research Paper, Germany has historically sought to follow a “best of both worlds” approach “that treated the European context as (only) a complement, but not as competition to the transatlantic frame.”²¹⁶ The first real push towards a change of perspective came with Trump’s presidency, during which he repeatedly criticised Germany for insufficient defence spending and when “the historical Washington–Berlin relationship had entered an unprecedented downward spiral.”²¹⁷ The situation was further complicated by Berlin’s strong belief that economic interdependence with Russia would make a direct attack on another European country unlikely.

Germany thus became one of the countries that underwent perhaps the most significant reassessment after the full-scale invasion: from the failure of attempts to influence the aggressor as a normative power to the urgent need for rapid and effective rearmament. Although Germany had spoken before the war about the need for a stronger Europe, there remained a “sharp mismatch between Germany’s pronounced aspirations and what it has currently accomplished.”²¹⁸ The events of 24 February 2022 therefore became a catalyst for several crucial practical steps. First, the suspension of Nord Stream 2 symbolised Germany’s abandonment of the long-standing assumption that economic interdependence with Russia could serve as a stabilising force in European security.²¹⁹ Second, Scholz’s announcement of a €100 billion special fund for the modernisation of the Bundeswehr signalled Berlin’s readiness to address long-neglected capability gaps in security and defence.²²⁰ Germany also supported large-scale sanctions against Russia, marking a departure from its previous reluctance to adopt hard measures against Moscow.²²¹

²¹⁵ Andris Banka, “Germany: The Renewed Quest for Strategic Autonomy,” in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States’ Security*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 51–62, p. 52.

²¹⁶ Lippert, von Ondarza and Perthes, *European Strategic Autonomy*, p. 6.

²¹⁷ Banka, “Germany: The Renewed Quest for Strategic Autonomy,” p. 53.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²¹⁹ Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, “Minister Habeck Comments on the Situation in Eastern Ukraine and the Discontinuation of the Certification Procedure for Nord Stream 2,” 22 February 2022.

²²⁰ Olaf Scholz, “Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin,” Federal Government, 27 February 2022.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

Finally, a significant political and mental shift was reflected in Germany's decision to supply lethal weapons to Ukraine, an issue that had long been highly sensitive.²²²

Nevertheless, these developments do not mean that Germany suddenly became a strong supporter of ESA as a concept. The structural problems of Germany's defence industry and military preparedness are long-standing and deeply rooted, and therefore could not be resolved quickly, even under conditions of increased political will. However, the return of military issues to the centre of the political agenda in Europe's largest economy is significant for the pursuit of ESA both rhetorically and practically. It is noteworthy that the Bundesregierung webpage states that the German government "will use all available means to strengthen the EU's capacity to act and its strategic sovereignty."²²³ Although this terminology is substantively close to the idea of ESA, it avoids the term "strategic autonomy" itself. At the same time, the page emphasises that "NATO is a guarantor of European security,"²²⁴ indicating that Russia's war has not prompted Germany to move towards reduced reliance on the US.

Poland occupies a position that is almost antagonistic to France with regard to ESA. This is also largely due to the fact that the idea of ESA has traditionally been perceived in Poland as a French project and as an expression of French geopolitical ambitions. For Poland, as the largest power in Central and Eastern Europe, ESA has always contained the risk that European security integration might develop "at the expense of NATO and the weakening of transatlantic ties."²²⁵ As Ieva Gajauskaitė notes, Poland's security outlook has been closely tied to NATO's deterrence posture towards Russia, which itself remains heavily dependent on sustained US military engagement in Europe.²²⁶ In other words, Poland's security is directly linked to the US military presence. Therefore, Warsaw has been reluctant to express support for ESA in a way that could send a misleading signal to the US about any possible limitation or downgrading of the strategic partnership. Polish officials have also repeatedly warned that the "creation of an army that would also be directed against the US has been a dream of Russia for many years."²²⁷ Such a position is driven above all by the fear that Europe is still unable to guarantee its own security without American involvement. Nevertheless, Poland has consistently supported the strengthening of both national and European capabilities, provided that they play a valuable and complementary role to NATO.

²²² Federal Government, "Bundesregierung liefert Waffen aus Bundeswehr-Beständen an die Ukraine," Press Release 74, 26 February 2022.

²²³ Federal Government, "Verantwortungsvolle Außenpolitik und geeintes Europa," *Die Bundesregierung*, 2025.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, "Informacja Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2019 roku," 14 March 2019.

²²⁶ Ieva Gajauskaitė, "Poland's Resilient Atlanticism," in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 63–80, p. 64.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine further strengthened Poland's Atlanticism and reinforced its pro-American security orientation. For Warsaw, the war confirmed the indispensability of the US for deterring further aggression. This was reflected, for instance, in the 2022 decision to establish a permanent headquarters of the US Army's V Corps in Poland.²²⁸ In 2023, Mariusz Błaszczak stated that Polish-American relations were "crucial for the security of our country and the entire NATO's eastern flank," while also emphasising that approximately 10,000 American troops were stationed in Poland.²²⁹ SWP summarised this logic in 2025 by noting that, after Russia's full-scale attack, Poland "altered its security calculus" and, after years of calling for better deterrence, began to demand better defence.²³⁰ At the same time, Poland actively intensified the development of its own defence capabilities by planning to expand the armed forces to around 300,000 troops, introducing voluntary basic military service, increasing defence spending and pursuing technical modernisation of the army.²³¹ In the context of ESA, this suggests that Poland continues to reject the concept in its French-led emancipatory interpretation. The war instead reinforced an Atlanticist version of ESA: Warsaw supports stronger European defence capabilities only insofar as they strengthen NATO's eastern flank, preserve the transatlantic bond and remain anchored in US strategic involvement.

The Baltic states have generally tended to align with the Polish position in the ESA debate, as their strategic preferences are primarily shaped by a survival instinct and the search for credible guarantees. At present, the only actor widely perceived as capable of providing such guarantees remains the US. Accordingly, the central concern is that "ESA initiatives should, under no configuration, threaten NATO."²³² The ability to defend their borders is therefore understood above all as the ability to deter or counter Russian aggression.

According to Viljar Veebel and Illimar Ploom, Estonia's position is characterised by a strong concern with preserving national sovereignty from external interference.²³³ This is particularly complex given, on the one hand, the asymmetry between Estonia and the US as a great power and, on the other hand, the fact that EU integration inevitably entails ceding a certain degree of national autonomy. For Estonia, hard capabilities remain the key domain in which full autonomy of

²²⁸ Ministry of National Defence of Poland, 'The Permanent HQ for US Army's V Corps Will Be Established in Poland', 30 June 2022.

²²⁹ Ministry of National Defence of Poland, 'Polish-American Relations Strengthen Security on NATO's Eastern Flank', 21 November 2023.

²³⁰ Kai-Olaf Lang, 'Poland: Solidifying Europe's Security Order with Cracks inside the House', in: Céline Marangé / Susan Stewart (eds.), *The Tipping Point: An Emerging Model of European Security with Ukraine and without Russia*, SWP Research Paper 5, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2025, p. 45.

²³¹ Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland, 'More Troops and More Money for Defence – the Council of Ministers Adopted a Draft Homeland Defence Act', 22 February 2022.

²³² Viljar Veebel and Illimar Ploom, "Through the Estonian Looking Glass: Can NATO's Credible Deterrence and EU Strategic Autonomy Succeed Simultaneously?", in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 93–108, p. 93.

²³³ Ibid, p. 105.

decision-making must be preserved. The military elite is therefore reluctant to engage with ESA, as it is often perceived as a political slogan rather than as a genuine impulse for concrete action. In this view, ESA could become relevant only in the event of a complete US withdrawal from security provision in the region bordering Russia.

In Latvia's case, as Toms Rostoks argues, NATO acquired a critically important role after 2014, in a way that would have been almost unthinkable before.²³⁴ Relevant measures included NATO's enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup, the rotational deployment of Allied troops and combat-ready equipment, and more frequent joint exercises with Latvian armed forces focused on deterrence against Russia.²³⁵ Latvia's main concern has therefore been that ESA could undermine the continuation of this level of support. As in the Estonian case, Latvia does not oppose stronger defence cooperation as such. However, it insists that key priorities, especially the development of high-intensity warfare capabilities, should precede the creation of additional institutions, a tendency often associated with the EU.

Lithuania similarly supports the view that "capability gaps should be filled in as fast as possible," especially in a region where states remain particularly vulnerable to a potential further Russian attack.²³⁶ Lithuania has also supported new mechanisms aimed, among other things, at strengthening Ukraine's defence, but only insofar as they are closely coordinated with the US.

The scepticism of all three Baltic states towards ESA is well captured by the question of "what could the EU deliver that the US-led NATO is already not delivering?"²³⁷ Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania tend to interpret Russia's aggression against Ukraine as a direct warning to themselves, which reinforces rather than weakens their Atlanticist orientation. The idea of a European army is perceived in the Baltic region as highly unrealistic and therefore hardly suitable as a serious basis for security policy. In high-level political statements from these countries, the concept of ESA is rarely used in the context of security and defence. Instead, references appear from time to time to a broader understanding of the concept, linking the debate on EU strategic autonomy to dependence on external supply-chain problems and shortages of essential resources. For example, in 2023, Lithuanian Finance Minister Gintarė Skaistė stated that the "geopolitical situation

²³⁴ Toms Rostoks, "Military Capabilities First, Politics Later: Latvia's Approach to European Strategic Autonomy," in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 109–120, p. 110.

²³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 'NATO Enhanced Forward Presence', updated 24 April 2025.

²³⁶ Ieva Karpavičiūtė, "European Strategic Autonomy in Lithuania's Foreign Policy Discourse," in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 121–137, p. 130.

²³⁷ Veebel and Ploom, "Through the Estonian Looking Glass," p. 93.

highlights the risks arising from dependence on non-democratic states,” and therefore argued that the EU should pursue strategic autonomy by reducing economic and energy vulnerability.²³⁸

Denmark’s attitude towards ESA throughout the twenty-first century was shaped by its opt-out from CSDP, which meant that the country did not participate in PESCO, was not a member of the EDA, and had only limited influence on the development of EU defence policy. As a result, Denmark effectively remained outside the core of the debate, and its position on the concept was rather ambivalent. As Amelie Theussen notes, in the Danish understanding, “ESA might simultaneously be a necessity, an opportunity, and a threat.”²³⁹ Denmark is a classic example of an Atlanticist country whose security depends vitally on cooperation with the US.

Russia’s full-scale invasion, however, radically changed Danish security policy. The clearest manifestation of this shift was the abolition of the CSDP opt-out after more than thirty years of limited Danish participation in EU security and defence matters. In addition, Denmark “agreed to a commitment to reach the NATO agreed-upon 2% of GDP for defence expenses in 2033.”²⁴⁰ This was a direct consequence of the war, given that no comparable plans had existed before 2022. Another important change was an annual increase of DKK 3.5 billion in defence spending.²⁴¹

For a country whose security strategy is built on strong transatlantic ties, ESA may clearly be perceived as a threat if it negatively affects the US presence, either in practical terms or at the level of political rhetoric. Still, statements by the Danish elite demonstrate a growing recognition after 2022 of the need for greater European responsibility in security and defence. The Danish Foreign and Security Policy Strategy 2023 states that “Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own security.”²⁴² The 2023 Defence Cooperation Agreement with the US, in turn, reflects the further deepening of American involvement in Denmark’s. It allows US forces access to three Danish air bases for training, exercises, deployment and pre-positioning of equipment. This Agreement has an initial term of ten years and builds on more than seventy years of Danish-American defence cooperation.²⁴³ At the same time, the Agreement also provides evidence of Denmark’s readiness to contribute more to its own security. Following subsequent decisions, the overall financial framework for strengthening defence and security in 2024–2033 reached DKK

²³⁸ Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania, “Minister of Finance G. Skaistė: ‘The Changed Geopolitical Environment Determines the Need for Greater EU Strategic Autonomy’,” 14 September 2023.

²³⁹ Amelie Theussen, “European Strategic Autonomy: Opportunities and Threats for Denmark,” in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States’ Security*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 138–152, p. 138.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

²⁴¹ Ministry of Defence of Denmark, “Danish Defence Agreement 2024–2033.”

²⁴² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, *Foreign and Security Policy Strategy 2023*, 2023.

²⁴³ Government of the Kingdom of Denmark / Government of the United States of America, *Agreement on Defense Cooperation between the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark and the Government of the United States of America*, Washington, 21 December 2023, pp. 4, 6, 9, 36–37.

357 billion.²⁴⁴ In this sense, Denmark increasingly acknowledges the logic of burden-sharing: if it wishes to continue benefiting from the American security umbrella, it must also assume greater responsibility itself. By 2025, this logic had become even more explicit in Danish high-level discourse. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen stated that “Europe must be able to defend itself,” which requires “strength, political will and cooperation within the EU.”²⁴⁵ Thus, the war made Danish Atlanticism more compatible with a stronger EU role in defence.

Historically, Belgium has been one of the most committed supporters of a stronger and more integrated European security and defence policy, and thus of ESA. Yet, given its size and limited military capabilities, Belgium has had relatively little practical weight in this debate. As De Neve notes, because of “one of the Union’s smallest defence budgets, its position favouring European strategic autonomy is barely heard.”²⁴⁶ Moreover, despite being “among the most enthusiastic proponents” of “deeper military integration,” Belgium’s actual policy choices have often reflected a more Atlanticist orientation.²⁴⁷ This was particularly visible in its decision to purchase American F-35 aircraft to replace its ageing F-16s, rather than opting for a European platform that would have strengthened Europe’s defence-industrial base. The decision therefore generated criticism and raised doubts about Belgium’s substantive commitment to European defence integration, since these considerations were “simply not taken into account in the selection criteria for new aircraft.”²⁴⁸

After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belgium increasingly emphasised higher defence spending and better coordination of defence investments.²⁴⁹ This position was reflected in Prime Minister Bart De Wever’s statement after his meeting with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte in 2025. While reaffirming NATO’s central role in collective defence, he stressed that “For too long, Europe relied on others to guarantee its safety. That time is over,” pointing to the need to strengthen Europe’s own capabilities.²⁵⁰ A similar logic is visible on the official website of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which links the preservation of the EU’s own defence industry, resilience and strategic autonomy to the return of armed conflict on European soil.²⁵¹ At the same time, its MQ-9B SkyGuardian remotely piloted aircraft programme, conducted through

²⁴⁴ Danish Ministry of Defence, ‘Danish Defence Expenditure’, updated 2025.

²⁴⁵ Prime Minister’s Office of Denmark, “EU Leaders Discuss Defence and Ukraine at Summit in Copenhagen,” 1 October 2025.

²⁴⁶ Alain De Neve, “Belgium and European Strategic Autonomy,” in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States’ Security*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 153–166, p. 164.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 153.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 162.

²⁴⁹ Belga News Agency, ‘Belgian PM Demands Better Coordination of European Defense Investments’, 25 May 2022.

²⁵⁰ Bart De Wever, ‘Meeting with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte’, 28 October 2025.

²⁵¹ FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, ‘External Relations’, last updated 12 November 2024.

a Foreign Military Sale, involved testing in the US, with Belgian personnel completing initial training at facilities in North Dakota and California.²⁵² Thus, Belgium's development of new ISR capabilities shows that, after 2022, support for stronger European capabilities coexisted with continued reliance on US technology, training infrastructure and transatlantic defence cooperation. Sabine Mengelberg and Jörg Noll argue that the Netherlands is "slowly but surely recognising the importance of Europe" for its own security and defence.²⁵³ Traditionally, NATO constituted the bedrock of Dutch defence policy and also served to "counterweight a strong Franco-German axis."²⁵⁴ Russia's aggression, however, contributed to a gradual reassessment of this position. The Netherlands remains cautious in its use of the term ESA, yet several practical steps fit the core logic of the concept. The official PESCO project page lists the Netherlands as the coordinator of the Military Mobility project, which the Council of the EU later described as being "led by the Netherlands".²⁵⁵ After 2022, the Netherlands also supported the EU RDC, committing personnel, armoured vehicles and medical support to this new crisis-response instrument.²⁵⁶ In any case, the Dutch understanding of ESA remains fundamentally pragmatic and Atlanticist. Yet, their approach reflects a shift "from either-or to and-and",²⁵⁷ where strengthening the CSDP is primarily understood as a way to reinforce, rather than weaken, the transatlantic alliance.

Hungary, due to Viktor Orbán's long-standing and uninterrupted rule, represents a particular case in the pursuit of ESA. The specificity of Hungary's attitude towards the concept is linked to a pragmatic understanding of the importance of strengthening European capabilities, combined with a consistent preference for limiting deeper integration. Thus, according to Tamás Csiki Varga, Hungary has acquired the status of "a reluctant supporter of ESA," since it agrees to endorse the idea only if it does not require substantial sovereignty-sharing.²⁵⁸ Accordingly, any radical steps towards reopening the debate on qualified majority voting, supranational decision-making, stronger EU institutions or a common army under EU control are met with strong criticism. For Hungary, NATO has traditionally been considered more important than the EU in security matters.

²⁵² General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc. (GA-ASI), 'Belgian Aircrew Completes MQ-9B Training', 17 July 2025; General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc. (GA-ASI), 'GA-ASI Completes First Flight of Belgium's MQ-9B SkyGuardian', 25 March 2025.

²⁵³ Sabine Mengelberg / Jörg Noll, 'Dutch Security and Defence Policy: From Faithful Ally to Pragmatic European', in: Giedrius Česnakas / Justinas Juozaitis (eds.), *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security: In the Shadow of Power*, London / New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 167–181, p. 167.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 169.

²⁵⁵ Council of the European Union, 'PESCO: The UK Will Be Invited to Participate in Military Mobility Project', 15 November 2022.

²⁵⁶ Netherlands Ministry of Defence, 'Verklaring ministers van Defensie Benelux over Rapid Deployment Capacity', 6 April 2022.

²⁵⁷ Mengelberg / Noll, 'Dutch Security and Defence Policy', p. 174.

²⁵⁸ Tamás Csiki Varga, "A Reluctant Supporter: The Hungarian Perspective on European Strategic Autonomy," in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security: In the Shadow of Power*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, London: Routledge, 2022, p. 182.

Nevertheless, concrete defence initiatives at the EU level may receive support, while “policy options are decided on a case-by-case basis.”²⁵⁹ Hungary’s support for the European defence-industrial base can be seen in the fact that it mainly procures European military equipment, including German Leopard 2A7 tanks, Lynx IFVs, PzH 2000 self-propelled howitzers and Airbus helicopters.²⁶⁰

After 2022, Hungary became one of the key sources of internal disagreement within the EU regarding initiatives and decisions related to sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine. This, in turn, weakened the political dimension of ESA, as it undermined cohesion and highlighted the vulnerability of EU decision-making to individual veto players. For instance, Hungary’s veto delayed the adoption of the €50 billion Ukraine Facility, which was agreed only on 1 February 2024 after weeks of resistance by Budapest.²⁶¹ Hungary also threatened to block EU refunds for MS that had supplied munitions to Ukraine until Kyiv allowed the transit of Russian Lukoil oil through Ukrainian territory.²⁶² Thus, in the context of ESA, Hungary represents a sovereigntist and highly selective approach.

Sweden and Finland also deserve separate attention. Shortly after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the two militarily non-aligned MS recalled the obligations stemming from Article 42(7) TEU in a joint letter to the European Council.²⁶³ The episode is significant because it showed that, before joining NATO, Sweden and Finland treated the EU’s mutual assistance clause as a relevant security guarantee. At the same time, their subsequent accession to NATO confirmed that, under the conditions created by Russia’s war, EU-based guarantees were not perceived as a substitute for the American-backed collective defence framework.

Overall, the cases examined in this subsection show that Russia’s full-scale invasion did create a broader consensus on the need to strengthen European capabilities. Across the countries analysed, even those traditionally sceptical of ESA became more open to capability-building, higher defence spending and practical EU defence initiatives, provided that these did not undermine NATO. At the same time, the war reinforced the perception of the US as an indispensable security partner and guarantor, especially among pro-Atlantic MS. Taken together, these developments suggest that

²⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 188.

²⁶⁰ Hungarian Ministry of Defence, ‘Új harckocsikat vesz a honvédség’, 19 December 2018; Rheinmetall, ‘NATO Member Hungary Orders 218 Lynx Infantry Fighting Vehicles’, 10 September 2020; Airbus, ‘Hungary Orders 20 H145Ms’, 29 June 2018; Airbus, ‘Hungary Orders 16 H225M Multi-Role Helicopters’, 14 December 2018.

²⁶¹ Mared Gwyn Jones / Alice Tidey / Jorge Liboreiro, ‘Hungary’s Orbán Blocks €50bn EU Long-Term Financial Support to Ukraine’, *Euronews*, 15 December 2023; Jorge Liboreiro, ‘EU Leaders Approve €50 Billion Deal for Ukraine after Viktor Orbán Lifts His Veto’, *Euronews*, 1 February 2024.

²⁶² Reuters, ‘Hungary to Block EU Funds for Member States until Ukraine Allows Lukoil Transit’, 23 July 2024.

²⁶³ European Parliamentary Research Service, ‘Outcome of the Informal European Council in Versailles on 10–11 March 2022’, *Epthinktank*, European Parliament, 15 March 2022.

after 2022 ESA evolved in two directions: stronger support for European capabilities, and a renewed confirmation of the centrality of the transatlantic framework.

CHAPTER 3. TRUMP'S SECOND TERM AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ESA

There is little doubt that the new large-scale war in Europe constitutes one of the most significant external shocks of recent decades. However, only a few years later, another question arose: whether a second major external shock, namely Trump's second electoral victory, would permanently reshape the concept of ESA and further encourage EU member states to adopt "a more coherent outward-facing approach to security and defence."²⁶⁴

Before turning to the impact of Trump's second term in office on ESA, it is necessary to clarify what constitutes the essence of Trumpism. Robert C. Lieberman, Suzanne Mettler and others identify three central features of this political phenomenon: high levels of polarisation, the manipulation of identity politics, and the "erosion of democratic norms."²⁶⁵ In this sense, it can be understood as a personalist form of politics that challenges the foundations of American democracy and the broader liberal-democratic order. A further question is whether it should be interpreted primarily as a symptom of an already existing crisis of the democratic world order or as one of the causes of its disruption. Much of the literature tends to view Trump's politics as "a symptom as well as a catalyst rather than the cause" of deeper structural tensions within American democracy and the liberal international order more broadly.²⁶⁶

Thorsten Wojczewski offers a particularly useful framework for explaining the foreign-policy logic of Trumpism, interpreting it as a case exhibiting proto-fascist tendencies.²⁶⁷ In his account, Trumpist politics is structured around three main frames. The first is the portrayal of the US as a country allegedly humiliated and cheated by domestic elites and external actors. Wojczewski conceptualises this emotional positioning as "crisis, decline, and victimhood."²⁶⁸ The second frame develops from this narrative and centres on the construction of enemies. In line with the logic of classical populism, this frame draws a distinction between "a disenfranchised demos" and a range of threatening "antagonistic Others," such as "aloof elites," "dangerous unwanted" migrants,

²⁶⁴ Michaels / Sus, '(Not) Coming of Age?', p. 395.

²⁶⁵ Robert C. Lieberman / Suzanne Mettler / Thomas B. Pepinsky / Kenneth M. Roberts / Richard Valelly, 'The Trump Presidency and American Democracy: A Historical and Comparative Analysis', in: *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (2019) 2, p. 471.

²⁶⁶ Tanja A. Börzel / Michael Zürn (eds.), *Polarization and Deep Contestations: The Liberal Script in the United States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

²⁶⁷ Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Fascism and Foreign Policy: Trumpism and the Politics of National Decline and Rebirth', in: *Global Studies Quarterly* 5 (2025) 3, pp. 1–13, p. 3.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 5.

minorities, and other groups presented as hostile to the nation.²⁶⁹ Wojczewski describes this logic as “Othering and elimination.”²⁷⁰ For the purposes of this thesis, it is particularly important that foreign states, including both allies and adversaries, are also subjected to this form of discrediting. They are depicted as having “victimized,” “abused,” or otherwise exploited the US, particularly through unequal “defence burden-sharing.”²⁷¹

Finally, the third frame is connected to the idea of “rebirth,” understood as the promise to restore lost national greatness and most clearly expressed in the formula “Make America Great Again”. Wojczewski argues that the appeal of “America First” and MAGA lies in their openness: they operate as flexible symbolic formulas onto which different “injured” groups can project their fears, frustrations, and expectations.²⁷² These claims therefore function as discursive tools through which foreign policy becomes linked to the restoration of sovereignty, borders, industrial power, and national greatness. A related interpretation is offered by Georg Löfflmann, who identifies “hostility towards the liberal international order” as a foundational element of the Trump administration’s foreign-policy orientation.²⁷³ Trump’s desire for supposedly better and more advantageous “deals” reflects a core belief of Trumpism: that the US’ failures and its exploitation by others resulted from the “poor deal-making” of previous political leaders.²⁷⁴ In this sense, transactionalism is a broader feature of Trumpism’s understanding of foreign policy, in which alliances, security guarantees and international commitments are assessed primarily through the logic of costs, benefits and immediate returns.

This thesis follows the argument that, in the case of Trump, European states made a strategic “mistake of dismissing him as a temporary phenomenon.”²⁷⁵ After Biden’s arrival in office, they largely reverted to reliance on the transatlantic status quo and deprioritised the strengthening of their own defence capabilities. As a result, Trump’s re-election forced Europe to confront Trumpism as an ideologically consolidated phenomenon capable of turning previously unthinkable policy ideas into practice. As Böller and Wiedekind note, Trump’s worldview remained “fairly consistent,” while his second term is marked by “sharper ideological coherence and clearer strategy” than the first administration.²⁷⁶

²⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 8.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 6.

²⁷¹ Wojczewski, “Fascism and Foreign Policy,” p. 8.

²⁷² Ibid, p. 10.

²⁷³ Georg Löfflmann, ‘America First and the Populist Impact on US Foreign Policy’, in: *Survival* 61 (2019) 6, pp. 115–138, p. 123.

²⁷⁴ Rubrick Biegon, ‘A Populist Grand Strategy? Trump and the Framing of American Decline’, in: *International Relations* 33 (2019) 4, pp. 517–539, p. 517.

²⁷⁵ Markus Kotzur, ‘Europe’s Quest for Strategic Autonomy in Response to Trumpism’, in: *Global Public Policy and Governance* 5 (2025) 4, pp. 457–466, p. 464.

²⁷⁶ Florian Böller / Jakob Wiedekind, ‘The Declining Reliability of U.S. Foreign Policy and its Domestic Sources Under Trump II’, in: *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 18 (2025), pp. 577–587, p. 581.

Some of Trump's statements would have seemed almost unimaginable for a US president only a decade ago. Today, however, his approach to NATO directly challenges the principle of alliance reliability. A clear example is his claim that he would not protect a "delinquent" NATO ally unless it fulfilled its defence spending commitments.²⁷⁷ Paradoxically, in this respect, Trumpism may have accelerated the pursuit of ESA. A key example is the EU's ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030, already discussed in the previous chapter, which has generated controversy because of concerns about democratic control and the possible fragmentation of the European defence market.²⁷⁸ In particular, the SAFE instrument is based on Article 122 TFEU, an emergency procedure that requires a Council decision and excludes the European Parliament from the legislative process.²⁷⁹ Moreover, while the plan aims to mobilise up to €800 billion in additional defence expenditure, it does not automatically ensure joint procurement or prevent duplication among national programmes. Given the political sensitivity and exceptional scale of such a plan, it would probably not have reached the Commission's agenda without Trump's pressure.²⁸⁰

Another striking example of the disruption of the established international order concerns Trump's claims regarding Greenland. What makes this episode unprecedented is that Trump's rhetoric challenged the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity in relation to a NATO ally. By arguing that "the world needs us to have Greenland" for security reasons and that the US would go "as far as we have to go" to obtain control over it, Trump framed an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark through the logic of great-power acquisition.²⁸¹ This was a particularly delicate issue because Denmark is a state for which American-backed transatlantic ties remain vital to national security.

According to Markus Kotzur, Trumpism may push Europe towards two opposite scenarios. The first would involve an attempt to "communitize" the CSDP by moving towards qualified majority voting.²⁸² In practice, however, there has been no real revival of the debate on institutional reform of the CFSP/CSDP through QMV. The only notable exception is the European Parliament's 2025 annual report on the implementation of the CFSP, considered in January 2026, which "calls for a gradual transition to qualified majority voting for common foreign and security policy decisions," but explicitly limits this to decisions "without military or defence implications."²⁸³ Thus, at this

²⁷⁷ PBS NewsHour, 'Fact-checking Trump's Comments Urging Russia to Invade "Delinquent" NATO Members', 12 February 2024.

²⁷⁸ European Parliamentary Research Service, *ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030*, p. 2.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 5.

²⁸⁰ Kotzur, 'Europe's Quest for Strategic Autonomy', p. 461.

²⁸¹ David Brennan, 'Trump Says US Will "Go as Far as We Have to" to Get Control of Greenland', in: *ABC News*, 27 March 2025.

²⁸² Kotzur, 'Europe's Quest for Strategic Autonomy', p. 460.

²⁸³ European Parliamentary Research Service, *Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy – Annual Report 2025, At a Glance*, European Parliament, 12 January 2026.

stage, Trump's policy does not appear to have generated a genuine impetus for reviving ambitions to build a potential defence union on a more supranational or federal basis.

The second scenario, even less plausible than the first, would be a radical reassertion of intergovernmentalism by "removing foreign, security, and defense policy from the EU structures again," which would allow each member state to regain full autonomy over security decisions.²⁸⁴ Nevertheless, for such a scenario to materialise, US pressure would have to be directed at dividing Europeans and weakening their ability to act collectively. Such tactics are already observable. Stefan Lehne explicitly warns that "the Trump administration will attempt to divide the Europeans," using its influence over ideologically aligned governments and parties to block EU decisions disliked by Washington.²⁸⁵ A similar logic is identified by SWP, which describes Trump's "divide-and-rule logic" as the use of security-policy levers, including NATO support and the American nuclear umbrella, in tariff negotiations in order to increase pressure on individual MS and advance US economic interests.²⁸⁶ Given the heterogeneity of European security priorities, this strategy may become a powerful instrument for deepening internal divisions within the EU. While eastern flank states tend to perceive a potential US withdrawal from Europe as an existential threat, other MS may assess its consequences less dramatically. This asymmetry creates room for external pressure to fragment European orientations from within.

Another example of a similar logic can be found in the ideological dimension, namely the support for like-minded right-wing forces in Europe. In February 2025, JD Vance sharply criticised European leaders at the Munich Security Conference, including for the German "firewall" against the AfD, and subsequently met Alice Weidel, the party's leader, nine days before the German federal election.²⁸⁷ Reuters presented this episode as an intervention in internal European political debates, while Scholz directly rejected such remarks as unacceptable "among friends and allies."²⁸⁸ In the context of ESA, such developments are problematic because they may undermine the political cohesion required for collective European action and make the pursuit of a common security and defence policy more vulnerable to external pressure.

Against this background, the renewed momentum behind discussions of a possible French nuclear umbrella can also be seen as directly or indirectly linked to the pressure generated by Trump. Historically, French nuclear doctrine has remained sovereign and national in character, yet it has

²⁸⁴ Kotzur, 'Europe's Quest for Strategic Autonomy', p. 460.

²⁸⁵ Stefan Lehne, 'What Can the EU Do About Trump 2.0?', Carnegie Europe, 12 February 2026.

²⁸⁶ Lukas von Daniels, 'Trade War and Peace: Three Scenarios and Policy Options for the US–EU Tariff Conflict', SWP Comment 33/2025, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2025, p. 2.

²⁸⁷ Associated Press, 'US Vice President JD Vance Meets German Far-Right Leader as He Criticizes "Firewalls" in Europe', 14 February 2025.

²⁸⁸ Reuters, 'Germany's Scholz Rebukes Vance, Defends Europe's Stance on Hate Speech and Far Right', 15 February 2025.

long contained a certain ambition of a European dimension, which, however, never implied “constituting a blanket commitment to the entire European continent.”²⁸⁹ It remained politically ambiguous and “neither automatic nor universal,” as France has consistently preserved room for manoeuvre by avoiding binding guarantees or overly explicit commitments.²⁹⁰ The issue gained renewed attention in 2020, when Macron, in his *École de Guerre* speech, invited European partners to engage in a strategic dialogue on the role of French deterrence in collective security.²⁹¹ Yet the initiative elicited only limited engagement from other MS. This European framing became more pronounced in 2024, after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when he argued that Europe must be able to defend itself “alone if necessary” and described nuclear deterrence as a critical element of the defence of the European continent.²⁹²

However, the decisive political turning point came in February–March 2025, when Friedrich Merz publicly raised the question of whether nuclear security from France and the UK could also apply to Germany.²⁹³ CSIS links this development to uncertainty over US commitments after Trump’s return.²⁹⁴ In response, Macron opened a strategic debate on the possible use of French deterrence to protect European allies, while stressing that the decision to use nuclear weapons would remain exclusively “sovereign and French from start to finish.”²⁹⁵ At the same time, Berlin’s position should not be understood as an attempt to replace the American nuclear umbrella, since Merz continued to emphasise the importance of preserving US guarantees. Germany thus provides a clear example of a hedging strategy. Under conditions of uncertainty generated by the actions of the American president, the most rational course appears to be the avoidance of the most significant risk – the loss of US support – while at the same time cautiously expanding European alternatives for long-term strategic balancing.

A possible trigger for this shift was Trump’s phone call with Putin in February 2025. According to Reuters, after the call Trump ordered senior US officials to begin negotiations on ending the war in Ukraine and suggested that his first meeting with Russian president would “probably” take place in Saudi Arabia.²⁹⁶ For European states, this was an alarming signal, as it created the impression that issues directly affecting European security could be addressed primarily in a US–

²⁸⁹ Nicolás Bardio, “Towards a French Nuclear Umbrella? Assessing the Transition from US to French Dual-Key Arrangements,” *European Journal of International Security* (2025), p. 7.

²⁹⁰ Bardio, “Towards a French Nuclear Umbrella?,” p. 7.

²⁹¹ Emmanuel Macron, “Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy,” *Élysée*, 7 February 2020.

²⁹² Emmanuel Macron, “Europe Speech,” *Élysée*, 24 April 2024.

²⁹³ Doreen Horschig / Astrid Chevreuil, “Can France and the United Kingdom Replace the U.S. Nuclear Umbrella?,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 4 March 2025.

²⁹⁴ Reuters, “Germany’s Merz Wants European Nuclear Weapons to Boost US Shield,” *Reuters*, 9 March 2025.

²⁹⁵ Emmanuel Macron, “Address to the French People,” *Élysée*, 5 March 2025.

²⁹⁶ Steve Holland / Nandita Bose, “Trump Says Putin and Zelenskiy Want Peace; Phone Calls Open Path to Ukraine Talks,” *Reuters*, 13 February 2025.

russsia format. This interpretation is supported by Chatham House, which argues that Trump spoke to putin “without consulting Ukraine or NATO allies” and that his subsequent announcement of immediate negotiations with moscow fundamentally undermined European confidence in US security commitments.²⁹⁷

On the same day, Pete Hegseth’s remarks in Brussels signalled a sharp recalibration of the US position: he described Ukraine’s return to its pre-2014 borders as “unrealistic,” rejected NATO membership for Ukraine as a “realistic outcome,” and ruled out the deployment of US troops as part of security guarantees.²⁹⁸ He also stated that the US could no longer be “primarily focused on the security of Europe.” These remarks can be read as an important indication of partial US disengagement from the European security order. Sven Biscop argues that Hegseth’s remarks made the American negotiating position on the russo-Ukrainian war “crystal clear” and left Europe “scrambling to react.”²⁹⁹ Similarly, SCEEUS interprets the same speech as outlining “a bad deal for Ukraine and European security,” since, taken together, its parameters implied the US “disengaging from Ukraine and Europe.”³⁰⁰

Nevertheless, “there is currently no unconditional commitment nor plan for advanced cooperation or ‘sharing’ of the French deterrent” at the European level, and for now the revival of this dialogue should rather be understood as a cautious process of strategic dialogue and exploratory cooperation.³⁰¹ The same logic was visible in the renewed Franco-British effort to advance a peace initiative for Ukraine, which gained momentum after Trump’s direct opening to putin and the subsequent Trump–Zelenskyy clash in the Oval Office. Both developments intensified European concerns that negotiations on a peace settlement could proceed without sufficient European or Ukrainian agency. Against this background, the London summit of 1 March 2025 signalled an attempt to place Europe back into the negotiation process by focusing on Ukraine’s position, a durable settlement and the “European element of security guarantees.”³⁰² The summit was followed by the emergence of a “Coalition of the Willing,” through which Britain, France, Ukraine and other states sought to develop a proposal that could be taken to Trump, while Macron also

²⁹⁷ Bronwen Maddox, “Trump’s ‘Electroshock’ on Ukraine Ends the Debate: Europe Cannot Rely on the US for Its Security”, *Chatham House*, 14 February 2025, updated 7 March 2025.

²⁹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “Hegseth Calls on NATO Allies to Lead Europe’s Security, Rules Out Support for Ukraine Membership”, 12 February 2025.

²⁹⁹ Sven Biscop, “Ukraine Now Needs a European Security Guarantee – Not a Peace Operation”, *Egmont Institute*, 13 February 2025.

³⁰⁰ Fredrik Wesslau, “A Man with a Plan? Trump’s Bad Deal for Ukraine and European Security”, *Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies*, 12 February 2025.

³⁰¹ Emmanuelle Maitre, “The French Nuclear Deterrent in a Changing Strategic Environment”, *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, Note de la FRS No. 04/2025, 11 March 2025.

³⁰² *Ibid.*

floated the idea of a limited one-month ceasefire covering air and sea attacks.³⁰³ By 5 March, France and Britain were reportedly seeking to finalise the plan with Ukraine “in days,” as the breakdown in US–Ukraine relations gave new urgency to the efforts of the two European nuclear powers.³⁰⁴ By mid-March, the process had moved towards operational planning, with Starmer announcing that allies other than the US were preparing to support Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire and that defence chiefs would work on “strong and robust plans.”³⁰⁵ The initiative therefore reflected an attempt to secure a US backstop for any future guarantees and prevent Europe from being reduced to a passive observer in negotiations directly affecting its own security. It would be too strong to describe the Coalition of the Willing as a failed initiative, since it did create a framework for political coordination and military planning. Nevertheless, as Karlsrud and Reykers note, “a Multinational Force Ukraine is still hypothetical,” meaning that the Coalition of the Willing has not yet translated into an operational security guarantee mechanism.³⁰⁶ This can be explained by several factors. First, the coalition was designed to function mainly in the context of a ceasefire or peace agreement, but no such settlement has been reached. Second, its credibility depended closely on the availability of a US backstop, without which many European states were reluctant to make more concrete commitments. Finally, the initiative itself was largely reactive: it emerged as a European response to Trump’s pressure and to fears that Ukraine and Europe could be sidelined in a US–Russia negotiation format. Thus, much like the debate on a French nuclear umbrella, the Coalition of the Willing should, for now, be understood as a preliminary framework for strategic coordination and political signalling.

In the context of ESA, the Trump–Putin meeting in Alaska deserves particular attention, as it signalled a partial diplomatic rehabilitation of Putin and a limited return to high-level Western engagement with Moscow despite the ongoing war. As Reuters noted, “the fact that the summit even took place was a win for Putin before it even started,” because it brought him “in from the diplomatic cold with such pomp.”³⁰⁷ Similarly, the Atlantic Council described the “red carpet treatment” Putin received in Anchorage as “a symbolic victory” that ended his international isolation “in some style.”³⁰⁸ For many observers, this move by the American president was difficult

³⁰³ Elizabeth Piper / Kate Holton / Andrew Macaskill, “UK, European Leaders Join Forces to Draft Ukraine Peace Plan to Take to US”, *Reuters*, 3 March 2025.

³⁰⁴ John Irish, “Britain, France Refine Ukraine Peace Plan with New Washington Trip in Mind”, *Reuters*, 5 March 2025.

³⁰⁵ Elizabeth Piper / William James, “UK’s Starmer Says ‘Coalition of Willing’ Expanding Preparations for Post-Truce Ukraine”, *Reuters*, 15 March 2025.

³⁰⁶ John Karlsrud / Yf Reykers, *Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine: A Multinational Force in the Making*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2025.

³⁰⁷ Andrew Osborn, “Putin Wins Ukraine Concessions in Alaska but Did Not Get All He Wanted”, *Reuters*, 16 August 2025.

³⁰⁸ Elena Davlikanova / Yevhen Malik, “Sorry, Trump, but Putin Will Not Pursue Peace until He Is Facing Military Defeat”, *Atlantic Council*, 21 August 2025.

to justify, since putin also “managed to ... spectacularly shatter years of Western attempts to isolate” him.³⁰⁹ The meeting did not amount to a full restoration of pre-war relations, but it symbolically weakened putin’s diplomatic isolation by treating him once again as a great-power interlocutor on equal footing with the US.

Unsurprisingly, the very fact of the meeting provoked apprehension, and in some cases even indignation, among many European states, not to mention Ukraine itself. Once again, the main concern was that issues directly affecting European security could be channelled through a bilateral US–russia format. This explains why, ahead of the summit, EU leaders stressed that “the path to peace in Ukraine cannot be decided without Ukraine” and that any diplomatic solution had to protect both Ukraine’s and Europe’s vital security interests.³¹⁰ A second source of concern was the suspicion that the summit could legitimise putin and provide russia with a diplomatic gain without requiring meaningful concessions, renewed condemnation, or additional punitive consequences. *Le Monde* described the forthcoming meeting as a potential “trap,” arguing that russian president could use it to achieve diplomatically what russia had so far failed to secure on the battlefield.³¹¹ A third dimension concerned the risk of territorial concessions. *Time* reported that the meeting provoked criticism because Trump had suggested that “some swapping of territories” could form part of a settlement.³¹² Zelenskyy rejected this idea, insisting that Ukrainians would not “give their land to the occupier,” while European leaders reaffirmed their support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.³¹³

This concern was further reinforced, and in some cases turned into frustration, by the outcome of the meeting. According to Kolesnikov’s assessment, putin “achieved exactly what he wanted” in Anchorage: the summit allowed him to preserve his relationship with Trump, avoid new sanctions, and gain time, while symbolically opening a process of US–russian reconciliation.³¹⁴ In response, European leaders reiterated that Ukraine must receive “ironclad security guarantees,” that russia cannot have a veto over Ukraine’s path towards the EU and NATO, and that any territorial decisions must be made by Ukraine itself.³¹⁵ They also stressed that international borders must not be changed by force. Macron, for his part, argued that Europe had to “learn all the lessons of the

³⁰⁹ Osborn, “Putin Wins Ukraine Concessions in Alaska but Did Not Get All He Wanted”.

³¹⁰ European Council, “European Union Leaders’ Statement on Ukraine”, 12 August 2025.

³¹¹ *Le Monde*, “Ukraine: Avoiding the Trap of the Russia-US Summit in Alaska”, 11 August 2025.

³¹² Solcyré Burga, “European Leaders Say Peace ‘Cannot Be Decided Without Ukraine’ in Message to Trump”, *Time*, 10 August 2025.

³¹³ European Council, “European Union Leaders’ Statement on Ukraine”, 12 August 2025.

³¹⁴ Andrei Kolesnikov, “In Alaska, Putin and Trump Symbolically Began a Process of Reconciliation between Russia and the US”, *Le Monde*, 17 August 2025.

³¹⁵ President Macron / Prime Minister Meloni / Chancellor Merz / Prime Minister Starmer / President Stubb / Prime Minister Tusk / President Costa / President von der Leyen, “Statement by President Macron, Prime Minister Meloni, Chancellor Merz, Prime Minister Starmer, President Stubb, Prime Minister Tusk, President Costa, President von der Leyen”, *Council of the European Union*, 16 August 2025.

past 30 years,” particularly regarding Russia’s repeated failure to uphold its commitments, while also stating that France would work closely with Trump and Zelenskyy to preserve common interests “in a spirit of unity and responsibility.”³¹⁶ At the EU level, Kaja Kallas emphasised that the US had the power to force Russia to negotiate seriously, while Europe would continue supporting Ukraine and working on further sanctions.³¹⁷ Reactions from Central and Northern European leaders were more openly alarmed: Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide warned that Putin wanted to split Europe and the US; Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk stressed that the West had to remain united; and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson cautioned that a bad peace on the aggressor’s terms would allow Russia to threaten more European countries.³¹⁸ By contrast, more Russia-accommodating governments reacted differently: Viktor Orbán described the meeting as making the world “safer,” while Robert Fico called the Alaska process “vital” and criticised what he saw as Europe’s unsuccessful strategy of weakening Russia through support for Kyiv.³¹⁹ These divergent reactions once again revealed internal European cleavages in response to Trump’s diplomacy with Putin.

By contrast, a more consolidated European position was reflected in the reaction to Trump’s claims regarding the possible acquisition of Greenland, including his refusal to rule out the use of military coercion.³²⁰ Moreover, the US president directly questioned Denmark’s sovereign claim by provocatively stating that he did not believe its rights over Greenland were valid.³²¹ This case therefore challenged the territorial status of a European NATO member from within the alliance itself. In the context of ESA, it also raised a broader and more problematic question: whether European security could be affected also by unilateral pressure from its main ally. EPRS noted that Trump’s comments on acquiring Greenland “provoked intense reactions in Greenland and Denmark, but also within the EU,” while also confirming that Greenland’s strategic relevance had become higher than ever.³²² This marked a significant shift in European perceptions of the US. As ECFR notes, European leaders initially treated Trump’s interest in Greenland “as a curiosity rather than a warning,” but his renewed pressure after returning to office made the challenge more difficult to dismiss.³²³

³¹⁶ Reuters, “World Leaders React to Trump-Putin Summit Reaching No Deal on Ukraine”, *Reuters*, 16 August 2025.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Reuters, “World Leaders React to Trump-Putin Summit,” 16 August 2025.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ Reuters, “Trump Will Not Rule Out Force to Take Panama Canal, Greenland,” *Reuters*, 8 January 2025.

³²¹ Reuters, “Trump Tells NATO Chief the US Needs Greenland,” *Reuters*, 13 March 2025.

³²² European Parliamentary Research Service, *Greenland: Caught in the Arctic Geopolitical Contest*, European Parliament, 11 March 2025.

³²³ Jana Kobzová et al., “Arctic Hold'em: Ten European Cards in Greenland,” European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 January 2026.

Following meetings with European leaders, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen stated that Denmark had received “full backing” from Europe and beyond on the need to respect territories and state sovereignty.³²⁴ French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot similarly responded that there was “no question” of the EU allowing other states to attack its sovereign borders, adding: “We are a strong continent.”³²⁵ These reactions show how Trump’s rhetoric pushed some European actors to articulate the defence of territorial integrity as a European, not merely national, responsibility. This position was further consolidated in January 2026, when the leaders of France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Denmark issued a joint statement declaring that “Greenland belongs to its people” and that only Denmark and Greenland could decide on matters concerning them.³²⁶ The same statement also emphasised that Arctic security should be achieved collectively with NATO allies, including the US. This demonstrated a dual European response. On the one hand, European states rejected any revision of Greenland’s status through external pressure and reaffirmed the principle of self-determination. On the other hand, they avoided a purely confrontational position towards Washington by stressing that Arctic security should be pursued collectively through NATO. This combination reflected a hedging logic in which Europe sought to resist US coercive rhetoric without openly breaking with the transatlantic security framework. At this point, the question arises as to how these developments affect the pursuit of ESA. The answer is necessarily ambivalent. If ESA is understood, in line with the operationalisation adopted in this thesis, as the ability to set priorities, make decisions, and implement them “in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone,” then Trump’s statements and actions appear to have produced an uneven effect. On the one hand, they have clearly intensified the rhetoric of European responsibility, generated concern, frustration and political urgency, and in some cases stimulated discussions about new European security options. On the other hand, much of this reaction has remained at the level of discourse and has not always translated into concrete policy decisions or institutional reform. At the same time, the previous section has shown that the gradual and continuous strengthening of the EU’s material capabilities is actively ongoing. Yet, the causal link remains difficult to isolate: this process cannot be attributed exclusively to Trump’s pressure, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or any single external shock, but should rather be understood as the result of a broader combination of security pressures shaping the EU’s defence agenda. This is particularly important in the decision-making dimension, where the impact of Trumpism remains more doubtful. While emotional reactions to Trump’s pressure may serve as a

³²⁴ Reuters, “Denmark Has Full European Backing to Maintain Respect of Borders, Danish Prime Minister Says,” Reuters, 28 January 2025.

³²⁵ Reuters, “EU Will Not Tolerate Attacks on Its Borders, France Says after Trump Greenland Threat,” Reuters, 8 January 2025.

³²⁶ Joint Statement on Greenland by the leaders of France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom and Denmark, 6 January 2026.

stimulus for action, they also tend to expose and deepen existing divergences among MS, thereby complicating the possibility of unanimous decisions in a policy field that still largely depends on intergovernmental consensus.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the comprehensive analysis of the transformation of ESA in security and defence under contemporary security challenges conducted in this master's thesis, several conclusions can be drawn.

First, the historical evolution of ESA demonstrates that the ambition to strengthen Europe's capacity to act in security and defence is not a recent phenomenon. It has repeatedly appeared in different institutional forms, from early post-war projects of collective European defence to the later development of the CFSP and CSDP. However, the failure of the European Defence Community became a decisive turning point that shaped the trajectory of European defence integration for decades. The reluctance of MS to transfer control over military capabilities, the fear of limiting national sovereignty, and the consolidation of NATO as the primary security provider created a structural path dependency that remains visible today. In this sense, the post-war security arrangement – or at least the tacit acceptance of organising European security under the Atlantic umbrella – continues to shape contemporary debates. At the same time, the creation of the ESDP and later the CSDP should not be underestimated: without these frameworks, the EU would have had even fewer instruments to respond to the security crises that emerged after 2022.

Second, the conceptual analysis has shown that ESA remains an ambiguous, contested and context-dependent concept. Its political appeal lies precisely in the fact that different actors can attach different meanings to it. For some MS, ESA primarily means strengthening the European pillar within NATO; for others, it implies a greater capacity to act without excessive dependence on the US; for yet another group of actors, it is increasingly linked to industrial, technological, economic and supply-chain resilience. This ambiguity explains why ESA has become such a convenient reference point in EU discourse. At the same time, it also creates analytical difficulties. ESA cannot be equated with full independence, autarky or sovereignty in the classical state-centred sense. Rather, it should be understood as a gradual and multidimensional process through which the EU seeks to expand its room for manoeuvre, strengthen its capacity to decide and act, and reduce critical dependencies without necessarily severing cooperation with partners.

Third, the thesis has argued that the most suitable working definition of ESA is one that combines decision-making capacity with the institutional, political and material means necessary to implement decisions in security and defence. Such an understanding avoids reducing ESA either to abstract rhetoric or to the unrealistic goal of complete independence from the US. The internal dimension concerns the EU's capacity to act, including decision-making, political cohesion, operational instruments and the defence-industrial base. The external dimension refers to the EU's room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis external actors, above all the US. This framework helped trace the post-2022 transformation of ESA as an uneven process shaped by capability gaps, institutional constraints, national preferences and external pressure. The theoretical framework helped explain why the transformation of ESA after 2022 remained internally contradictory. Realism made it possible to interpret ESA through the categories of changing threat perceptions. Intergovernmentalism clarified why even a major external shock did not eliminate the centrality of MS, unanimity and national strategic cultures in CFSP/CSDP. Hedging, however, proved to be the most useful concept for capturing the overall logic of ESA: European states do not simply choose between dependence on the US and full autonomy, but seek to preserve transatlantic guarantees while gradually developing fallback options.

Fourth, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine produced a clear political recalibration of ESA. The 2022 Strategic Compass became an important reference point in this process, even though it was largely drafted before the invasion and therefore could not fully anticipate the scale of the subsequent war. Its implementation nevertheless reflected a new sense of urgency, clearer strategic prioritisation and a stronger link between Ukraine's and the EU's own security. The war pushed the EU to define Russia as a long-term and direct threat, to mobilise financial assistance with unprecedented speed, and to search for more flexible decision-making practices. Yet the political dimension also revealed the limits of transformation. Mechanisms such as Article 44 TEU remained largely unrealised, while constructive abstention became the most visible example of pragmatic flexibility within the existing intergovernmental framework. Thus, the political recalibration of ESA after 2022 did not overcome the unanimity-based nature of CFSP/CSDP, but it demonstrated that external shock can push the EU to use available mechanisms more decisively. Fifth, the institutional and material dimension appears to be the most dynamic area of ESA's post-2022 transformation. Russia's illegal full-scale invasion represented a tectonic shift that caught the EU legally, institutionally and materially unprepared for high-intensity conventional warfare on its doorstep. In response, the EU activated and created several instruments aimed at addressing these gaps. The EPF was transformed from a primarily conflict-prevention tool into the central mechanism for financing military assistance to Ukraine, including lethal support. EUMAM UA became a practical example of the EU's operational adaptation, linking military training with

material assistance. The PESCO Strategic Review, the ammunition initiative, EDIRPA, ASAP, EDIS, EDIP and ReArm Europe all reflected an effort to move from fragmented national procurement towards a more coordinated defence-industrial approach. However, these instruments did not turn the EU into a classical military actor with autonomous command structures. Nevertheless, this subsection has shown that political will generated under the pressure of an acute external shock can be decisive both for the creation of new mechanisms and for the flexible use of existing ones. Even a highly complex and reactive political system such as the EU, where each member state retains significant veto power, proved capable of concentrating resources, coordinating efforts and acting with relative cohesion when faced with an urgent security crisis.

Sixth, the analysis of the Atlanticist–Europeanist debate after 2022 revealed a partly counterintuitive development. The war did not weaken the transatlantic link in the sense of forcing Europe to fully assume responsibility for its own security or to recognise the rapid build-up of hard capabilities as genuinely unavoidable. On the contrary, it made the role of the US even more indispensable for many MS. The scale of American military, intelligence and political support to Ukraine exposed the asymmetry between European ambitions and capabilities. For Atlanticist states, this confirmed their long-standing belief that NATO and the US remain irreplaceable. For more Europeanist actors, the war also demonstrated that any serious discussion of ESA must begin with the recognition of Europe’s persistent capability gaps, which inevitably pushed them towards closer cooperation with the US as well. In this context, “the outbreak of war in Ukraine served as the glue for cohesion”³²⁷ between MS, but it also narrowed the meaning of ESA in the direction of NATO-compatible autonomy: a project aimed at increasing Europe’s contribution within the transatlantic framework rather than replacing it.

Seventh, the second Trump administration created a different type of pressure, having an ambivalent impact on the pursuit of ESA. Unlike Russia’s war against Ukraine, Trump’s return made the reliability of the US’s indispensable role in European security more uncertain. On the one hand, Trump’s pressure has intensified European debates on responsibility, deterrence, defence spending and the need to reduce excessive dependence on the US. In this sense, it has contributed to the political urgency behind initiatives such as ReArm Europe, the renewed debate on a French nuclear umbrella, and the Franco-British efforts to shape security guarantees for Ukraine. On the other hand, these developments have not amounted to a coherent transformation of the EU’s decision-making capacity in security and defence. Much of the reaction has remained reactive, fragmented and dependent on US involvement, while internal divergences among MS

³²⁷ Genini, “How the War in Ukraine,” p. 4.

have often become more visible. Therefore, Trumpism should be understood as an external pressure that exposes both the necessity of ESA and the persistent limits to its realisation.

At the same time, the transformation of ESA should not be understood as the result of two fully separate causal factors. The boundary between the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion and the impact of Trump's second administration is partly blurred. Both challenges form a continuous process of interconnected events, political statements, fears and institutional reactions. The war forced Europe to rediscover the indispensability of the US; the latter, through Trump's rhetoric and policy direction, then reinforced European fears about the risks of excessive dependence. The combined effect of these developments produced a specific strategic tension: Europe needs the US more than ever, but it can no longer assume that American support will always remain stable. This tension lies at the centre of ESA's post-2022 transformation and constitutes one of the main challenges to which the EU has yet to find a convincing response.

This also demonstrates why ESA is still far from being achieved in a full sense. Despite the fact that active debates on ESA had been ongoing for more than a decade, ESA remained, before 2022, more "an aspiration than a political reality."³²⁸ After 2022, the EU undoubtedly moved further towards operationalising parts of this ambition. It mobilised new financial instruments, strengthened defence-industrial initiatives, supported Ukraine militarily, and began to address capability gaps more seriously. Yet these changes did not eliminate the main structural constraints: dependence on US and NATO capabilities, the intergovernmental nature of CFSP/CSDP, fragmented defence procurement, insufficient industrial capacity, and uneven political will among MS. Richard Youngs's observation remains relevant in this regard: the EU's response to the war has often been guided by a desire "*not to get directly involved, not to have the responsibility of quickly integrating Ukraine, and not to have to manage deeply intertwined international interdependencies.*"³²⁹ This points to the central paradox of ESA: the EU seeks greater autonomy, but often remains reluctant to accept the political risks and responsibilities that genuine autonomy would require.

Overall, the answer to the research question is that conceptually, ESA has moved further away from the idea of full independence from the US and closer to a more pragmatic understanding centred on resilience, flexibility and capability-building. Practically, it has become more closely linked to financial instruments, procurement mechanisms, military assistance, training missions and the strengthening of the EDTIB. However, this transformation remains incomplete. ESA after 2022 should therefore be understood as an ongoing process of forced adaptation. The EU has become more flexible, more financially active and more aware of its vulnerabilities, but it has not

³²⁸ Michaels, "(Not) Coming of Age?," p. 383.

³²⁹ Richard Youngs, "The Awakening of Geopolitical Europe?," *Carnegie Europe*, 28 July 2022.

yet overcome the structural limits that prevent it from becoming a fully autonomous security and defence actor.

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ABSTRACT

of the master's thesis

Topic: "The Transformation of EU Strategic Autonomy in Security and Defence under Contemporary Security Challenges after 2022"

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Short summary of the thesis:

The master's thesis "The Transformation of EU Strategic Autonomy in Security and Defence under Contemporary Security Challenges after 2022" examines the transformation of EU strategic autonomy (ESA) in security and defence under the impact of two selected challenges: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the second Trump administration. The research focuses on how the meaning and practical pursuit of ESA have changed after 2022, especially in relation to the EU's

capacity to act, defence-industrial development and dependence on the transatlantic security framework.

The thesis clarifies the conceptual ambiguity of ESA and distinguishes between its broader and narrower interpretations. It traces the historical evolution of European autonomy in security and defence, from early post-war projects to the development of CFSP/CSDP and the institutionalisation of ESA in EU strategic discourse. The study proposes an analytical framework that examines ESA through internal and external dimensions. The internal dimension includes political, operational and industrial components, while the external dimension concerns the EU's room for manoeuvre in relation to the United States and NATO.

The research demonstrates that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine politically recalibrated ESA by strengthening the EU's strategic prioritisation, accelerating the mobilisation of financial and institutional instruments, and increasing the urgency of defence capability development. Particular attention is paid to the Strategic Compass 2022, the European Peace Facility, EUMAM Ukraine and new defence-industrial initiatives. At the same time, this transformation remains incomplete because of unanimity in CFSP/CSDP decision-making, fragmented national defence policies, limited operational capacity and continued dependence on NATO and the United States.

The analysis of the second Trump administration shows that Trumpism created a different type of pressure on ESA by making the reliability of US security commitments more uncertain. It intensified European debates on responsibility, deterrence, defence spending and the need to reduce excessive dependence on the United States, contributing to the urgency behind initiatives such as ReArm Europe and renewed discussions on European security guarantees. At the same time, the European response remained largely reactive, while continued dependence on US involvement exposed both the necessity of ESA and the persistent limits to its realisation.

The thesis concludes that ESA has transformed from a contested and partially operationalised ambition into a more urgent, practical and defence-industrial agenda. Nevertheless, ESA is best understood not as independence from the United States or NATO, but as a gradual process of strengthening the EU's ability to make and implement security and defence decisions, preserve strategic flexibility and act with partners whenever possible, and alone when necessary.

Key words: EU strategic autonomy, security and defence, CSDP, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, second Trump administration, NATO, transatlantic relations, hedging.