

**Overcoming the Community Dilemma:
Defence Integration in a Post-Heroic European Union**



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Abstract

Why have European leaders repeatedly advocated for an EU defence capacity, yet so often fallen short of their stated ambitions? And what role does the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) play alongside NATO, given their overlapping membership and functions? Existing explanations of CSDP integration struggle to systematically theorise the conditions under which integration occurs – and to account for the persistent gap between political commitments and institutional implementation.

To address this issue, this thesis examines three defining periods of CSDP integration (1999, 2004, and 2016), drawing on newly available archival material and elite interviews. It argues that CSDP integration has been primarily driven by internal imperatives, particularly the need to sustain the European community during ontological crises – periods of profound self-identity disruption. Such crises confront core EU states with a community dilemma: in order to maintain a sense of progress and safeguard a community integral to their self-identity, leaders are compelled to engage in rapid institution-building. Yet, fearing dissensus, they pursue this in an ad hoc and deliberately ambiguous manner ultimately producing institutional outcomes that lack strategic effectiveness.

This social-psychological reading contrasts with strategic and power-maximising accounts by drawing attention to the performative and community-oriented character of CSDP integration. The explanatory framework sheds light on the EU's ongoing struggle to reconcile its community ethos with the realities of power politics. For decades, EU defence policy embodied a 'post-heroic' mindset rooted in the assumption of a peaceful international order and the belief that interdependence and exchange, rather than deterrence and sacrifice, ensured stability. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has upended this model, exposing the limits of an approach shaped by ontological needs rather than strategic adaptation. Yet institutional responses remain fragmented, highlighting the enduring tension between identity preservation and strategic adjustment in European defence cooperation.

Acknowledgements

Writing a DPhil is a challenging journey – one that I could not have completed without the support of many people along the way. I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on the past four and a half years and thank those who accompanied me for parts of the path or the entire duration.

I arrived in Oxford in October 2020, at a time when the city felt like a ghost town. What lay ahead was an expedition into the unknown. Three months later, my partner Charlotte joined as co-captain, and shortly after, we learned that an additional crew member would be joining us – our daughter Gwendolyn – followed two years later by her sister Elinor. What began in choppy waters – lockdowns, a side job as a tour guide, funding uncertainties, and Charlotte's UK physiotherapy accreditation process – soon turned into our greatest shared adventure.

There is no degree or title for what Charlotte has accomplished over these years. She has outshone me in every category, balancing motherhood, professional training, and the successful completion of one of Germany's most demanding health practitioner exams – all while being there for me every step of the way. *Es gibt dafür keine Worte, aber ich werde dir dafür immer von Herzen dankbar sein.*

The concepts we choose to study often reflect personal experience. My thesis centres on the notion of community – a theme whose deeper significance I came to understand only later. Raised in a tight-knit rural community in Germany, I set out in my early twenties to backpack across the globe, learning along the way that human happiness is fundamentally social. *Happiness is only real when shared.*

Coming into the discipline of International Relations, I realised that the notion of community is almost entirely absent. Interaction between states is typically understood either as occurring within an anarchical international system – where social factors are assumed not to matter, as if states were asocial stimulus-response machines – or within an international society, where shared norms matter, but only superficially. Rarely is international politics thought to be structured by deeper bonds of identity and belonging.

Looking back, I found the lens of community and ontological security to be a powerful explanatory tool. Yet I also came to realise that this perspective reflects a distinctly European experience – where postwar integration sought to embed states in a web of mutual recognition and shared purpose. For much of history, by contrast, the international has been a colder, more impersonal realm. Sadly, Europe itself seems to be entering a colder period again, just as community structures like those I once knew have become increasingly difficult to sustain in today's fast-paced world.

However, there is always a silver lining, as my supervisor Kalypso Nicolaïdis would say. And in saying so, she was often my ray of hope – especially during the early, challenging phase of this work. Without Kalypso, this journey would not have happened. She placed her trust in me, seeing value in pursuing a DPhil on EU defence from post-Brexit Britain. I still remember a friend – deeply immersed in the Brussels policy world – remarking that 'working on EU defence in the UK after Brexit must be an expression of British humour'. But Kalypso was right. I am convinced that this 'outside-in' perspective was key to shedding a critical light on 25 years of European defence integration – and to recognising the importance of seeing the bigger picture at a time when Europe's security order is once again being reshaped by mounting geopolitical tensions.

When Kalypso took up her post at the European University Institute in Florence, Richard Caplan kindly agreed to take over as my primary supervisor. One of his earliest requests was – perhaps unexpectedly – a ballad in his honour, after I had performed a song at Kalypso’s farewell workshop. To the tune of Kim Carnes’ *Bette Davis Eyes*, I wrote: *‘This man is good as gold, his heart is twice the size, pure as New York snow, he is Richard Caplan, guys.’* Beyond the humour, Richard’s presence and his ability to gently and consistently push my work forward were invaluable. Behind the songs lies a deep appreciation for two supervisors whose thoughtful guidance never wavered. *Grazie mille* to you both – Richard and Kalypso.

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John N.T. Helferich

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Abbreviations

General International Relations & Security

CFSP – Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP – Common Security and Defence Policy
E3 – France, Germany, UK
ESDP – European Security and Defence Policy (predecessor to CSDP)
EU – European Union
IO – International Organisation
IR – International Relations
LIO – Liberal International Order
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
R2P – Responsibility to Protect
WWI – World War I
WWII – World War II

EU Institutions, Policies, and Treaties

BG – EU Battlegroups
CAP – Common Agricultural Policy
CARD – Coordinated Annual Review on Defence
CHOD – Chiefs of Defence Staff
CIVCOM – Committee for Civilian Crisis Management
EDA – European Defence Agency
EDF – European Defence Fund
EDIP – European Defence Industry Programme
EEAS – European External Action Service
EIDHR – European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights
EPF – European Peace Facility
EPC – European Political Cooperation
EPC – European Political Cooperation
EUGS – EU Global Strategy
EURATOM – The European Atomic Energy Community
ESS – European Security Strategy
EUMC – EU Military Committee
EUMS – EU Military Staff
EUISS – European Union Institute for Security Studies
HR/VP – High Representative/Vice President of the European Commission
JHA – Justice and Home Affairs
MPCC – Military Planning and Conduct Capability
PESCO – Permanent Structured Cooperation
PSC – Political and Security Committee
QMV – Qualified Majority Voting
TEU – Treaty on European Union
TFEU – Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

NATO and Other Foreign/Security Institutions

AFSOUTH – NATO's Mediterranean Command
CJTF – Combined Joint Task Force
DARPA – US Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency
DEFE/MoD – Ministry of Defence (UK)

EI2 – European Intervention Initiative
FCO – Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)
FNC – NATO Framework Nations Concept
JEF – Joint Expeditionary Force
NDC – North Atlantic Council
NRF – NATO Response Force
PREM – Prime Minister’s Office
SDR – Strategic Defence Review
SG – Secretary General
SFOR – NATO’s Stabilisation Force (Bosnia)
SHAPE – Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
VJTF – Very High Readiness Joint Task Force

Economic & Financial Institutions and Terms

ECB – European Central Bank
EEC – European Economic Community
EFSM – European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism
EFSF – European Financial Stability Facility
EMU – European Monetary Union
ESM – European Stability Mechanism
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
R&D – Research & Development
PPP – Purchasing Power Parity

International Organisations & Agreements

IMF – International Monetary Fund
ILSA – Iran-Libya Sanctions Act
INF Treaty – Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
JCPOA – Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Nuclear Deal)
NSA – National Security Agency (US)
OSCE – Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UNSC – United Nations Security Council
WTO – World Trade Organization

Theoretical & Methodological Terms

OIS – Ontological Insecurity
OS – Ontological Security
OSS – Ontological Security Studies
QCA – Qualitative Content Analysis
SIT – Social Identity Theory

Political Parties & Regional Terms

CDU/CSU – Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (Germany)
CEEC – Central and Eastern European Countries
PDS – Party of Democratic Socialism (Germany)
PS – Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party, France)
RPR – Rassemblement pour la République (Centre-Right Party, France)
SPD – Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)

PART I

THEORY AND FRAMEWORK

1.0 Introduction: Europeanising the Use of Force

In a world of sovereign nation-states, the European Union (EU) is indeed a strange entity. Arising from the ashes of two world wars, what began as a project of reconciliation has since become an unprecedented experiment in supranational cooperation. It marks the first time in history that sovereign states have embarked on a semi-conscious gamble that the whole will prove to be greater than the sum of their parts. This revolutionary, yet peaceful project of community building, stands as a remarkable endeavour in a part of the world that had, just a few centuries ago, invented the nation-state and sought to expand it through war.

Yet, the EU's most remarkable transformation has only been unfolding over the past 25 years. It is the attempt to turn this introspective peace project into a force for power projection. This is remarkable not only because it may alter the nature of the project, but also because defence is thought to be one of the constitutive elements of the modern state. According to Max Weber, it is the 'monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force' that defines the modern state and distinguishes it from other forms of political organisation (Weber 2002, 822). Nonetheless, since the end of the Cold War, European states have increasingly pooled sovereignty in domains of core state power within a supranational entity that transcends any traditional military alliance (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014).

Beyond deeper philosophical questions about statehood, however, many initially grappled with the puzzle of why Europeans would build a separate security institution when there was NATO. Why create an institution that more or less mirrors NATO's mandate, replicates its institutional structure and has a very similar membership? (Hofmann 2013, 3). For decades, Europeans had rather successfully organised security and defence via the North Atlantic Alliance. Notably, NATO came out ahead in the superpower competition with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Yet, just when the Alliance found a new purpose celebrating its 50th anniversary (by many referred to as a 'love fest') in Washington D.C. in 1999, Europeans decided to establish a separate defence capacity within the EU a month later. This came to the surprise of many observers in both Europe and America. The new defence capacity was initially called European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) but renamed to Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty. It covers aspects of crisis response as well as the defence industry which have since been addressed by both the EU and NATO.

The combination of these developments – the quasi-duplication of NATO and the emergence of a defence capacity within a supranational organisation, which many had fiercely opposed – has created a fascinating research puzzle. Scholars from both sides of the Atlantic have since endeavoured to elucidate the issue and thereby opened two camps which broadly fall along geographical fault lines. As such, many American scholars asserted that the motivation behind CSDP is to challenge US hegemonial power, thus highlighting transatlantic competition (Posen 2006; Jones 2007; Rosato 2011). Many scholars in Europe instead emphasised the added-value that European policymakers associate with CSDP for the transatlantic alliance highlighting enhanced cooperation (Dover 2005; Howorth and Menon 2009; Hofmann 2011). What both perspectives have in common however is that they perceive EU defence cooperation as a rational act of utility maximisation driven by a desire to increase military effectiveness.

Fast forward 25 years, Europeans face the largest land war on their continent since WWII. As the European security architecture unravels over Russia's war on Ukraine, it becomes evident that much of the CSDP-NATO puzzle remains unsolved. In response to the invasion, the added value of 25 years of EU defence cooperation has been far from apparent. Since February 2022, the dominant response has been through NATO or cooperation outside the EU framework, with EU officials largely ceding the stage to national representatives in public discourse. That said, member states have relied on the CSDP for arms deliveries via the European Peace Facility (EPF) and launched a training mission for Ukrainian soldiers. This marked new ground, as the EU had never previously influenced a military conflict in this way. Notwithstanding these novel forms of engagement, observers have highlighted that the war in Ukraine has exposed and exacerbated long-standing defence-industrial fragmentation in Europe, a lack of strategic vision, and blurred functional distinctions between the CSDP and NATO (Bergmann and Besch 2023; Howorth 2023, 10; Fiott and Simón 2023, 22; Fiott 2025).¹

The CSDP's practical limitations and persistent reliance on US support stand in contrast to ambitions for greater European autonomy. In recent years, heads of state – most notably from Germany and France – have emphasised objectives such as 'strategic autonomy', a 'defence union' and even forming a 'European army'.² However, when set against the EU's actual capacity to act via the CSDP, this reveals a significant 'capability-expectations gap' – i.e. the divergence between what the EU is said to achieve and what it can actually deliver (Hill 1993; Bendiek, Alander, and Bochtler 2020). In the defence-industrial domain, it is true that 25 years of CSDP cooperation have done little to halt the decline in European defence capabilities after the Cold War. Today, 80% of European defence spending still takes place outside the EU framework, and collaborative European Research & Technology (R&T) spending has experienced a near-secular decline since the financial crisis, with 2022 levels amounting to only half of those in 2008.³ In terms of common action, the CSDP has had limited impact on Europeans' ability to conduct large-scale military missions without NATO support, owing to the absence of strategic enablers and a unified command and control structure. Finally, the publication of the CSDP roadmap in 2022 – the so-called *Strategic Compass* – by its very name failed to convey a clear sense of direction or purpose (Witney 2022).⁴

Against this background, it seems increasingly doubtful that the CSDP has been driven either by a strategic motivation to safeguard the transatlantic alliance or by a desire to compete with it, as dominant explanatory approaches suggest. Perhaps, then, it is time to shift the research focus away from conventional modes of analysis that focus on how the CSDP maximises states' utility or power. Instead, a more fruitful approach may be to explore social-psychological perspectives to uncover the deeper social forces that have shaped EU defence integration since its inception (Bickerton 2011; Anderson 2008).

¹ Enrico Letta, *Much More than a Market: Speed, Security, Solidarity*, 2024, 70,

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>.

² In 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron called for a 'real European army' during a radio interview. Shortly after, German Chancellor Angela Merkel echoed the idea in a speech to the European Parliament (Franke 2018).

³ EDA, *Defence Data 2022*, 15, <https://eda.europa.eu/publications-and-data/defense-data>.

⁴ The Strategic Compass was published on 21 March 2022, just two weeks into the full-scale war in Ukraine.

EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 2022,

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf.

This research seeks to pick up the pieces of this puzzle. Its central question is: under what conditions have EU member states pursued defence integration via the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)? Answering this question involves two closely related sub-questions: why has CSDP integration often fallen short of its stated ambitions, and what role does the CSDP play in European security alongside NATO, which shares much of the same membership and pursues overlapping institutional aims? These questions are inherently linked, as understanding the conditions for integration necessitates examining both the persistent gap between ambition and outcome, and the CSDP's function within the broader transatlantic security architecture. Empirically, the study traces the drivers of three defining periods of EU defence integration.

1. The launch of the ESDP during the Yugoslav wars (1998–2000),
2. Its deepening following the Iraq invasion (2003–2005),
3. The transformation of EU defence in the wake of Brexit and Donald Trump's first presidency (2016–2018).

The decade between the second and third period (2005–2015) saw little integration despite significant changes in the European security landscape – notably the Arab Spring, which culminated in the 2011 Libya intervention. The absence of CSDP integration during this period serves as a test case for the proposed explanatory framework. Data collection draws on newly declassified archival sources and interviews with executives from France, Germany, the UK, Poland as well as EU officials involved in the studied political processes. In each case, the goal is to gain deeper insights into the social purpose of cooperation in this domain by examining the decision-making process behind the establishment of new CSDP institutions.

Theoretically, the aim is to develop a community-based account of EU defence cooperation, illustrating the conditions under which rationales of national utility maximisation are superseded by social community effects. To this end, I put forward a theory that highlights the role of ontological security – i.e. the human need for stability and progress in the face of existential challenges – in maintaining the functioning of the EU. Foremost, I seek to demonstrate that core EU member states have initiated CSDP integration to safeguard a community that has become constitutive of their sense of self when specific group dynamics trigger an acute ontological crisis. This need for community-affirming cooperation largely stems from two defining properties of the EU: first, its internal constitution as a security community that has fostered a deep sense of trust and collective identification (Adler and Barnett 1998). And second, member states' largely shared *post-heroic* outlook on international politics affecting their approach to national security (Münkler 2015). Together they help explain why EU defence has mostly been about community-oriented behaviour rather than power projection.

Internally, the EU qualifies as a security community, according to Karl Deutsch (2015), because it is a group of states within which the possibility of conflict among members has become unimaginable (Deutsch 2015, 6). Furthermore, a shared history, common values, and long-standing cooperation have fostered a deep sense of collective identification, making any threat to this shared identity a collective concern (Adler and Barnett 1998, 7). In response, member states act to restore their sense of self and progress. To better understand why states symbolically cooperate in defence despite limited added value to their physical security, the notion of post-heroism becomes crucial (Scheipers 2014). It suggests that core members of this community perceive international relations

as fundamentally peaceful and adhere to the belief that deeper engagement, rather than traditional military power, is the primary means of preserving stability, as reflected in the EU's own history. This has in part led to *denationalisation* of defence (Mérand 2010; Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014). Moreover, it has shifted the primary function of defence cooperation from enhancing physical security to community-building. In fact, defence policy is particularly well-suited to reinforcing a group's distinct identity. By delineating boundaries between those within a shared geographical and cultural space that requires protection and those outside it, it helps to build group identity by defining who belongs and who does not.

Remarkably, being tied to a community in this way can give rise to what I term a 'community dilemma'. In periods of acute ontological crisis, member states are compelled to cooperate through new institutions to safeguard their community, fostering a sense of stability and progress. However, because such cooperation is primarily driven by anxiety control rather than strategic utility, this often produces non-strategic ambiguities and inefficient institutional outcomes – ones that states would not have proposed based solely on grounds of military utility.

Overall, the analysis suggests that even as the EU has shifted from eschewing the use of force to gradually embracing it, the primary impetus for closer defence integration has largely stemmed from internal community factors. Table 1 illustrates the logic of the argument, highlighting that the purpose of defence has actually been to sustain cooperation, rather than the other way around.⁵ This logic has predominated during moments of ontological crisis, whereas in its absence, states revert to narrower national interests in line with rationalist understandings. The specific empirical measurement of ontological crisis will be introduced below and detailed in Chapter 3.

Table 1: Competing Logics Explaining EU Defence Integration

	Ontological Security Logic	Physical Security Logic
Ontology	Ideational – Boundedly Rational Actors	Realpolitik – Rational Actors
Epistemology	Constructivism	Rationalism/Materialism
	Defence	Integration
	<i>for the purpose of</i>	
	Integration	Defence
Predominant Effect	restored ontological security	enhanced physical security

⁵ I am grateful to Professor Tobias Bunde for this iteration of the argument (Bunde 2021).

In light of current events, this study offers insights into the immense challenge Europeans face in turning the EU into a credible military actor in the face of growing geopolitical threats. As CSDP integration has historically been shaped more by ontological needs than by strategic rationales, uncomfortable zero-sum choices at the heart of European defence have long been deferred or obscured. These tensions, which this thesis brings to the fore, are now resurfacing under unprecedented pressure for European defence autonomy. As such three structural challenges come into focus. First, how can the EU and NATO both function as fully fledged defence institutions when member states possess only limited resources and must draw on the same force structure for both organisations? Second, how can the EU manage large-scale defence-industrial projects across 27 member states, when such cooperation has historically proven difficult even among a handful of countries on a minilateral basis? Third, how should the EU address the challenge posed by Brexit – and the enduring concern, as Jacques Chirac once put it, that ‘there is no European defence without England’ (*News24* 2003). Current proposals to *rearm Europe* will have to confront these structural challenges if meaningful change from past practices is to be achieved.

By pointing to the social-psychological factors that have shaped CSDP integration, this thesis demonstrates how many of the questions that now appear urgent have, for much of the past 25 years, remained veiled beneath the symbolic and identity-stabilising dimensions of EU defence cooperation. Resolving these tensions requires immense political will and leadership – a form of visionary politics comparable to that of the post-WWII era. The last critical juncture that might have enabled such a shift came in the immediate aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in spring 2022. Donald Trump’s return to power has since ushered in a new phase of international instability, marked by open antagonism towards European allies. Historically, however, major reconfigurations of military alliances and power distributions have tended to follow military confrontation. This is by no means desirable. Thus, both the pro-European observer and the Atlanticist are left to hope for the return of leadership capable of forging a peaceful international order – one in which democracy is protected, and citizens can live in mutual recognition.

1.1 Shifting Focus: From Utility Maximisation to Anxiety Control

This study starts from the premise that the current institutional framework in European defence is unlikely the result of rational institutional design alone. Instead, deeper social processes appear to be at play, challenging the dominant notion of *Homo Lupus-Economicus* – the idea that states pursue an optimal utility function for self-defence based solely on an instrumental analysis of military costs and benefits. Uncovering these processes more comprehensively will require a broader shift towards sociological and psychological modes of analysis in the field of European security (Katzenstein 1996, 27). This dissertation is by no means the first exploratory step in this direction of research. An interest in the internal motivations of European foreign/security policy already characterises the work of a small circle of scholars in this field.

Most notably, Chris Bickerton (2011) devoted a book to shifting the debate from questions of effectiveness to the internal functions of EU foreign policy. Bickerton starts by asking the obvious question: ‘If it is true that the EU regularly falls short of everyone’s expectation then it may be that ... being an effective international actor is not in fact the main purpose of foreign and security cooperation’ (Bickerton 2011, 8). He suggests that EU foreign/security policy should be examined

as it is – and not primarily in terms of what it fails to achieve or what it succeeds in achieving (ibid.). Bickerton then identifies a number of internal functions that foreign policy cooperation has fulfilled, such as the democratic legitimisation of the EU, community-building and balancing the institutional relationships that make up the EU (Bickerton 2011, 22; Anderson 2008).

Other authors have similarly taken issue with the outcome-oriented study of European integration.

In fact, this critique goes back even to the advent before the 1992 Maastricht Treaty introduced the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), in which CSDP was later subsumed. For instance, Weiler and Wessels, as early as 1988, highlighted that cooperation on foreign policy has actually often led to inaction and helped justify inactivity. They noted that European Political Cooperation (EPC), the precursor to CFSP established in 1970, ensured a status quo orientation among member states and provided ‘a collective shelter against the call for more active foreign policy’, which could have been detrimental to the collective (Weiler and Wessels 1988, 251).⁶ Beyond the notion of damage limitation, which is common in such functional accounts, Zaki Laidi (2005) and Anand Menon (2009) argue that EU foreign/security cooperation reflects an actual preference for ‘power avoidance’ in Europe (Laidi 2005; Howorth and Menon 2009, 249). Bickerton (2011) takes this argument to an almost cynical conclusion arguing CFSP serves ‘precisely to legitimise Europe’s retreat from its historical role as architect and driver of international affairs’ (Bickerton 2011, 23). In sum, these scholars share the view that effective outcomes are of secondary importance compared to the cooperative process itself; or that ‘the journey is as important as the destination’ (Juncos and Reynolds 2007, 147).

However, what these contrasting views lack is a more profound exploration of why foreign policy has evolved to serve these community functions and under what circumstances the process of cooperation takes precedence over maximising military power. In this regard, two scholars have come close to offering an explanation. Ben Tonra (2003) draws on cognitive psychology to argue that elites have internalised the expectation of common interests and shared actions rooted in a common understanding, both on a personal and institutional level (Tonra 2003, 743). What mattered now was fulfilling role expectations and certain ‘images of Europe’ that are meaningful primarily to Brussels officials, rather than to the broader public (ibid; Hooghe 2011; Mitzen 2006a). Similarly, Stephanie Anderson (2008) highlighted how CSDP cooperation fosters a collective identity within the EU and ‘offers prestige on the cheap’ (Anderson 2008, 58). In turn, this enhanced prestige strengthens member states’ diplomatic influence, ‘reinforcing the image of the EU as a powerful actor on the world stage’ (ibid.).

Like other scholars, these studies seek answers within the vocabulary of identity and performativity. However, cause and effect remain weakly conceptualised in such functional accounts, which have struggled to transcend the descriptive level to a more systematic social-theoretical explanation that addresses mechanisms and micro-processes.⁷ Moreover, the complex CSDP/NATO conundrum is often bracketed by focussing only on selective EU cases in disregard of wider transatlantic dynamics. This study shares the concern that materialist and rationalist accounts have invited

⁶ Smith (2004) attests a similar function to the EPC namely that its purpose was not to solve international problems but to prevent international problems from causing harm to the community (Smith 2004, 71).

⁷ Bickerton (2011) terms approaches that emphasise the internal functions of EU foreign and security policy the *functional school*. This should not be confused with (neo-)functionalism, which is a causal theory of integration, whereas the functional school is primarily descriptive, concerned with the purposes EU defence policy serves and for whom.

misreadings of EU defence. As Tonra (2008) put it, such accounts cannot understand ‘what makes European policymakers battle so hard and so long for something that in output terms can only be seen as so little’ (cited in Bickerton 2011, 17). The goal therefore is to build upon these findings and develop them more systematically to analyse the drivers of transformative phases in EU defence integration.

A key modification in this regard is to ground existing insights in the concept of ontological security (OS) to develop a mid-range theory.⁸ In their rejection that CSDP is driven by the maximisation of utility or power, functional accounts share a core axiom with the emerging field of Ontological Security Studies (OSS). The latter represents a social-psychological approach to political behaviour centred on the fundamental human need for stability, continuity, and order in one’s self-identity. Originally introduced by psychologist R.D. Laing, it was brought into IR by Anthony Giddens and has mostly been applied to describe how disruptions in identity – a stable sense of self – can affect political action and state relations (Laing 1990, 41; Giddens 1991, 32).

By now this lens has lent crucial insights into various issues where conventional understandings of security fall short, by highlighting how self-identity needs can supersede the pursuit of physical security (Steele 2008; Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2018). From an OS point of view, EU defence integration is about ‘anxiety control’ when elements of the social world that key actors rely on become disrupted and cause what the psychologist Erik Erikson called an ‘identity crisis’ (Erikson 1968, 15). In other words, defence integration is a mechanism for managing dread by ‘tricking’ the community into thinking that the world is predictable and orderly, thus ‘bracketing’ existential anxieties so that it can continue to function (Giddens 1991, 36; Krickel-Choi 2022, 15).

In applying OS to EU defence cooperation, the study seeks to break new empirical and theoretical ground. Empirically, OS has mostly been applied to situations of international conflict between individual actors but rarely to the analysis of deep forms of international cooperation shaped by intergroup dynamics (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010; Greve 2018; Browning and Joenniemi 2017).⁹ Theoretically, the conditions under which crises of ontological security emerge for a particular actor or community remain under-researched (Ejdus 2018). When discussing the circumstances that give rise to ontological angst, IR scholarship tends to resort to somewhat vague conceptions of ‘critical situations’, ‘crisis’ ‘rapid change’ etc.¹⁰ Berenskötter and Nymalm (2021) argue in that regard, ‘while the focus on disruptive moments and dissonant processes makes sense, the notion that anything destabilising a stable sense of self is a threat verges on tautology’ (Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021, 24; Flockhart 2016).

⁸ Mid-range theories bridge the gap between abstract, overarching theories that provide a broad understanding of social phenomena and highly specific theories that explain narrow aspects of social behaviour (Checkel 1999, 551).

⁹ While OSS has recently gained traction in the study of European integration, applications to the CSDP specifically remain under-researched (Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2018; Mälksoo 2016; G. M. Friedrichs and Sommer 2025).

¹⁰ This thesis primarily uses the terms ‘ontological insecurity’, ‘angst’, and ‘dread’ interchangeably to describe disruptions to the continuity and stability of individual or collective self-identity. Yet it acknowledges their semantic distinctions. ‘angst’ and ‘dread’, drawn from existentialist thought, refer to the emotional intensity or affective dimension of ontological insecurity. The term ‘ontological crisis’ is employed more narrowly to capture moments of extreme ontological insecurity, arising under specific scope conditions outlined in the conceptual framework.

There are two main reasons for the vague conceptualisation of ontological crisis. The first is methodological and related to the issue that most OS accounts rely on single case studies embracing interpretivist frameworks that do not engage in more systematic theory testing. The second is theoretical and rooted in the issue that OS is merely a concept or vocabulary, but incomplete for mid-range theorising unless combined with more comprehensive social theories that explain wider aspects of human behaviour and the interplay of structure and agency (Wendt 1987; Meyer 2011).

To overcome this issue, this study combines the concept of OS with Social Identity Theory (SIT). The latter provides a substantive explanatory framework about how structural factors related to self and group identity drive collective action in and across groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel 1974). Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), SIT explains how individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships, leading to in-group favouritism and out-group differentiation. SIT and OS are easily combinable as both share the premise that people strive to hold a favourable view of self and that this largely depends on inherent psychological dimensions intrinsic to individual actors as well as their social relations (Hymans 2002). While OS is more concerned with the intrinsic self needs, SIT provides substantive insights into the social processes shaping ingroup/outgroup behaviour (Ward 2017; Gaffney and Hogg 2023). In combining their insights, the two perspectives provide a useful starting point to explain how group dynamics and self-identity needs may shape EU defence cooperation under particular circumstances.

1.2 The Argument Step by Step

I seek to demonstrate that core members of the European Security community initiate the establishment of EU defence institutions for its intrinsic value as an ‘anxiety control mechanism’ when specific group dynamics trigger an ontological security crisis. The reason for this lies in the particular nature of the EU as a security community, which is shaped by a specific set of shared expectations as well as ingroup and outgroup dynamics that can become destabilised and create ontological insecurity. This creates a sense of danger to the community which has become constitutive of the identity of many governing elites in member states (Checkel 2005; Tonra 2003; Lebow 2016).

There are both functional and psychological reasons why defence policy lends itself well to community-building and maintenance in the EU. As mentioned, when policymakers advance EU defence policy, they reinforce group boundaries between those within this political space and those outside it, fostering a sense of positive distinctiveness among insiders while reaffirming their group membership (Anderson 2008). This dynamic is reinforced by the deep historical ties between defence matters and the EU’s origins, rooted in the belief that pooling resources over the use of force fosters community-building in times of uncertainty and division – as exemplified by the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) after WWII. Yet there are also two simple functional reasons why performative action in this domain is relatively low-cost. First, the CSDP is largely isolated from other policy areas, reducing the risk of unintended spillover effects from performative action. Second, inefficiencies in this domain rarely affect the wider public, which generally views

defence integration favourably anyways.¹¹ Consequently, institution-building in defence lends itself particularly well to community maintenance through intrinsically motivated cooperative efforts at minimal cost.

Based on theoretical deduction from SIT and OS, I argue that three necessary conditions underpin the eruption of an ontological crisis in the EU, serving as a trigger for CSDP integration. These conditions reflect both internal-psychological and social-relational sources of ontological insecurity. They involve significant disruptions in (1) the shared group ethos, (2) group-internal relationships among core members, and (3) the external relationships between the core and significant others outside the community. In short, the variables are labelled and described as follows:

1. **Community Angst:** The first trigger of ontological angst relates to dynamics that undermine the core ethos of the European security community, encapsulated in the notion of ‘the ever-closer union’. This ethos is undermined when fears of disintegration erupt that fundamentally challenge the shared expectations of peace and progress upon which this security community rests. Defence cooperation here functions as a performative act of recommitment, aimed at restoring a sense of stability and progress within the community (*internal-psychological dimension*).
2. **Prodigal Son:** At least one core member of the EU needs to experience fears of falling behind or being excluded by the group in the future. Defence cooperation in this context is driven by the marginalised member’s need to re-enter the community core, prompting community-oriented behaviour that reaffirms its belonging and realigns its self-perception with the collective identity (*ingroup relationship dimension*).
3. **Estrangement:** Core members of the EU need to experience unprecedented estrangement (i.e. normative clashes) from a significant other outside the group, in this case the United States. Defence cooperation then becomes a mechanism for asserting group boundaries, enhancing ingroup cohesion, and fostering a renewed sense of belonging. (*outgroup relationship dimension*).

When ontological security is disrupted at all these levels, a crisis is likely to emerge, prompting ad hoc EU defence integration as a means to restore a sense of stability and progress. However, none of this would be possible if the EU had not developed into a ‘security community’ that is now integral to the identity of vast parts of its governing elites. Indeed, the EU aligns closely with the definition of a security community as established by seminal scholars of the concept, notably Karl Deutsch, Emanuel Adler, and Michael Barnett. Moreover, the EU can be classified as a ‘mature’, or ‘densely knitted community’ due to three factors.¹² First, it is marked by a strong sense of collective identity and trust (‘we-feeling’). Second, it classifies as a mutual aid society based on diffuse forms of reciprocity. Third, it represents a post-sovereign system of governance that lies somewhere between a federation and an international organisation (IO). These factors reflect early theorisations of security communities, and Table 2 below provides evidence for each of these assumptions (Adler and Barnett 1998, 30–32).

¹¹ Support for a common security and defence policy has historically been above 70% in Europe. According to the Eurobarometer 2023, 80% of respondents indicated that cooperation in EU defence matters should be increased. European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 99: Europeans’ Opinions on the EU’s Priorities*, Spring 2023, 17, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3052>.

¹² Specifically, the EU represents a ‘pluralistic security community’ made up of different sovereign entities rather than ‘amalgamated security community’ which refers to when single independent units merge into a single larger unit with a common government (Adler and Barnett 1998, 6).

Table 2: The EU as a Tightly Knit Security Community

No	Indicator	Evidence
1	Strong sense of collective identity	EU is only IO that is: - represented along national state on passport (EU citizenship), - possessing deeply shared and widely used symbolism e.g., flag, anthem, and single currency
2	Mutual aid society	EU is IO with most diffuse form of reciprocity to date represented for instance in the bailouts during the financial crisis, the Covid Recovery Fund, the commission negotiating Brexit without formal member state influence.
3	Post-sovereign System of Governance	EU represents highest level of shared sovereignty among nation states with common supranational, transnational and national institutions. This is represented for instance in the community method legislation process but also in the increasingly supranational management of policy areas including defence R&D.

From here it is only a small step to understand that European integration has become constitutive of state identity and that a threat to the communal identity and entrenched social relationships is seen to require a cooperative collective response.

Yet this is likely not true for all members of the community but only for the core group. According to Karl Deutsch, larger, stronger political units were found to form ‘the cores of strength around which in most cases the integrative process developed’ (Deutsch 2015, 38). Core countries have internalised the group ethos and possess substantial power to shape integration and determine collective meanings (ibid.). Based on these assumptions, the EU core is made up of France, Germany and to some extent the UK – before Brexit. Historically, the UK is best understood as a shifting core member, moving in and out of the core at different times, depending on which elites were in power, sometimes very pro-European and more often unfavourable to the EU (Marcussen et al. 1999). In any case determining the core will always require some degree of empirical analysis.¹³ Overall, however, governing elites in core countries are more likely to share the group ethos than those in the group ‘periphery’, i.e., the smaller member states, especially Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), which only joined the EU at a later stage. Countries who are not part of the core are thus expected to join the integration effort later for more instrumental reasons (e.g., side payments).

It is true that different states relate in different ways to the European community and associate different goals with it. However, this does not preclude a minimalist core identity in the community centre (Katzenstein 1996; Lebow 2016). The fact that actors can have multiple identities is in many ways trivial. What is important is to determine which aspects of identity are important for the formation and maintenance of a community (Nicolaidis and Pélabay 2008).

¹³ It is important to note that assigning attributes to actors through deduction is a methodological choice and required to engage in causal analysis where identity factors need to be fixated at some point to differentiate cause from effect. However, this does not counter the constructivist ontology of the proposed theoretical framework.

As a baseline, communities of democratic countries share the norms and values embedded in the political culture of liberalism.¹⁴ This is based on the three-step logic that democracies (1) recognise one another as peaceful, (2) refrain from fighting each other, and (3) share an ideational bond which binds them into communities grounded in institutions for the peaceful resolution of disputes (Risse 1996, 371). In that way a community has the potential to alter the collective outcome that would have resulted from the constellations of preferences and power alone (Schimmelfennig 2003, 7). The EU's identity core however is much 'thicker' than this baseline suggests (Katzenstein 1996, 22; Adler and Barnett 1998, 34). It reflects some deeply shared expectations of peaceful change and progress that can supersede national identities and thereby render the EU an imagined 'community of fate' (Anderson 1983, 48; Wæver 1998, 94).

The destabilisation of ingrained group norms can thus be expected to trigger **community angst** which constitutes the first of three variables that contribute to ontological crisis. Here it is argued that the undermining of two particular expectations is relevant to trigger community angst. They were inductively established based on treaty text where these norms take on a particular role reflected in their position at either the beginning or the end of the preamble of the foundational EU treaties of Rome, Maastricht and Lisbon. They are:

- a.) to prevent mass violence in the heart of Europe
- b.) to work towards an ever-closer Union i.e. to prevent community disintegration.

We may expect these principles to be shared among core members, and when one or both are undermined, the community core will experience ontological insecurity. The precise operationalisation of these variables will be outlined in Chapter 3.

Besides internal-psychological sources of ontological security, there is also a social-relational dimension highlighted in ontological security research. The literature shows that disruptions to a state's sense of self arise not only from the undermining of internalised norms but also from ruptures in routinised social relationships (Mitzen 2006b; Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021).

This relates to the second variable of ontological crisis, which I term the **Prodigal Son**. It emerges when a core member develops fears of falling behind or being excluded from the group, prompting a desire to reassert its position within the core group through group-confirmatory behaviour. In the present study, this role is exemplified by Tony Blair, who set aside familiar Atlanticist interests and turned to European defence not to maximise material gains, but to reaffirm Britain's place within the European core. This behaviour reflects a social-psychological drive for recognition and belonging that extends beyond strategic calculation. The Prodigal Son variable thus constitutes a second source of ontological insecurity that triggers pro-social behaviour. However, unlike collective identity threats, this sentiment is likely not simultaneously experienced across core states but rather by individual states. In the cases studied, such sentiments in individual core member states served as a key catalyst in initiating or reinforcing integration efforts.

¹⁴ Not any security community as understood as a non-war community must necessarily be based on liberal values, as actors can also cooperate on other intersubjective ideas. However, one may assume that liberal values lend themselves particularly well for the formation of transnational civic cultures due to their openness regarding the free movement of people, goods and ideas to interpenetrate societies (Adler and Barnett 1998, 41).

The final driver for EU defence integration is **estrangement**. Like the Prodigal Son, this variable relates to the social-relational dimension of ontological angst. However, instead of focusing on internal group dynamics, it concerns destabilised relationships with an outgroup member – namely, the United States.¹⁵ Social identity theorists remind us that whether a state is perceived as part of an ingroup or an outgroup matters significantly, as outgroup members often serve as the ‘other’ against which group identity is constructed (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 60; Turner 1991, 70; Campbell 1998, 9). When a familiar relationship with an outgroup member such as the United States is challenged, this can disrupt ontological security. SIT provides a specific link between disrupted outgroup relations and defence cooperation. It suggests that identity differentiation from an outgroup leads ingroup members to recognise their similarities and reinforce internal cohesion. As Gaffney and Hogg (2023) argue, ‘ingroup members seek positive distinctiveness from outgroup members’ – that is, a sense of favourable differentiation or uniqueness that affirms a positive sense of both group and self-identity (Gaffney and Hogg 2023, 2; Turner et al. 1987). In this way, identity-driven differentiation can provide a softer, semi-conscious impetus for EU defence integration – one that differs markedly from rationalist or materialist logics of power competition.

Again, some degree of empirical analysis is necessary to determine which outgroup relationships matter in different contexts. With regard to EU defence, it is evident that the United States represents a significant outgroup member which at times appears close and similar, yet at other times distant and unfamiliar, resulting in severe disruptions to this routinised social relationship. This duality is why veteran UK diplomat and former Chancellor of Oxford University, Chris Patten, referred to the US as a ‘Cousin and Stranger’ – the title of his book (Patten 2006). Here I argue that unprecedented norm clashes about the maintenance of international order with the US lead to identity differentiation and incentivise EU defence integration (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010). The key point of divergence between the EU and the US lies in a subset of liberal norms centred on notions of *post-heroism*. When post-heroic European perspectives clash with the US vision of a *heroic-belligerent* role-conception, the US comes to be seen as ‘the stranger’.¹⁶ (Simmel 1908, 404; Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021, 26). Conceptualising the US in this way has important implications for the EU-NATO relationship, which I shall outline in chapter 2.

Overall, this framework serves as a heuristic for analysing moments of EU defence integration, assuming that a strong expression of the proposed factors increases the likelihood of defence integration.¹⁷ The three variables are all rooted in the same ontology, which conceptualises state behaviour as a semi-conscious and semi-rational process, significantly shaped by social identity and community effects.

In this way, the argumentative logic differs markedly from rationalist explanations of European integration in times of crisis, most notably Jones et al.’s (2016) well-known notion of ‘failing forward’. Their framework assumes that integration is driven by material crises and technical

¹⁵ Outgroup members that actors perceive to be positive collectives can be a source of ontological security. However, such ‘normative friendships’ also create vulnerabilities which will need to be rectified in the event of destabilisation or uncertainty (Koschut and Oelsner 2014; Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021, 34).

¹⁶ Georg Simmel (1908) described the stranger as someone who does not quite fit the ingroup but is also not an outsider, someone who is culturally proximate but not ‘organically connected’ (Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021, 26).

¹⁷ In line with the principle of equifinality, it is assumed that other, more rational drivers may also lead to defence integration, but these are of lesser relevance for capturing the CSDP as a political phenomenon.

necessity: states, when confronted with governance failures, adopt lowest common denominator solutions shaped by bargaining and clashes of national interests – solutions which, in turn, tend to reproduce governance shortcomings and thus set the stage for further rounds of integration (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016; 2021). My approach, by contrast, explains integration as a response to ontological crises and social necessity. Rather than being forced by functional shortcomings, defence integration serves a performative role – stabilising and reinforcing a collective sense of self and community cohesion. The activation of PESCO, for instance, was not prompted by technical inefficiencies in the way the EU was compelled to adopt new economic instruments in response to the 2008 financial crisis. Instead, it reflected a community maintenance process after Brexit in which defence cooperation was primarily motivated by the need to reaffirm European unity and cohesion, rather than by pressing material constraints.

In that sense, this psychological reading challenges any notion of automaticity in the integration process leading toward a highly integrated end state in the neo-functionalist sense. Instead, it highlights the process's underlying symbolic and performative purposes – and, in turn, the somewhat fragile basis of the CSDP, which has largely operated as a second-order concern in foreign/security policy in the absence of ontological crisis.

1.3 Research Design

This section addresses questions related to the measurement of concepts as well as research design. My research design relies on case studies for theory development and draws on George & Bennett's (2005) method of 'structured-focussed comparison'. The authors encourage researchers to only select cases that are instances of the same phenomenon about which they want to theorise and to only focus on certain elements of interest about the case. Subsequently, one should establish a coherent set of questions that guide data collection for all cases (George and Bennett 2005, 69). Through accumulation and comparison of data, it should then be possible to draw broader inferences or develop a (mid-range) theory about the studied phenomenon.¹⁸

This research is interested in the social and strategic motivations behind EU defence integration. The selected cases represent the three defining phases of institution-building in EU defence, aiming to establish theoretical linkages. The first phase (1998–2000) marked the birth of an EU defence capacity, while the second (2003–2005) and third (2016–2018) phases deepened existing institutions through new initiatives. The second phase focuses on the launch of the European Defence Agency (EDA) and the European Security Strategy (ESS). The third phase examines the so-called 'winter defence package,' which notably included the EU Global Strategy (EUGS), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). It is assumed that what links these periods are crises of ontological security enabled by community effects.

¹⁸Theories usually contain numerous observable implications across actors and social contexts, time and space. Their leverage increases with the level of generality and abstraction of a scientific proposition. This is how theories differ from ad hoc explanations, which are based on the interaction of singular factors present in the context of a single event only (Schimmelfennig 2003, 9).

So far, the study of ontological security has rarely been applied to cooperation in EU security and defence via a systematic cross-case analysis (Mälksoo 2016). The project thus seeks to contribute to a novel research agenda, which is the reason why cases were predominantly selected on the dependent (outcome) variable (Geddes 1990, 131). Consequently, the central objective of this study is heuristic in that the case studies serve to identify new variables, hypotheses, mechanisms and causal paths for theory-building. At the same time, however, the goal is to gain insights into the validity and scope of competing explanations. In line with the notion of ‘solidifying constructivism’, the goal is to generate testable claims about the conditions under which EU defence integration occurs (Checkel and Moravcsik 2001; Meyer and Strickmann 2011).

To gain further analytical leverage the study works with test cases and rival theories. A test case in this regard is either a case where the outcome seems to be present but not the hypothesised cause or vice-versa (Mahoney and Goertz 2004, 657). Such cases provide a challenge for the validity of the proposed theory to explain why in a seemingly similar situation the mechanisms did not operate. In the case of CSDP, it is interesting that defence integration stagnated for an entire decade despite a radically changing security landscape in the context of Russia’s assault on Georgia (2008) and the Arab Spring (2011-2015). A particularly insightful test case is the political crisis surrounding the Libya intervention in 2011. One might assume that the EU’s failure to respond collectively – relying instead on the US and NATO – could have triggered ontological angst, thereby producing the expected outcome of institutional reform. However, no such reform followed. Thus, the absence of institutional change after the Libya intervention presents a key opportunity to evaluate the three proposed conditions of ontological crisis.

Table 3: Case Study Research Design

No	Case	Years	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable
1	First transformation – the origins of CSDP in the context of the Balkan wars and the Euro introduction	1998-2000	High-level OS Crisis	Decision to establish an EU defence capacity (ESDP)
2	Second Transformation – institutional deepening mainly over Iraq invasion and Constitutional Treaty	2003-2005	Medium-level OS crisis	Smaller scale defence integration via EDA & ESS
2	Third Transformation – institutional deepening over Brexit and the Trump Presidency	2016-2018	High-Level OS Crisis	Activation of PESCO and launch of the EU Global Strategy along with initiatives such as the EDF and MPCC
Test Case				
T1	No Transformation – Institutional stagnation over the Libya intervention and the Obama Presidency	2005-2015	Absence of OS crisis despite change in security landscape	paused CSDP integration

More analytical leverage should also be gained by testing the theory against rival hypotheses. The approach is thus informed by the Lakatosian (1978) idea of theory-building, which conceives of the scientific endeavour as a ‘three-cornered fight’ between observations, a theory and a rival theory (Lakatos 1978, 31). Only against the background of alternative explanations can conclusions be drawn from observations, which are always ambiguous to some extent (ibid.). In line with a scientific realist epistemology the aim is to uncover the deeper, often hidden, mechanisms that influence EU defence integration, without however assuming that these mechanisms operate as definitively as ‘covering laws’ in the natural sciences (Jackson 2016, 72).

The natural rivals to my ontological framework are the central IR assumptions about rational and materially motivated state action in security and defence. Materially defined state action is usually dominant in the subfield of Security Studies drawing on the theoretical lens of neorealism. The study of international institutions has long been dominated by neo-liberal institutionalism (Hofmann 2013, 6). Both advance expectations about EU defence integration that are odds with the proposed social identity framework. Neorealism emphasises European balancing and hedging strategies driven by fears of survival and power maximisation (Walt 1987; Waltz 2000). In the EU context neorealist theorising has emphasised competition and rivalry with the US as primary factors in the creation of European defence institutions (Posen 2006; Rynning 2011; Hyde-Price 2012; Simón 2017). In a different vein, liberal theories assume that states engage in rational costs-benefit calculations about the security environment and domestic preferences highlighting the interest of efficiency and the possibility of mutual gains through the development of institutions (Weiss 2011; Pollack 2019). Such accounts emphasise the purposeful distribution of work between NATO and the EU. However, both frameworks pay little attention to community-oriented behaviour and dynamics of intrinsically motivated cooperation.

Importantly, this thesis does not argue that rationalist or materialist motivations play no role in EU defence. As such it is true that developing a distinct EU defence capacity has allowed member states to act more independently of states such as the US and Turkey, both of which exert significant influence in NATO. Moreover, differences in crisis response approaches between these states and European countries have further justified the CSDP’s existence. In particular, the CSDP has placed a stronger emphasis on civilian overseas missions, notably in areas such as rule-of-law promotion and security sector reform. To date, the EU has launched 40 overseas missions, the majority of which have been civilian.¹⁹ However, these missions were often minimally staffed and had limited or uncertain impact on local security conditions and the EU’s capacity for power projection (Dijkstra 2013; Howorth 2014c; Van Der Lijn et al. 2024).

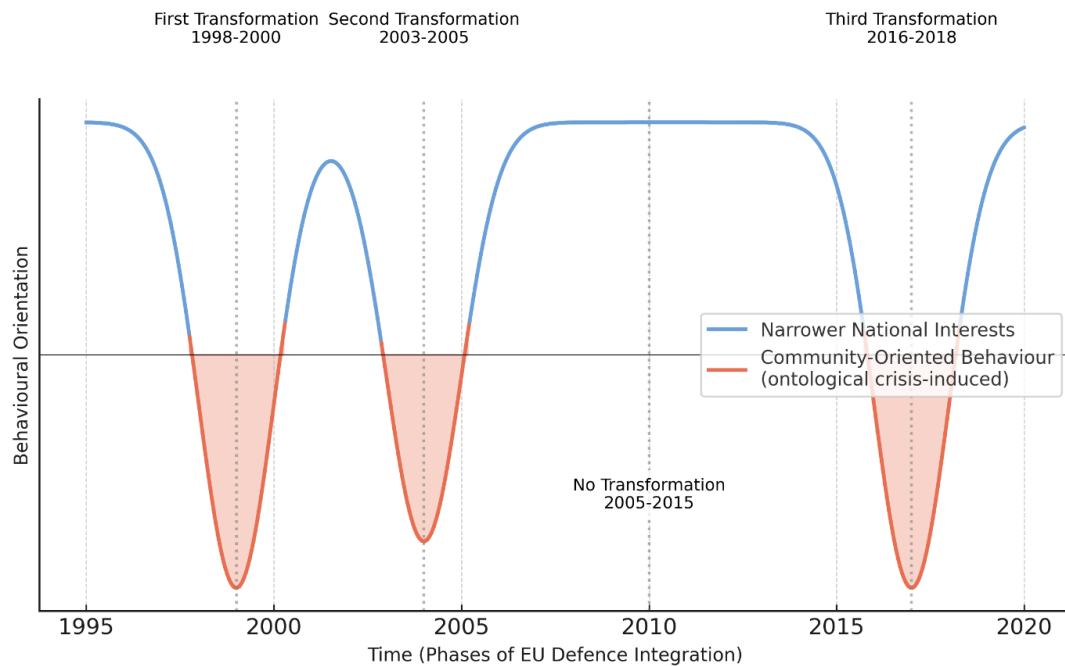
The key point, then, is that while these rationales played a role, outcome-oriented concerns about military efficiency were not the primary driver of integration in each case. Instead, the evidence suggests that rationales aligned with realist hedging strategies or liberal notions of forum-shopping – where states strategically choose between institutions to maximise benefits – tend to dominate in the absence of ontological crises.²⁰ In such periods, behaviour driven by narrow national interests

¹⁹ EEAS, *Missions and Operations*, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en.

²⁰ Importantly, this analysis focuses on relative changes in OS levels among core EU countries rather than absolute levels. As such, it is entirely possible that during crisis A, the overall OS level was higher than during crisis B, yet crisis

temporarily gives way to community-oriented rationales – only for these to fade as the ontological crisis subsides, leading states to revert back to long-standing strategic preferences. Figure 1 provides an overview of the assumed causal pathway and the interaction between national interests and community-oriented behaviour.

Figure 1: The Interaction Between Narrow National Interests and Community-Oriented Behaviour



At this stage it is worth noting the challenges associated with the empirical detection of behaviour induced by ontological angst. A good starting point in this regard is to ask ‘how does one recognise an ontological security crisis when it’s there?’ Barry Buzan faced the same question on the concept of *International Society*, which later became canonical in the discipline (Finnemore 2001, 509). An initial response to critique of more abstract concepts is that they are analytical tools that provide linguistic instruments to better make sense of international affairs. Their dominant purpose is anthropological, such as ‘the enlargement of the universe of human discourse’ in the Wittgensteinian sense ‘the limits of my language are the limits of my world’ (Wittgenstein 1922; Geertz 1973, 14). Most applications of OS have indeed embraced such an interpretivist epistemology and thereby discarded theory testing. As a result, though, much of the potential of ontological security remains unused.

The goal here is to gain deeper insights by distinguishing actions driven primarily by ontological security needs from those motivated by more familiar responses to material challenges. To do so, material and ontological security crises are treated as Weberian ‘ideal types’, which can both be present at the same time but where one has a more dominant effect on actors’ behaviour than the other in a given historical moment (Weber 2019, 153). A key distinction between the two is that the pursuit of material security is treated as an intentional, strategic and conscious endeavour,

A still led to defence integration while crisis B did not. Absolute OS levels, in turn, are difficult to measure consistently across multiple actors and time periods.

whereas the pursuit of OS usually is not. From these theoretical baselines, it is possible to establish indicators that confirm either agency resulting from a material or an ontological crisis. In a first instance, such an enquiry will be guided by establishing whether actors perceived an issue predominantly as a physical/economic threat or a challenge to their identity i.e., shared norms values etc. Table 4 outlines the questions researchers may ask in this regard.

Table 4: Meta-Level Differences in Perception: Material vs Ontological Crisis

Material		Ontological crisis
<i>Physical Threat</i>	<i>Economic Challenge</i>	<i>Social-psychological identity challenge</i>
Was an event or act predominantly seen as a threat to the integrity of state borders, the people within the state, its institutions, capabilities or hard power?	Was an event or act predominantly seen as a threat to a state's resources, competitiveness or economic strength?	Was an event or act perceived as a threat to the identity (norms, values; ethos) of state actors, did it interrupt crucial practices and conventions that provided a sense of stability and continuity in their self-perception?

However, this merely provides a 'straw-in-the-wind' to validate the proposed theory and evidence might still be too ambiguous to decide which factors dominated the initial decision-making process (George and Bennett 2005; Mahoney and Acosta 2022). More granular insights can be gained by assessing the circumstances in which the interactions among political elites were embedded. The indicators in Table 5 provide more precise proxies for determining whether actors were primarily motivated by physical security gains or by cooperation as an end in itself. These proxies are theoretically derived from existing literature that seeks to distinguish between strategically motivated interactions and predominantly normative or principled exchanges (Checkel 2007; Risse 2000; Turner 1991; Johnston 2001; March and Olsen 2010).

Table 5: Conceptualising Actor Interactions in EU Defence Decision-Making

Indicators	Strategic Exchange (physical security motivation)	Normative/Principled Exchange (social identity motivation)
Decision-Making Process	<i>Extensive domestic deliberation</i> → Long decision timeframe; reasoning is guided by a concrete, goal-oriented rationale.	<i>Ad hoc decision-making and cognitive shortcuts</i> → Short decision timeframe; minimal negotiation of technical details or deep reflection on strategic objectives.
Communication Style	<i>Manipulative</i> → Persuasion relies on rhetorical or technical argumentation to achieve a predefined objective. Arguments aim to manipulate or coerce acceptance rather than foster genuine consensus (Risse 2000).	<i>Deliberative</i> → Persuasion draws on shared norms and community spirit, with actors primarily seeking mutual understanding and reinforcing collective identity (Checkel 2007, 803; Habermas 1981).
Red Lines	<i>Clear and fixed</i> → Actors establish explicit limits before and during deliberations, remaining prepared to withdraw if demands are not met	<i>Unclear and fluid</i> → Red lines shift significantly during deliberations, indicating that cooperation itself is a priority over specific demands
Role of Side Payments	<i>Side payments central to agreement</i> → Cooperation hinges on material incentives, which are necessary to secure participation and shape the terms of the agreement.	<i>Side payments absent or secondary</i> → Cooperation is driven by shared purpose; material incentives, if used, come later to co-opt peripheral states but do not determine the core agreement.
Outcomes	<i>Goal-aligned</i> → Political outcomes align with actors' original goals, indicating utility maximisation	<i>Gap between capabilities and expectations</i> → Outcomes do not fully align with prior rhetoric, yet actors gloss over shortcomings, instead emphasizing shared achievements and the continued cooperative process.

These proxies help distinguish between materially driven and normatively driven motivations. While strategic exchange reflects utility-maximising behaviour, where actors seek tangible gains through bargaining and side payments, normative exchange is characterised by intrinsically motivated cooperation for the sake of self-affirmation and community maintenance. Indicators such as decision timeframes and communication styles provide empirical leverage to assess whether cooperation was transactional or driven by a commitment to sustaining the security community. In this way, the framework allows for a more nuanced analysis, recognising that EU defence integration is not primarily dictated by narrow national interests, but shaped by collective identity dynamics.

1.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The agents of interest for this theory are elite level decision-makers as a proximate cause of a foreign policy outcome (Jervis 2017). The focus shall be on countries in the EU core group most notably France and Germany who are complemented by the UK in the first and second case study and Poland in the third. In this way it should be possible to gain insights into the hypothesised community effects and trace variation regarding core and periphery countries. Furthermore, the chosen countries represent three distinct subgroups of states who have historically shaped European defence policy and who reflect different preferences regarding the EU and NATO. As such, the UK represents the *pro-NATO group*, France the European *autonomy group* and Germany the *compromise group* (Moravcsik 1998, 450). Given these countries' divergent strategic orientations, identifying shared social-identity incentives as policy drivers in this domain presents a least likely test for such motivations. If similar patterns emerged despite differing national interests, this would provide strong evidence that ontological security considerations play a structural role in EU defence cooperation.

The analysis adopts a methodological individualist approach (i.e. one that explains social phenomena through the actions, preferences, and perceptions of individual actors) by disaggregating the effects of ontological crisis at the member-state level. In the first case study on the origins of the CSDP, I conduct a detailed examination of individual member states along each variable of ontological crisis. This approach is particularly appropriate here due to the availability of archival sources and the historical significance of this period as the genesis of the policy domain. In the subsequent case studies, the analysis is organised around the three variables of ontological crisis, with selective reference to variation in member-state motivations. Across all cases, the goal is to assess the presence of ontological crisis in the EU core, and how its manifestations varied across countries at specific historical junctures.

The question remains what data is required for such research. When investigating the latent social-psychological factors driving policy outcomes, gaining access to sensitive 'behind-the-scenes' sources is crucial. Therefore, this project sought access to formerly classified documents as well as memoirs of former decision-makers. Such materials were predominantly available for the first case study, which relies heavily on British and, to some extent, German archival sources.²¹ Following the UK's recent decision to reduce the declassification period from 30 to 20 years, a wealth of previously restricted material has become available, enabling this study to shed new light on the origins of the CSDP. Archival sources were collected either on-site at the National Archives in Kew or online, where digitised documents were accessible.

²¹ At the National Archives of the UK (TNA), the focus was on documents from the Blair era (1997–2000) from the Prime Minister's Office (PREM), the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Ministry of Defence (DEFE). These materials included preparatory briefs for the Prime Minister and government officials ahead of summits, meetings with European and US leaders, and calls, as well as records and minutes from the meetings themselves. In addition, I drew on archival sources from the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (PAAA) in Germany. I am grateful for research exchanges with Georg Schneider in this regard. See Schneider, Georg. 2024. *Derailed at Departure: The Impact of Germany on Saint-Malo's Defence Ambitions*. Unpublished master's thesis, Hertie School, Berlin.

For the remaining case studies, high-level interviews and official documents served as the primary sources of evidence. A total of 25 interviews were conducted between May 2023 and March 2025. Interviewees were selected based on their direct involvement in, or insights into, the decision-making processes under study. They included former foreign and defence ministers, their advisers, ministerial staff from France, Germany, Poland, and the UK, as well as EU officials and, occasionally, academic and policy experts. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, all interviews were conducted on the condition of anonymity. Interviewees are therefore cited using generic identifiers (e.g. ‘Senior EU official’) to protect confidentiality while ensuring analytical transparency. Full details are on file with the author. All interviews followed a semi-structured protocol designed to capture both individual motivations and group dynamics within the EU and in relation to the United States. To minimise reliance on any single data source and enhance confidence in the study’s conclusions, a triangulation approach was adopted. For an overview of the primary sources used – including archives, interviews, and official documents – see *Appendix: Primary Sources*.

The gathered data was analysed by means of a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) using the computer software NVivo. QCA is a method for understanding social reality ‘where characteristics of a manifest “text” are used to infer characteristics of a non-manifest context’ (Merten 2013, 87)²². As such, the method aims to systematically work out core meanings, through step-by-step reduction and abstraction.²³ This was done by first establishing a coding frame within NVivo in which text segments were categorised. The coding frame was established through a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning which allowed refinement of categories over the course of the analysis (Gläser and Laudel 2010; Mayring 2015). Each category corresponded to dimensions of ontological crisis or factors associated with alternative theories to determine relevant causal mechanisms.

1.5 Plan of the Thesis

This thesis examines the conditions under which EU member states initiate defence integration by applying a structured theoretical framework. **Part I** develops the theoretical foundation. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides a brief exposition distinguishing the EU and NATO as overlapping security institutions, while exploring in more depth the concept of the community dilemma. Chapter 3 reviews existing theoretical approaches and identifies notable gaps. Chapter 4 then outlines the conceptual framework in detail and operationalises the factors underlying an ontological security crisis, concluding the theoretical section. **Part II** conducts an in-depth study of the genesis of CSDP. It presents the first empirical case, analysing French, German, and British motivations for the creation of CSDP (1998–2000) on a country-by-country basis. **Part III** further applies this thesis’ explanatory framework to the evolution of CSDP as a policy area. It examines the expansion of CSDP over the Iraq war (2003–2005), its stagnation in the context of the Libya intervention, and its reactivation in the wake of Brexit (2016–2018). The final chapter concludes the thesis and outlines avenues for further research.

²² The term ‘text’ here is understood in the widest sense as a manifest product of communicative actions.

²³ The method was established in response to a dissatisfaction with quantitative-content-analysis and its exclusive concern with manifest contents (e.g. word counts) thus disregarding latent meanings or *everything that is not in the text* (Kracauer 1952).

2.0 The European Union, NATO and the Community Dilemma

The purpose of this exposition is to outline distinctions between the EU and NATO as functionally related yet distinct identity-based communities. Based on this, I outline a new concept called the *community dilemma* which underlies EU defence integration. It represents the conceptual opposite of the security dilemma in IR and overarches this psychological reading of the CSDP grounded in OSS and SIT.

Research in various social science disciplines has well established the importance of group membership in furthering individuals' physical and psychological needs. Groups or communities do not only provide shared resources and safety, but they also further self-esteem, reduce uncertainty, and provide a sense of belonging. In the most extreme sense 'people live for and die because of their group memberships' and collective identities are key for advancing or stagnating societies (Cikara and Van Bavel 2014, 235; Gaffney and Hogg 2023, 1; Friedrichs 2016).

Such a strong level of social influence is usually alien to the IR discipline. Mainstream approaches such as neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism consider actors to be unitary and functionally undifferentiated, and their interests exogenously defined by the anarchical structure of the international system (Waltz 1979; Nye 1988; Katzenstein 1996, 12). Crucially, this structure is materially determined rather than socially constructed, based on the assumption that the absence of a central monopoly on the use of force renders the international system a perpetually threatening Hobbesian state of nature (Hobbes 2008). As states are concerned with their physical survival, their security enhancing measures are likely to generate armed rivalry between them which raises the probability of conflict. Such situations are referred to as 'security dilemmas' because they are not desired by any individual actor but considered inevitable due to the structure of anarchy (Herz 1950, 157; Glaser 1997, 172; Walt 2022). Neorealism and neo-liberal institutionalism both agree that this systemic context of anarchy and uncertainty shapes states and defines possibilities for conflict and cooperation. They only diverge regarding whether and how conflict can be mitigated through collective management and institution-building – a stance where neoliberalism is more optimistic than neorealism (Jervis 1978, 168; 2017; Keohane 1984, 18).

Until the 1990s ushered in a constructivist turn, it was rather extraordinary to assume that national security was shaped by anything other than the rational material interest in maximising or maintaining security under anarchy. Alexander Wendt's (1992) observation that 'anarchy is what states make of it' was in this sense a liberating moment opening up novel research agendas into how constructed norms affect state identity and produce varying 'cultures of national security' (Wendt 1992; Katzenstein 1996). In these scholarly circles, actors were now conceived to be defined by constitutive norms, that can be shared with others, which can give rise to all sorts of perceptions and behaviours, including the need to maintain a stable sense of self as outlined in OS scholarship.

The proposed concept of the community dilemma starts by taking two core assumptions about actorhood in constructivist research seriously. First that actorhood is largely shaped by shared constitutive norms that make up individuals and collectives. And second that states possess a fundamental need to maintain stable identities in the face of identity challenges – beyond material security concerns. Based on these assumptions, situations can arise where states that share

constitutive norms within a collective experience a threat to those norms and respond by initiating cooperation – primarily to safeguard the collective to which they belong. However, because this cooperation is launched to swiftly counter ontological fears, it often bypasses deep strategic deliberation. States engage not after carefully weighing costs and benefits, but in response to identity-based anxieties, with preferences emerging by default rather than through rational evaluation (Jervis 2017, 128).

Here, constructive ambiguity plays a key role as openly confronting divergent national prerogatives would risk paralysing action and undermine the sense of unity needed to restore ontological security.²⁴ This leads to a pattern of ad hoc cooperation that favours symbolic reassurance over strategic clarity. I term this the ‘community dilemma’: not cooperating risks ontological angst and potential group disintegration, yet cooperation – launched ad hoc and under conditions of ambiguity to relieve ontological fears – tends to produce outcomes that are less strategic and less efficient than those states might have chosen under different circumstances. In contrast to the security dilemma, where the state must protect itself from others to survive physically, the community dilemma compels the state to further entangle itself with others to endure ontologically.

Figure 2: The Logic of the Community Dilemma

	Security Dilemma	Community Dilemma
Structure:	Material / Anarchy	Normative / Community
Ontology of Actors:	Unitary, functionally undifferentiated, and immune to social influence	Relational, defined by individual and collectively shared norms
Motivation:	To survive physically i.e. maintain material power	To endure ontologically i.e. maintain a stable sense of self
External Challenge	Physical threat	Identity dread
		
Logic of Response	Behaviour to protect physical security likely reciprocated by other states leading to unintended military conflict.	Behaviour to safeguard collective identity likely leading to cooperation for its intrinsic value but inviting institutional ambiguities and inefficiencies

²⁴ Constructive ambiguity refers to the deliberate vagueness in collective commitments or policy framing, allowing states to bypass contentious strategic deliberation in order to preserve unity and launch cooperation swiftly (Jegen and Mérand 2014; Heisbourg 2000).

Community dilemmas are presumably a rare phenomenon in international relations. They presuppose that the interaction between states does not take place in a Hobbesian state of anarchy, but in a Kantian context of perpetual peace (Kant 1983; Hobbes 2008).²⁵ Moreover, the community dilemma requires states to have integrated to an extent that their collective identity is so deeply ingrained that stable group norms are essential for their individual sense of stability and continuity.

To date, it appears that the EU is the only example of such a deep community structure. How and why the EU has emerged as the medium through which the 'European community of fate' is expressed is contingent and subject of debate (Adler and Barnett 1998). Historical research has shown that ideals of pan-Europeanism long predate the catastrophic wars of the early 20th century, which provided the impetus for political integration that eventually culminated in the EU.²⁶ Such analyses however also suggest that there is nothing natural for the EU to have taken on that role. For example, Kiran Patel's (2020) work documents how the EU successfully surpassed other institutions such as the Western European Union (WEU) and the Council of Europe over the course of the 20th century, establishing itself as the primary channel for European identity formation (Patel and Kaiser 2018; Patel 2020).

The end of the Cold War and the Maastricht Treaty then provided the backdrop for Europeans to form a densely knit security community. (Jones and Menon 2019, 172; Wæver 1998). During this period, the EU expanded its post-sovereign system of governance, massively extended diffuse reciprocity arrangements through the Single Market and the Schengen Agreement and introduced a wide range of supranational institutions reinforcing the idea of a borderless community (European citizenship, common currency etc.). On the one hand, this leads to more contestation of the project as it becomes more visible and politicised – academically known as the end of the 'permissive consensus' (Cheneval and Nicolaidis 2017, 18). On the other hand, numerous ensuing crises have not led to disintegration of the Union, but overall, to its expansion and deepening (with the notable exception of Brexit).²⁷

It is important to note that the increasing integration of the European security community is not just a marginal development that has no bearing on transatlantic security cooperation. Rather, it is a central feature that is all too often neglected in analyses. NATO's institutional purpose and cultural underpinning are rather different from those of the EU. NATO is best understood as a traditional military alliance focused on collective defence (Sayle 2019, 50). Its founding purpose was narrowly defined, namely in Lord Ismay's words 'to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down' (Lundestad 1998, 37; 2018, 169).²⁸ However, it was never driven by a teleological mission to unite the old and new continents politically and culturally into an 'ever-closer union'. NATO's weaker normative foundations were evident in the admission of Portugal,

²⁵ This assumes that structural contexts shaping the interactions of states can vary across time and space from anarchy to community.

²⁶ Historians have traced early ideas of European unity back to the Carolingian dynasty in the 8th century and the 'Mozarabic Chronicle' which first mentions the term 'Europeans' in the context of the battle of Tours. The idea of a United States of Europe is often traced to Victor Hugo's speech at the International Peace Congress in Paris in 1849 (Dawson 2002, 15; Pagden 2002, 176).

²⁷ Maastricht however also gives rise to what many perceive to be the EU project's internal contradictions most notably of having a single currency without a state (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006).

²⁸ Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay was NATO's first Secretary General. NATO, *NATO Declassified: Lord Ismay*, https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/declassified_137930.htm.

Spain, and Greece as members while they were still fully-fledged autocracies. In contrast, the EU swiftly accepted these countries following their democratic transitions, largely disregarding whether their accession was economically viable for the Union (Tsoukalis 2023).²⁹ Common norms and a shared identity thus played a far more dominant role in the EU, whereas geostrategic considerations remained paramount in NATO.

That said, NATO stands out as the strongest military alliance in world history. Its integrated command structure is unique and reflects a deeper level of military integration than the CSDP, which relies on national commands. Nonetheless, this institutional structure is primarily the result of strategic necessity and US hegemony during the Cold War, rather than shared identity. It is precisely NATO's higher level of military functionality that distinguishes it from the CSDP, whose logic is rooted more in social identity than in operational capacity. NATO documents typically serve a clear strategic purpose, often with material implications for defence spending and force structure, and are usually classified (NATO Official, 2024; Senior EEAS Official, 2024). By contrast, CSDP strategy documents are not embedded in similarly rigid frameworks and are shaped by looser coordination, serving a more symbolic function and involving less operational secrecy (Mälksoo 2016). Importantly, however, NATO's more strategic institutional approach does not equate to a closer community structure, even if that may seem counterintuitive. The key difference lies in their origins: NATO emerged from strategic necessity after WWII, whereas the CSDP largely developed as a means of consolidating the EU's political identity and demonstrating its capacity for action, enabled by a pre-existing institutional infrastructure that already provided for Europe's security.

NATO therefore only fulfils a little more than the minimum requirements of a security community. In SIT terms, it displays much lower 'entitativity' or "groupness" than the EU (Gaffney and Hogg 2023, 7). The term refers to the presence of sharp group boundaries, similarity and interdependence, a common destiny, shared goals and clear norms among group members (ibid.; Campbell 1958, 16; Lickel et al. 2000, 226). The group structure being dominated by the US as "first among equals", makes deep social identification more difficult. In addition, the perception of similarity and interdependence is lower because NATO covers a larger geographical and cultural space. Its two members boasting the strongest armies are the US and Turkey, whose politico-cultural disparities have increasingly mirrored their geographical separation of almost 10 000 kilometres. Against this background it is remarkable that NATO has grown strong enough to endure after the Cold War, when its common enemy and main purpose – the Soviet Union – had disappeared (Thies 2009; Sloan 2016; Schuette 2021; Sarotte 2022).

This brief discussion underlines how the EU constitutes a distinct group within the broader Atlantic alliance or 'the West'. Importantly this European core group stands out not only for its internal community structure but also for a distinct outlook on the world, which affects relations with outsiders as well as internal dynamics. Arguably, the cultural identity of Europeans has been shaped as much by the demarcation from societies outside the West as from those within, particularly the USA (Nicolaidis and Howse 2002; Smith 2005; Manners 2006). Thus, to fully grasp

²⁹ NATO fulfils the requirements of a loosely coupled security community in the sense that it is a transnational regional where members do not expect bellicose activities from other members and consistently practice self-restraint – except Turkey/Greece perhaps (Adler and Barnett 1998, 30).

the social dynamics that characterise the EU core group, one needs to go beyond the ways in which its members relate to each other internally, as embodied in the concept of *security community*. What distinguishes the EU from other communities with regards to a shared ‘Weltanschauung’ is that member states have increasingly adopted a *post-heroic* vision of international politics, which is key to understanding the peculiar nature of CSDP.

German historian Herfried Münkler (2015) has revitalised the notion of the post-heroic to showcase the evolution of political violence in Europe in recent history (Münkler 2015, 9).³⁰ According to Münkler (2015), post-heroic societies have internalised the view that actors in international politics possess a natural preference for peace or at least the peaceful resolution of conflicts. In Hegelian terms, those who look at the world through a post-heroic lens will also get a peaceful smile back (ibid.). Such societies differ from those with a *heroic-belligerent* view who tend to see the world littered with conflict and threats that need to be countered. Post-heroic actors instead embrace a fairly unexpansive interpretation of liberalism and a notion of leadership that is defined by a need for collective achievement and shared accountability (Helferich 2023b, 88). The dominant view in post-heroic societies is that patience and pacific measures are considered the best ways to resolve conflict.³¹ When indeed intervention cannot be avoided, it is conducted in limited ways with the crucial goal of avoiding human casualties (Scheipers 2014).

The reason for that is that post-heroic societies “suffer” from Lyotard’s ‘post-modern condition’ (Lyotard 1984). In essence they have lost faith in grand narratives about heroic sacrifice for the nation and instead casualties in war are predominantly framed as victims of the powerful rather than martyrs for the greater good especially as conflict endures.³² According to Münkler (2015), two decisive factors determine the transformation of heroic into post-heroic societies. The first is a decline in material capabilities to wage war, including a reduced demographic reproduction rate. The second is the diminishing significance of a religious patriotic ideology (Münkler 2015, 204).³³ The former is a material requisite to be able to engage in heroic sacrifice, the latter provides the ideological incentive to act heroically.³⁴ Both factors have been strongly in retreat in Europe which makes it increasingly difficult for governments to demand heroic sacrifice necessary to project military power, according to this view (ibid.).

As is to be expected, there is variation in how strongly the post-heroic ethos is expressed across European actors, including the UK, France, and Germany. However, these are differences of degree, not of kind – something that becomes particularly evident when comparing Western

³⁰ The term ‘post-heroic’ was also coined by Edward Luttwak (1995), though his usage has been criticised for taking an overly essentialist approach. Here the term is employed as an ideal type to describe broader attitudinal shifts in European strategic culture. For a critical reflection on the analytical sensitivities this entails, see the conclusion (Luttwak 1995; Frisk 2018).

³¹ In German, this tendency toward inertia reflects the notion of *Aussitzen* – ‘waiting or sitting it out’. (Jankowski 2015).

³² Walter Laqueur (2004) has described this as the ‘new vulnerabilities’ of Western societies, which increasingly struggle to assert themselves in asymmetric warfare against terrorist groups (Laqueur 2004, 450; Helferich 2021, 5).

³³ A 2018 Pew study found that religion in Western Europe was strongly associated with nationalist sentiment and that Europeans are (much) less religious than Americans. Half of Americans (53%) stated that religion was ‘very important’ in their lives, compared to a median of just 11% of adults in Western Europe. Among Christians, the gap is even wider – two-thirds of US Christians (68%) stated religion was very important to them, compared to a median of 14% of Christians in the 15 Western European countries surveyed (Pew Research Center 2018, 47).

³⁴ ‘As the “hero’s death” follows a different social logic than “exchange”, it requires a guiding religious principle or a political religion in order to be able to demand or motivate it if necessary’ (Münkler 2015, 204).

Europe to other societies, most notably the United States. The American historical experience has fostered a contrasting ethos, grounded in the notion of peace through (military) strength – not strength through peace (Nicolaidis 2005). Especially in relation to political religion and patriotism, the United States represents a markedly different case (Frejka and Westoff 2008, 22; Pew Research Center 2018, 47). Chris Patten (2006) denotes distinctive notions of heroism in the US such as American exceptionalism rooted in the myth of “manifest destiny” that portrays Americans as “the chosen people” – the “shining city on the hill” to defend freedom and democracy (Patten 2006, 9). Unlike in Europe, political culture in the US reflects a distinct mix of religion and nationalism what Robert Bellah (1967) terms ‘civil religion’. It denotes a non-sectarian quasi-religious faith in American culture where sacred symbols are drawn from national history (Bellah 1967, 3). This is reflected for instance in the sacred status of the US Constitution and Bill of Rights as well as iterations such as “God Bless America” – the dominant formula to end presidential speeches since WWII. Derived from the ‘politics of the sacred’ is a tendency toward a Manichean worldview, in which global affairs are often framed as a struggle between good and evil – with the latter seen as something to be resisted, outlawed or eliminated (Squiers 2018, 20; Coyne 2022, 17).

Western Europe instead has increasingly banned religion from politics. The most notable example is laïcité in France, but also the decision not to refer to Europe’s Christian-Judaic heritage in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty. Instead Lisbon evokes the European community’s broader humanist roots in the Preamble (De France 2021; Nicolaidis 2005). In any case, notions of “the outlaw” that can be expelled or done away with runs counter to the European post-war experience and geography.³⁵ In addition, the post-heroic ethos drives a tendency to recognise one’s own ‘smallness’ and seek engagement even with the pariahs of international society rather than containment short of war. Against this background it is not surprising that capital punishment has vanished from the European continent (except Belarus).³⁶

Consequently, though, Europeans are more constrained than the US to act internationally by a reflex to first question what they should do rather than what they can do given their power.³⁷ Perhaps this is best illustrated by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk’s remarks during a recent Ukraine summit in London. There he stated: ‘The paradox is that 500 million Europeans are asking 300 million Americans to defend them against 140 million Russians. We must rely on ourselves, fully aware of our potential and with confidence that we are a global power’. Furthermore, he said: ‘Europe, together with Ukraine, has twice as many fighter jets as Russia, and in terms of professional soldiers, our advantage over Russia is clear. The issue is not numbers but a lack of belief in our own strength’.³⁸ Needless to say, these are reductive ideal types, crude in many ways. However, their relevance to EU defence is evident and was highlighted in numerous interviews where such cultural disparities were mentioned as an important backdrop to transformations in CSDP.

³⁵ Because in the European historical memory it has been deeply ingrained that any ‘war to end all wars’ (as in “the war on terror”) is a chimera that will only lead to more suffering.

³⁶ In this context, Donald Trump announced in his March 2025 state of the Union address that criminals who murder a police man will face a mandatory death penalty.

³⁷ I am grateful to Oliver De France for our conversations on this point.

³⁸ Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, *Historic Summit in London – Western Leaders Stand Together for Security and Ukraine*, 2 March 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/historic-summit-in-london--western-leaders-stand-together-for-security-and-ukraine>.

To conclude, the notion of the post-heroic community grappling with a community dilemma overarches the conceptual framework of this thesis. It allows the core argument to be restated in more analytical terms. EU defence integration is the result of a post-heroic security community experiencing a community dilemma that pushes individual states to integrate in defence to overcome ontological crisis. With these concepts in mind, the NATO/CSDP conundrum appears somewhat less paradoxical, as this thesis seeks to show. First, the persistent ‘capability-expectations gap’ can be understood as the result of defence integration functioning primarily as an anxiety-control mechanism – only secondarily concerned with power projection or efficiency gains (Hill 1993). While CSDP may not represent outright power avoidance, projecting military force is subordinate to the imperative of community maintenance. Second, NATO/CSDP overlap emerges as the product of ad hoc integration driven by ontological security concerns. Institutions are modelled on NATO templates but reinterpreted through a post-heroic lens, with emphasis placed on civilian crisis response rather than traditional warfighting roles. Third, the recurring paranoia about transatlantic decoupling appears less paradoxical when one recognises that NATO and the CSDP serve different purposes for distinct communities – the former primarily material, the latter ontological.

In sum, this leads to situation where the two institutions are caught in the crossfire of geopolitical interests and European identity construction. At such moments, Europe’s failure to take the perspective of those outside the community – particularly the United States – can lead to friction. Yet this is typically not driven by strategic intent, but by the implicit effects of community-bound thinking. Nonetheless, in the absence of ontological crisis, the enduring material interest in NATO’s hard security guarantees remains more salient than the ideal of European community-building. This helps explain why CSDP has largely progressed in an ad hoc fashion and often misaligned with capability requirements.

3.0 Institution-Building in EU Defence: Theoretical Approaches

The following literature review outlines the epistemological and ontological foundations of the thesis's analytical perspective – what can be termed a *thin constructivist* or *modernist constructivist* approach (Checkel 1999; Checkel and Moravcsik 2001; Wendt 1999). It embraces a constructivist ontology of actors and the social construction of knowledge. However, it deviates from a typical constructivist approach in that it fixes actors' attributes at a given point in order to engage in causal analysis. In a first step, I outline three metatheoretical positions such as *materialism*, *choice-theoretic rationalism* and *constructivism* to show where a modernist constructivist approach fits. In a second step, I rely on these three metaphysical positions to classify existing explanations of EU defence which serve as competing hypotheses. In that way the chapter sets the ground for a more detailed outline of the proposed theoretical framework of this thesis in chapter 3.

3.1 Mapping Meta-Theoretical Divisions

Scholarship of EU defence integration can be divided across metatheoretical cleavages, which have affected not only the content of the truth claims provided, but also the validity associated with them. However, the dividing lines are by no means clear-cut, but a matter of degree. The first cleavage in this regard relates to how one conceptualises actors and their interests ontologically. Therein, the clearest differentiation can be drawn between materialism and constructivism as metaphysical positions. It is from these positions that different social theories and paradigms derive, such as social constructivism, institutionalism and realism as IR theories. As such, I take realism to be at its core about materialism – the notion that states respond to material incentives, needs and power regardless of perception or interpretation (Hurd 2008). In contrast, all strands of constructivism converge on an ontology that conceives the social world as 'intersubjectively and collectively meaningful structures and processes' (Adler 2013, 9). In a constructivist's world, 'material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded' (Wendt 1995, 73). What states want is therefore predominantly a result of social relations.

The philosophical view of rationalism cannot simply be placed between materialism and constructivism because it relates to both. Here, rationalism is treated as instrumentalism, i.e. the idea that states pursue individual gains (relative or absolute) by calculating costs and benefits. Rationalism is often (wrongly) equated with materialism and seen as the opposite of constructivism (Hurd 2008). The argument is that materialists express costs-benefit calculations in material terms whereas constructivists reject them altogether. Yet, both conceptualisations are misleading. First, constructivist theorising does consider instrumental behaviour but views instrumental reasoning merely as one axiom.³⁹ For constructivists using rationalism as a starting point for reasoning is (typically) considered to be less revealing than focussing on deeper sociological processes. Second, materialist approaches (usually) also assign a secondary role to instrumental behaviour. Material perspectives, such as neorealism, for instance, view outcomes as pre-determined by material changes to the extent that the study of actors' intentions is seen as epiphenomenal or unimportant (Waltz 1979; Posen 2006, 165). In that sense both paradigms are not fundamentally based on rationalism but incorporate it to varying degrees.

³⁹ The term axiom is defined as a premise or starting point for reasoning.

By contrast, there are IR theories that put instrumentalism at the centre of their research programmes, often bracketing ontological issues. I shall label them under the term *choice-theoretic rationalism*. Approaches rooted in that meta-theoretical category, such as neo-liberal institutionalism conceive of actors' interests as pre-social, but they do not necessarily reduce preferences to material interests.⁴⁰ Choice-theoretic approaches differ from materialism and constructivism in that they are fundamentally based on instrumentalism as the starting point for argumentation. Their point of departure is that actors are self-interested utility maximisers and that they choose options 'on the basis of a consistent (transitive) preference ranking; if A is preferred to B and B to C, A should also be preferred to C' (Guzzini 2000, 163). Choice-theoretic accounts are thus structured around arguments about how actors operate as they try to maximise fixed preferences under a set of constraints (Barnett 2019, 195). Although argumentation for such theorists starts from the rational axiom, this does not mean that more constructivist vignettes cannot also be incorporated. Neofunctionalism, for example, which relies on unintended spillover effects to explain European integration, assumes that actors act instrumentally. However, it also assumes that over time their cost-benefit calculations are altered due to changing institutional expectations resulting from cooperation in the past (Risse 2005). As such, rational and constructivist ideas are combined, with instrumental reasoning serving as the guiding force (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021).

A second dividing line concerns epistemology, which relates to how we can comprehend and explain the world(s) out there. A first commonality between materialism and constructivism is that both follow an epistemology that assumes that there is a world out there and that it can be empirically measured and analysed (Manners 2002a, 13). This already differentiates them from other metatheories such as critical theory or post-modernism, which centre around the contested nature of knowledge production. Unlike postmodernism, critical theory or idealism, which 'take the world only as it can be imagined or talked about', constructivists accept that not all truth claims have the same epistemic value and consequently there is some foundation for inter-subjective knowledge (Adler 2013).

The main difference between materialism and constructivism in epistemological terms is where they fall on the spectrum of positivism and post-positivism. Positivist methodology is grounded in the belief that facts and values can be separated, that there are regularities in the social and the natural world and that empirical validation or falsification is the hallmark of enquiry (Smith et al. 1996, 16). Materialists in that regard usually embrace an objective positivist epistemology assuming researchers are capable of identifying so-called 'covering laws' that govern the social world across time and space (Hempel 1942, 35; Waltz 1979, 6). Constructivists, on the other hand, embrace an inter-subjective epistemology (Patomaki and Wight 2000, 225). They posit that cause and effect are not neatly separable as agents and structures are co-constitutive to a point that truth claims are always spatio-temporally limited (Jackson 2016, 73). Therefore, constructivists are critical of the assumption that theories can or should be testable in a natural science sense. Instead, truth claims are considered valid if the method of knowledge production has been applied reliably and when the claims are intersubjectively comprehensible based on the analysed data.

⁴⁰Liberal intergovernmentalism occupies a somewhat odd ontological middle ground: it is constructivist in treating interests as idea-driven, yet materialist in grounding those ideas primarily in economic terms.

However, within the constructivist camp in IR, several currents have developed, which take middle-ground positions on a number of the issues noted above (Adler 2013). In line, with this research tradition, I follow an approach which has been called modernist or thin constructivism (Checkel 1999, 546; Wendt 1999, 47). The terms describe a strand that is more open to causal explanations, which are “testable” in a quasi-positivist sense. For modernist constructivists, the embrace of a positivist strategy, however, is an analytical rather than an ontological choice. Specifically, this pragmatic stance serves to invite more theoretical cross-fertilisation than radical constructivist approaches (ibid.; Patomaki and Wight 2000, 223). Nonetheless, also the modernist strand regards interpretation of social artifacts as an intrinsic part of social science. Moreover, even if it is possible to grasp social reality’s ‘minimalist foundations’ through cause-effect relationships, it assumes that ‘theories are far from being true pictures of the world’ (Adler 2013, 9).⁴¹

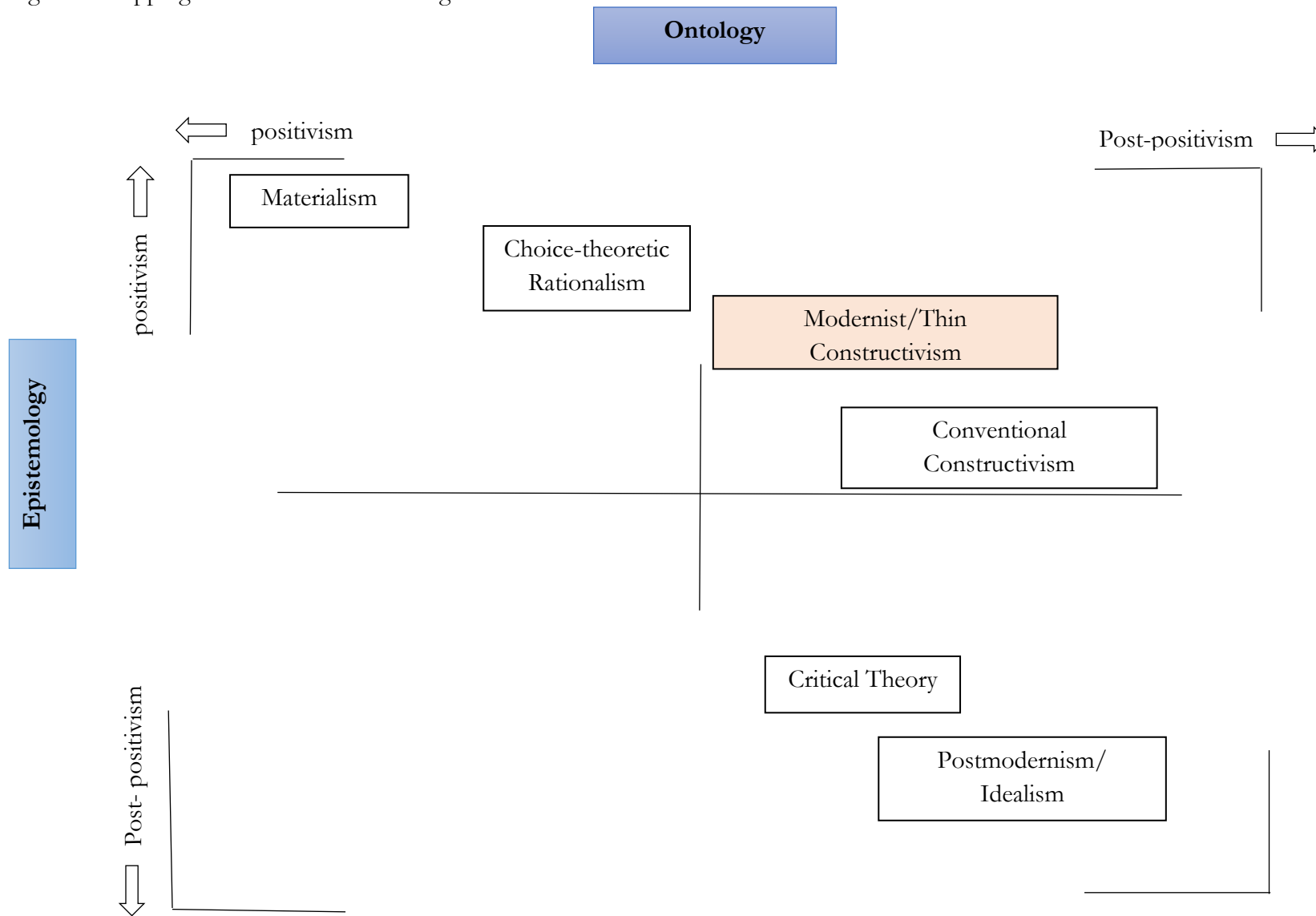
While Ontological Security Studies (OSS) is most commonly associated with interpretivist and post-positivist approaches due to its emphasis on identity, narratives, and meaning-making (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008), this thesis adopts OS in line with the logic of modernist constructivism. That is, it treats OS as an analytically useful concept to explore how actors respond to crises of self-identity, without making strong epistemological claims about the inaccessibility of meaning or rejecting causal inference. The goal is not to reconstruct actors’ internal experiences in a thick interpretivist sense, but to identify patterns of behaviour that correlate with institutional responses to perceived ontological crises. In this way, OS is employed to formulate causally plausible explanations about the relationship between collective self-understanding and policy outcomes, consistent with the pragmatist ethos of modernist/thin constructivism (Checkel 1999; Patomaki and Wight 2000). This position echoes Wendt’s resolution of the ontology/epistemology tension in *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), where he argues that a constructivist ontology – emphasising the social construction of reality – can be paired with a positivist epistemology that seeks to explain observable regularities. The use of OS in this thesis is therefore methodological rather than metaphysical, aligned with the broader epistemological stance of the research project.

In the field of EU defence, constructivist approaches that systematically generate testable observations across cases are lacking. Existing scholarship has often been method-driven rather than problem-driven, at the expense of careful empirical analysis (Howorth and Menon 2009). While some have modelled EU defence integration as an exclusively strategic exchange, others have strictly emphasised the constitutive effects of institutions (ibid.). Whereas the former approaches tend to make substantive claims that often infer motives from outcomes, the latter typically rejects substantive theorising. Several scholars have identified this problem and suggested ways to overcome the divide in this arena. Unfortunately, however, these methodological recommendations have hardly been put into practice, especially beyond article length (Meyer and Strickmann 2011, 67). Applying the lens of OS (which is typically employed within interpretivist frameworks) through a loosely causal research design aims to fill this paradigmatic gap. What is novel, in this sense, is not just the epistemological approach to applying OS but also its application to the thematic area of defence integration, as OS is usually applied to explain dynamics of conflict rather than cooperation (Browning and Joenniemi 2017). In doing so, I aim to generate new insights into the NATO/CSDP relationship while refining OS as an explanatory framework.

⁴¹ The modernist/thin strand is broadly consistent with a scientific realist epistemology, insofar as it treats socially constructed facts as amenable to systematic empirical investigation through theory-driven explanation.

The theory outlined in Chapter 1 aligns with a modernist-constructivist approach in several respects. It assumes that preferences are shaped by both material and social realities. However, rather than problematising these preferences in the typical constructivist sense, it analytically freezes them at a fixed point in time, as is common in choice-theoretic approaches. This is an analytical, not an ontological, decision – made to allow for the separation of cause and effect necessary for causal explanation. Unlike rationalist models, however, the approach recognises the constitutive effects of institutions and the possibility of non-rational agency. While it does not centre on long-term socialisation processes, it focuses on analytically relevant instances of social interaction to trace their effects. These analytical choices serve as a pragmatic bridge between paradigms, enabling insightful explanations of empirical phenomena. In this sense, rather than adhering rigidly to one paradigm, the approach combines ontological and epistemological perspectives in a way that supports careful empirical analysis and theory refinement. Figure 3 illustrates where the approach is situated along the ontology/epistemology and positivism/post-positivism spectrum.

Figure 3: Mapping Meta-Theoretical Cleavages



Before outlining the explanatory approach in more detail, it is helpful to show how institution-building in EU defence has been studied and explained so far. The discussion serves to illustrate the dichotomisation of the field, which has so far struggled to explain when EU defence integration is more likely and why the policy domain has continuously fallen short of its ambitions.

3.2 Existing Explanations of EU defence

The EU's ongoing "maturation" into a defence community has proven to be a real challenge for scholars in the field of European integration and IR (Maurer, Raube, and Whitman 2024). This is partly because for most of the 20th century theorists sought to explain the absence of defence integration in the EU (Ojanen 2006, 58). Across theoretical camps, scholars were united in predicting that integration in security and defence would be unlikely in the absence of an existential physical threat.⁴² With the sudden emergence of ESDP in the late 1990s, these theoretical assumptions had to be abruptly modified. However, scholars came to rather different conclusions about the nature of the project and its underlying motivations. Jolyon Howorth (2014) therefore suggested that each case of EU defence integration was historically too unique to allow for substantive theoretical claims across cases. As a result, neither of the dominant schools of IR nor European integration – taken in isolation – could resolve the puzzle alone (Howorth 2014c, 191). Similarly, Forsberg (2007) concluded that the 'little theoretical work that exists on European defence either pre-dates the emergence of the ESDP or does not attempt to contribute to explanatory theorising' (Forsberg 2007, 2). While these notions are often still evoked today, such statements do not give enough credit to the work that has been done in recent years. By now European defence cooperation has been studied through grand theories of IR, regional integration theory as well as scholarly work in the fields of strategic studies and negotiation theory. Nonetheless, the field is still fragmented, and few conclusive insights have been established. While constructivists have been largely unable to generate testable observations across cases, more substantive theorising usually reaches overly "grand" conclusions, which are not in line with (rather obvious) empirical observations about the CSDP (Howorth 2012, 448).

In the following, the existing approaches are explained on the basis of the above-mentioned metatheoretical classifications. As the objective of this study is to contribute to theories of cooperation in security and defence, the section confines itself to the most relevant approaches to the research question. These are (1) neorealism, or material-power-based accounts, (2) neoliberal institutionalism, or choice-theoretic functionalist approaches, and (3) constructivism, or social-relational explanations. The aim is to gain as many explanatory insights as possible, rather than simply refuting the competing theory. The guiding question is how would the main research programmes explain the cases under scrutiny; what factors do they focus on, and what causal mechanisms do they generate?

⁴² In brief, realism treated security and defence as part of states' *raison d'être* which they are unwilling to bargain away; liberal-intergovernmentalism suggested that integration in high politics would not amount to much, except in the unlikely event that national interests converge across states and even neo-functionalism, which predicts that spill-over effects will lead to closer integration assumed that this will take place in de-politicised areas of "low politics" rather than in security and defence.

3.3 Neorealism: Material Capabilities and Physical Threat

Neorealism is a broad and multifaceted paradigm and some of its main proponents have come to opposing conclusions about the drivers and purpose of CSDP. While approaches united under the term range from defensive (e.g. Tang 2010) to offensive (e.g., Mearsheimer 2014) to neoclassical (e.g., Rose 1998) variants, all strands share basic common assumptions.⁴³ As such, neorealists posit that actors' motivations are determined by the structure of the international system, which in turn is a function of the distribution of material capabilities within an anarchical configuration of states. Furthermore, the relative position of an individual state in that system induces its security preferences to either maintain or increase its power. As institutions are thought to reflect the existing international power structure, it is usually assumed that when that structure changes, institutions must change accordingly for them to survive (Pickworth 2011).

Neorealist accounts of EU defence cooperation draw inferences by combining ideas about the international and the European state system (Posen 2006; Jones 2007; Rosato 2011). They converge on the view that CSDP is the result of changes in the international system, after the end of the Cold War produced a shift from bipolarity to unipolarity. When the US emerged as the uncontested hegemon, European states invested in CSDP as an attempt to 'balance' the hegemon by seeking ways to project power abroad autonomously (Posen 2006, 150). An additional factor which Jones (2007) derives from the composition of the European state system is that EU cooperation allowed European states to 'bind Germany and ensure long-term peace on the continent' (Jones 2007, 11). The logic of balancing has a long and distinguished history in the study of international security. Accordingly, weaker states support each other because strong states represent a threat, which results in the emergence of balances (Waltz 1979; Walt 1987).⁴⁴ Based on this reading, certain European states would thus feel threatened by the US, Germany and also Russia which provides the main incentive for them to integrate their defences and develop a new grand strategy.

While these narratives appear insightful at first, neorealist interpretations of CSDP have been sharply criticised. This is partly due to how theorists adapted their framework when earlier predictions about the absence of an EU defence capacity proved wrong. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, realist scholar John Mearsheimer and others (1990) famously predicted that European states would return to nationalist politics of the past and even war as soon as bipolarity ended (Mearsheimer 1990, 5; Waltz 2000). The fact that the same conceptual tools initially used to predict conflict were later repurposed to explain cooperation sparked criticism. Moreover, the adversarial logic at the heart of neorealism did not align with the empirical record. Not only were traditional balancing behaviours not directly observable, but European governments continued to emphasise NATO as their primary security guarantor.⁴⁵

⁴³ This review focuses on neorealist and neoclassical variants, as classical realism has played a limited role in explaining CSDP integration. While foundational for the realist tradition, classical realism centres on prudence, human nature, and the tragic character of politics, and its application to EU defence has largely taken the form of normative assessments. These typically question the EU's strategic culture, moral claims, or capacity for power political agency, rather than offering causal explanations of institutional integration (Rynning 2013; Hyde-Price 2012; Rynning 2011).

⁴⁴ 'Balancing means the creation or aggregation of military power through internal mobilisation or the forging of alliances ... Thus, balancing requires that states target their military hardware at each other in preparation for a potential war' (Schweller 2004, 166).

⁴⁵ Theoretically, it remains underspecified why states like France and the UK sought to balance the US but bind Germany, when both posed a threat. Why was CSDP needed, given existing EU frameworks and the fact that Germany had reunified nine years before?

In response, some theorists sought to refine balance-of-power-theory introducing the notion of “soft balancing”. Paul (2005) defines soft-balancing as ‘constraining US power by other (diplomatic and institutional) means’ – not military power (Paul 2005, 59). States would resort to soft-balancing under conditions that render hard balancing impossible, such as unipolarity, globalisation, and the difficulty of turning economic power into military might (Howorth and Menon 2009, 730). As one of the main proponents of this view, Robert Art (2004) argued that the UK and France especially were keen ‘to enhance their political influence within the transatlantic alliance through soft balancing, but not to challenge America’s military hegemony with hard balancing’ (Art 2004, 199; Cladi 2022). While these modifications improve the external validity of the theory, they come at the expense of internal coherence and ‘conceptual stretching’ (Sartori 1970, 57; Weiss 2011, 22). Thus, Brooks and Wohlforth (2005) argue that the broad definitions of balancing behaviour have made the concept overly permissive, rendering it difficult to distinguish soft balancing from normal diplomatic friction (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005, 91).⁴⁶

Given the limits of balance-of-power theory, some neoclassical realist scholars have turned to hegemonic stability theory. This approach is more institutionally oriented with the advantage that deviations from existing power balances need not be interpreted as balancing. Instead, neoclassical realists understand European amendments to the institutional order as a form of insurance against *abandonment* or *entrapment* by the hegemon. (Rose 1998; Posen 2006; Baun and Marek 2019). The “fear of abandonment argument” suggests that the US withdrawal from Europe after the Cold War in favour of a ‘tilt to Asia’ made it necessary for Europeans to provide for their own security. In contrast, “the fear of entrapment argument” claims Europeans were concerned about being ‘dragged...into conflicts in which they have no direct stake’ by the US through NATO (Press-Barnathan 2006, 280; Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010, 415; Baun and Marek 2019). Again, the referent object is the US whose vision on the use of force leads to strategic uncertainty and thus threat. This suggests that faced with strategic uncertainty, Europeans are forced to ‘hedge their security bets’ (Art 2004, 179). To substantiate this argument, scholars would have to show that, from the perspective of European policymakers, NATO has failed to reduce strategic uncertainty, while the CSDP has succeeded – an aspect questioned by both constructivists and some within the realist camp (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010; Blankenship 2023).

In sum, however, realist explanations of CSDP run into one major issue: the CSDP does not seem consequential enough to support any of the balancing or hedging dynamics proposed; it does not significantly alter European power. In recent years, observers have widely agreed that CSDP neither challenges US power nor can substitute for it, already because Europe lacks a unified command and control structure.⁴⁷ Moreover, all major foreign/security decisions are still taken in national capitals and more than 80% of defence procurement occurs outside the EU.⁴⁸ Consequently, what Brooks and Wohlforth (2008) noted remains valid: after 25 years of CSDP cooperation, ‘neither the authority nor the ability to act decisively in Europe’s name exists’ (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 31).

⁴⁶ As Howorth (2014) notes, “if any action by any state which increases that state’s relative power vis-à-vis another one is to be defined as balancing, then...it essentially strips the term of any conceptual or analytical usefulness” (51).

⁴⁷ The EU currently possesses a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) as an embryonic operational headquarter in Brussels to coordinate small-scale military missions, mostly training missions

⁴⁸ In 2021 collaborative EU investment in defence programmes only stood at 18 % highlighting that the ‘EU defence landscape remains fragmented, with cooperation remaining the ‘exception rather than the norm’. European Parliament, *European Defence Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA)*, 2023, 2.

A major issue with the initial wave of realist scholarship on the CSDP is that it inferred motives based on potential future outcomes. Consequently, the CSDP's theoretical potential to rival US power was used as evidence of its underlying motivation, which may not accurately reflect the drivers in the decision-making phase. This ties into a more important methodological problem related to realism's materialist underpinnings namely the role of actors' intentions. For Stephen Walt (2009), state action, such as soft balancing, represents a 'conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to US preferences' (Walt 2009, 104). Implicitly this alludes to a functional approach that could be falsified based on evidence about intentions. Yet, if actors' statements are considered, this is usually not done in a balanced manner, but truth claims mostly centre around anti-American statements, particularly in France, or calls for an ambitious strategic reorientation in parts of the US administration (Jones 2007). Even more problematic are studies that simply infer motives from outcomes. This is usually justified on the basis that 'states and statesmen are not necessarily expected to couch their actions in balancing language' (Posen 2006, 165). As such, scholars infer motives from (selected) changes in capabilities that serve to illustrate strategic rifts. The problem with this methodology is that any progress made by CSDP can be offered as a confirmation of balancing behaviour and thus a vindication of realism.⁴⁹ As actors are marginalised, the only outcome that could falsify realist hypotheses would be the complete unravelling of CSDP – even though, in that case, pre-Cold War predictions could simply be reinvigorated by extending their timeframe (Mérand 2010, 347; Howorth and Menon 2009).⁵⁰

In conclusion, the application of neorealism to CSDP reveals key incompatibilities with its theoretical foundations. From the existing literature it is not possible to predict when a state wants autonomy, when it wants to bind another state (and itself) and how agency is related to the state's relative position in the international system (Weiss 2011, 21). This provides a challenge when it comes to using neorealism as a rival theory. To simplify, I reduce neorealism to its materialist core, which already produces markedly different expectations than those derived from the proposed social identity framework. For defence integration to align with neorealist logic, it would need to reflect European states' fear for their physical security and a desire to maximise military capabilities vis-à-vis the hegemon or other regional powers that threaten their territorial integrity or citizens.

Despite its internal ambiguities, realism offers a cautionary perspective on the structural limits of NATO/CSDP cooperation. It serves as a reminder that reducing European dependence on the United States could diminish Washington's leverage over its allies. However, transatlantic power rivalry is only one possible endpoint and should not be used to infer state motives. While the case of CSDP challenges core assumptions of realism, one possible response is to treat the phenomenon as falling below realism's analytical threshold (Rosato 2011). From this perspective, EU defence would be classified merely as 'noise – something states can afford to pursue during relatively stable and peaceful periods of international politics'.⁵¹ Such a reading preserves realism's relevance in explaining the absence of deeper CSDP cooperation, while also acknowledging its limitations in accounting for the underlying motivations driving policy choices.

⁴⁹ Howorth and Menon (2009) criticise 'it is simply inappropriate to apply a method that infers motive from outcome in defence of a theory whose central claims concern these very motives' (Howorth and Menon 2009, 732).

⁵⁰ Critics have therefore argued that given the problem to falsify realist claims, the theory's protection belt is impenetrable (ibid; Weiss 2011, 22).

⁵¹ I am grateful to Professor Dominic Johnson for providing this perspective (Johnson 2020).

3.4 Choice-Theoretic Rationalism: Economic Costs and Spillover

In the study of European defence cooperation, materialist theories, such as neo-realism, stand in contrast to choice-theoretic accounts rooted in neo-liberal institutionalism. The latter highlights positive-sum reasoning among actors, reducing the centrality of states' fear for survival. The two most widely applied European integration theories that belong to the liberal school of thought are liberal intergovernmentalism and neo-functionalism. Although they are usually defined in contrast to each other, both share common liberal institutional tenets: (1) the recognition of mutual problems by boundedly rational actors motivates collective efforts, and (2) increasing cross-border interaction in Europe encourages more institutional cooperation in less contentious policy areas. However, when it comes to the conceptualisation of the integration process and its drivers, the two theories differ fundamentally.

At the core of neo-functionalism are two notions. First is the logic of *spillover*, which implies that regional policymaking tends to extend from one domain to another (Börzel, Risse, and Wiener 2019, 45). The intuition behind spillover effects is that once actors have solved a particular problem successfully through cooperation, this task/function is likely to become institutionalised. Furthermore, miscalculations due to sovereignty concerns will produce crises, which can only be resolved by delegating more powers to a higher level of supranational authority (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021). Neo-functionalist thinking was inspired in the early days of European cooperation after WWII. In *The Uniting of Europe*, Ernst Haas (1958) argued that cooperation on coal and steel had created pressure to integrate in other economic areas, which led to the creation of *Euratom* and the European Economic Community (EEC).

The second related idea is that integration is understood as a *self-perpetuating process* and not as a static outcome. The approach is transformative not only because it suggests that regional institutions continuously expand, but also because actors' loyalties shift over time (Haas 1958, 16). According to Haas (1958), integration is a process 'whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre, whose institutions demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states' (ibid.; Risse 2005).⁵² Neo-functionalism saw a revival over the 2016-2018 transformation phase in EU defence. In particular, the introduction of the European Defence Fund (EDF), which for the first time allowed the European Commission to use the EU budget to invest in defence R&D, drew theorists' attention.

Pierre Haroche (2019) saw in this a functional spillover from the Commission's economic competences to defence procurement. The argument goes that 'the Commission managed to expand its role by relying on the dysfunctionalities of intergovernmental cooperation, on the functionality of its own instruments and on the functional connection between its own economic competences and the issue of defence industrial cooperation. This offensive spillover allowed the Commission to export supranational governance to the area of defence' (Haroche 2019, 860). Hakansson (2021) shares this assessment further highlighting how the Commission managed to enter this field and outcompete other institutions partly as a result of external events such as Brexit and Trump which he conceptualises as 'exogenous spillover' (Hakansson 2021, 7).

⁵² Later neo-functionalists, however, preferred less ambitious definitions of the integration process that do not touch upon the loyalties of actors and also relativise the notion of automaticity (Lindberg 1963, 6; Schmitter 1970, 847).

These analyses are insightful as they draw attention to the increased role of EU institutions in shaping the integration process. Yet, they stretch the notion of spillover increasingly far. Moreover, they strongly overlap with supranationalist readings which assume EU institutions as key drivers of integration which deviates from the neo-functionalist core.⁵³

Apart from a shared rationalist epistemology, intergovernmentalists disagree with all core assumptions of neo-functionalism, such as spillover effects, shifting loyalties and automaticity in the integration process. Instead, they conceptualise integration as isolated moments of interstate bargaining with the aim of furthering the national interest (Hoffmann 1966). The theory gained popularity in light of the “empty chair crisis”, which paralysed the Community in the 1960s and cast doubts over ever further integration.⁵⁴ It was brought to its seemingly ultimate conclusion by Andrew Moravcsik in *The Choice for Europe* (1998). His liberal-intergovernmentalist approach suggests that major steps in EU integration are best understood as a series of isolated, rational choices by national elites who are informed by the preferences of domestic interest groups (Moravcsik and Nicolaïdis 1999). As such, the most powerful domestic interest groups would compete to influence national preference formation, and the outcomes of these struggles serve as constraints and opportunities for governments in interstate bargaining. The bargaining process in turn is shaped by asymmetrical interdependence between states and the role of institutions in ‘bolstering the credibility of interstate commitments’ (Moravcsik 1998, 18; Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2019, 66).

Two notable studies apply liberal-intergovernmentalism to EU defence (albeit in slightly different ways) relying on the importance of domestic interest formation and bargaining power in their explanations. Daniel Fiott (2019) employs this theory to analyse the establishment of the European Defence Agency (EDA) as well as two EU Directives on defence transfers and procurement. Slightly in a departure from LI predictions, he finds that institution-building in each case was only in part driven by domestic interest groups, here the defence industry. While the views of such representatives informed elite preferences, governments’ desire to cooperate on the EU level was also motivated by an interest to reassert control over national defence production in the face of globalisation (Fiott 2019, 3). Furthermore, Robert Dover (2005) relies on liberal-intergovernmentalism to provide an account of why Britain supported the establishment of ESDP under Blair. Yet, Dover (2005) largely neglects domestic preference formation by focusing only on the ‘national interests as defined by a small group of politicians and officials, within the core executive’ (Dover 2005, 520). Accordingly, ESDP for the UK was driven by a tactical shift ‘to meet a series of short-term EU policy goals’ such as ‘the need to become engaged in European integration’ (ibid.). Both applications of liberal-intergovernmentalism, highlight the limitations of this lens when applied to EU defence. Yet, they agree that states engage in cost-benefit calculations, with military or economic effectiveness as the ultimate driving force, while international organisations have no independent impact on policy outcomes. Broadly speaking, liberal-intergovernmentalism would expect this thesis to find that defence integration took place because the best organised domestic interest groups in the most powerful EU states wanted it primarily, but not exclusively for economic reasons.

⁵³ See Blauberger and Weis (2013) on the Commission’s role in pushing member states to agree to the 2009 defence directives for fear of involvement of the European Court of Justice (Blauberger and Weiss 2013).

⁵⁴ In 1965, Charles De Gaulle refused to join the Council of Ministers due to disputes over agricultural policy.

In sum, choice-theoretic accounts that place instrumental reasoning and efficiency gains at the centre of their analysis have provided valuable insights into European defence integration. Their main shortcoming lies in how defence was incorporated once it was no longer considered a qualitatively distinct policy domain. The relatively few applications of neo-functionalism tend to bracket the original assumption that EU defence was transatlantic in nature and functionally isolated, thereby limiting the applicability of neo-functionalism. Existing accounts fail to show under what conditions endogenous tensions push defence out of a ‘state of stable self-maintenance’, compelling policymakers to cooperate (Schmitter 1970, 844; Ojanen 2006).

Liberal intergovernmentalism faces a similar challenge, having likewise discarded the idea that defence policy is qualitatively different. The theory lacks clarity on when states perceive a sustained surplus of gains over losses sufficient to initiate integration. By focusing on the role of defence-industrial interest groups, scholars have provided testable hypotheses. However, these findings somewhat contradict the proclaimed purpose of EU defence integration – to consolidate the EU’s defence-industrial base. In reality, such consolidation would require some firms to lose out in order to reduce duplication, making it counterintuitive for companies to push governments toward a path that could ultimately lead to their own demise. This would add layers of bureaucracy in exchange for potentially modest EU-level funding.

The empirical issue remains that CSDP integration has mostly been ad hoc and frequently misaligned with security needs. Looking back on 25 years of EU defence cooperation raises the question: if efficiency gains were a primary motivation, why have they materialised in such limited ways? Nonetheless, the roles of national interest groups and EU institutions in driving the integration process provide important causal factors that will be considered as rivals to the proposed theoretical explanation rooted in ontological security. Furthermore, choice-theoretic conceptualisations of the bargaining process between states serve as important contrasts. Their proposed instrumental reasoning, based on clearly defined utility objectives, contrasts with the proposed ontological theory, which emphasises a lack of clearly defined objectives, high levels of ambiguity, and community-oriented behaviour.

3.5 Constructivism: Strategic Culture and Norms

Constructivism is not a substantive theory of International Relations. Rather it should be seen as a school of thought under which a particular set of approaches to international politics can be subsumed. Constructivism’s key characteristic is that it does not take interests for granted, but instead endogenises them by drawing attention to how norms and social identities inform preferences. Drawing on Anthony Giddens’s (1984) *structuration theory*, constructivists regard the structure of CSDP and the agents as mutually constitutive drivers of integration (Giddens 1984). Scholars share an interest in analysing how the interplay of language, norms and role perceptions forge ‘an emerging, peculiarly European, approach to security and defence’ (Howorth 2014c, 209).⁵⁵ Owing to its ontological stance, constructivist scholarship is especially concerned with the study of security governance i.e. day-to-day decision-making in CSDP.

⁵⁵ Conversely, realists often perceive this effort as misguided suggesting there is no special European way of approaching international politics (ibid.).

A second important strand analyses whether and how the different historical experiences of EU countries are converging to form a collective whole. Therein, top-down socialisation processes are mainly reflected in the literature on *Europeanisation* whereas arguments about diffusion processes, from the bottom up, centre around the notion of *strategic culture* (Meyer 2006; Tonra 2018). A key finding of this research is that strategic cultures in Europe have converged over time and that the increasing number of interactions between officials is contributing to a ‘denationalisation’ of defence (Hofmann 2012; Mérand 2010). However, scholars have also pointed to persistent bureaucratic and cultural differences, showing how EU members are still not on the same ‘geostrategic page’ (De France and Witney 2013, 3; Meijer and Brooks 2021).⁵⁶

One problem that has haunted constructivism, as a latecomer to IR, is the way other theorists have pitched their theories against it. A common argumentative strategy is to, firstly, present the research programme as a substantive approach, secondly, extrapolate a general causal statement from it, and finally, juxtapose it to one’s own theory. With regards to the puzzle at hand, one might state, for example: constructivism predicts that ‘beliefs on security issues that are widely held within a state drive the government’s preference formation for institution-building’ (Weiss 2011, 25). The risk here is that one takes an unspecified causal claim from constructivism’s ontological stance to strengthen one’s own theory.⁵⁷ While it is true that security culture and identity form the main explanatory building blocks of constructivism, ‘testing an explanation against constructivism’ as a whole would be a strawman approach that can hardly enrich an explanation. Moreover, the added value of (mainstream) constructivism lies precisely in the fact that it goes beyond monocausal “if-then” assertions by problematising the ability to predict, for example, when a crisis will erupt or when a particular actor or idea will matter.

The answer to this issue is not that constructivist research can only provide context or that it is incommensurable with other theories. Instead, one may refer to the small strand of modernist constructivism, which explicitly formulates substantive statements, while embracing a constructivist ontology. With regard to EU defence, for instance, one may draw on a growing number of explanatory approaches and check if their findings travel further. Specifically, a younger generation of scholars – the so-called ‘second wave’ of CSDP scholarship – has placed itself in the constructivist orbit to explain moments of defence integration (Bickerton, Irondelle, and Menon 2011). These scholars have developed institutional (sociological/discursive) theories as well as theories of identity formation and epistemic communities, which can help to refine one’s hypothesis.

In explaining defence cooperation, not a small amount of constructivist scholarship is based in the literature on *epistemic communities* (Haas 1992, 3).⁵⁸ Scholars of epistemic communities assume that regularly interacting expert groups can socially evolve to represent more than the sum of their parts.

⁵⁶ Due to the lack of common purpose and ambitions, De France and Witney (2013) contend EU defence is characterised by ‘strategic myopia and cacophony’. Based on the strategic documents of the 27 member states, the authors classify countries into: strategists, globalists, localists, abstainers and drifters.

⁵⁷ The appreciation of more detailed insights is often (wrongly) seen as a weakness in IR. In fact, it is precisely the added value that constructivism has delivered, providing more detailed insights than reductive grand theories.

⁵⁸ Related concepts include advocacy and business networks, interpretive communities and argumentative communities, and communities of practice. It is usually assumed that these groups are held together by a shared motivation to achieve specific goals (Drake and Nicolaidis 1992).

Accordingly, the interactions of civil servants can have a significant impact on the outcomes of EU security policy, beyond what one would expect by examining only the initial preferences of member states (Mai'a 2015, 92). In his analysis of ESDP, Howorth (2004) draws on these ideas to show how elites, supported by think tanks, provided Whitehall with ideas that made Tony Blair believe that 'Britain had to cross a European Rubicon' to save NATO (Howorth 2004, 220–22). When the idea of an EU defence policy was finally on the table, it was likeminded epistemic communities in France, the UK and Germany that convinced their national leaders to push through with it. This, however, did not represent a deeper alteration of preferences as in social learning. Instead, Howorth (2004) argues that Blair made a miscalculation by thinking that an autonomous EU capacity would appease the Americans after the Balkan Wars had created tensions within NATO.

In a similar explanation of ESDP, Mérand (2010) emphasises the narrower social dispositions (*habitus*) of domestic actors by drawing on Bourdieu. The author suggests that a small group of civil servants saw in ESDP a solution to a crisis in their social field, which affected them on a personal level. Having long been involved in European foreign/security policy, these elites opted to become policy entrepreneurs in order to preserve the diplomatic and military capital they had accumulated over time (Mérand 2010, 354). Both studies are rich in empirical observations and add important insights into the nature and origins of EU defence. Nevertheless, from a theoretical perspective, the creation of an EU defence capacity appears to be the result of miscalculation and happenstance, with like-minded elites being in the right place at the right time. Yet these and other single case studies offer limited explanatory power when it comes to identifying generalisable conditions that facilitate defence integration.

To conclude, it would be incorrect to suggest that realist hedging strategies, economic incentives from rationalist accounts, and cultural factors highlighted by constructivists played no role in EU defence integration. However, these factors appear secondary, as no single theory sufficiently explains when CSDP integration is more or less likely or why the policy has lagged, as illustrated in Tables 6 and 7. The point is not to dismiss these insights as irrelevant; on the contrary, they provide crucial background knowledge for understanding observed policy-decision in this domain. Indeed, there is a strong case that sovereignty concerns and national prerogatives – emphasised in both realist and liberal accounts – have dominated the past 25 years. Where theorists seem to have erred, however, is in relying too heavily on these propositions to explain moments of integration. In reality, CSDP integration signals interruptions in the usual dynamics of IR. This occurs when a unique constellation of factors enables community-oriented behaviour that is otherwise foreclosed.

Judging by the historical trajectory of the CSDP, EU defence policy has not primarily been driven by traditional motivators such as physical security concerns or economic gains. In the post-Cold War era, the absence of a significant material threat helps explain the CSDP's limited strategic scope. Furthermore, even in the face of Russia's initial imperial resurgence following the annexation of Crimea and the first Trump presidency, European states largely continued to prioritise NATO over meaningful EU defence integration. However, this historical pattern is now under pressure. Three years into Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine – and amid renewed uncertainty over the future of US commitments – the strategic permissiveness that characterised the 'post-Wall era' has eroded. EU member states are increasingly being forced to reconcile their community-based approach to defence with the realities of hard power politics. While it remains to be seen whether this will fundamentally alter the CSDP's underlying logic, the current moment

introduces unprecedented tensions between ontological reassurance and material necessity. Building on the emerging field of Ontological Security Studies (OSS), the following section outlines the analytical framework in more detail, defining its epistemological foundations and linking its theoretical wagers to existing work in political psychology.

Table 6: Overview of Explanatory Approaches

Metaphysical Position	Theoretical framework	Dominant Causal Variables	Causal Mechanisms <i>EU defence due to:</i>	Shortcomings	Literature
Materialism	Neo-realism	Distribution of Power in the international and European state systems	...states' desire to (soft)-balance against the hegemon and/or other overwhelmingly powerful states	- EU states emphasise cooperation with NATO and US, not competition - CSDP neither capable of substituting nor rivalling US power	(Posen 2004; Jones and Menon 2019; Rosato 2011; Art 2004; Paul 2005; Hyde-Price 2012)
	Neo-classical Realism (plus hegemonic stability theory)	Changes in the security landscape lead to fears of abandonment or fears of entrapment	...states' desire to mitigate physical security threats influenced by perceptions of the hegemon's strategic commitments	- CSDP integration misaligned with security events and needs - lack of credible threat of abandonment or entrapment	(Posen 2006; Press-Barnathan 2006; Rose 1998; Blankenship 2023)
Rationalism – Choice theoretic Functionalism	(Liberal)-Intergovernmentalism	Domestic preferences of most powerful EU states	...states' desire to create institutions and lock-in international cooperation, driven by the interests of domestic interest groups	- weakly organised defence interest groups on EU level - CSDP inefficiencies and limited economic benefits of existing EU defence initiatives	(Fiott 2019; Dover 2005; Weiss 2011; Calcara 2019; Moravcsik 2003)
	Neo-functionalism (including elements of supranationalism)	Functional and institutional pressures to integrate based on previous integration decisions	...EU institutions' ability to exploit spillover effects that enable institutional entrepreneurship	- defence largely insulated from other policy areas - still limited role for EU institutions in European defence	(Haroche 2019; Hakansson 2021; Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 2012; Risse 2005)
	Rationalism (other)	Transaction costs derived from various costs-benefit calculations e.g. economic, military, sovereignty costs.	...states' desire to maximise their utility based on careful calculation of costs and benefits given national preferences	- recurrent periods of ad hoc integration lacking behind ambitions - high level of ambiguity / lack of clearly defined CSDP purpose	(Weiss 2011; Blauberger and Weiss 2013; Koppa 2022; Dijkstra 2013)
Constructivism	Epistemic communities	Network of professionals who share a common set of beliefs, values, knowledge	...European-minded technical elites and their ability to convince national leaders to integrate in defence	- defence still dominated by national executives - lacks deeper explanation of CSDP purpose	(Howorth 2004; Mérand 2010; Mai'a 2015; Deschaux-Dutard 2020)
	Sociological (other)	various ideological/social-ideational motivations e.g. party ideologies, Europeanisation, convergence of strategic cultures	...ideational change or convergence opens previously closed avenues for cooperation	- prevailing strategic cacophony - national sovereignty concerns continue to dominate	(Hofmann 2012; 2013; Meyer 2005; Tonra 2018; Maurer, Whitman, and Wright 2023)

Table 7: Proposed Theory in Context

Metaphysical Position	Theoretical framework	Dominant Causal Variable	Causal Mechanism	Literature
Constructivism (modernist)	Inter-disciplinary insights from Ontological Security Studies & Social Identity Theory	Ontological security crises resulting from disruptions in the internal-psychological and social-relational sources of stability in core EU states' self-identity	Defence integration to safeguard the community, enhance ingroup relations and restore a positive sense of self and progress	(Greve 2018; Mitzen 2006b; Steele 2008; Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010; Bickerton, Irondelle, and Menon 2011; Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002)

4.0 Ontological Security and Social Identity: A Systematic Approach to Community and the Self

A challenge of constructivist theorising is to reconcile structure and agency – as distinct levels of analysis. It was Alexander Wendt's (1987) well-known critique that IR theories have strongly relied on explanations that are either exclusively rooted in individualism – thus rejecting the 'explanatory importance of irreducible and potentially unobservable social structures' – or structuralism bracketing practical reason and consciousness that can account for human intentionality and action (Wendt 1987, 356). The issue is that 'if the properties of states and system structures are both thought to be causally relevant to events in the international system, and if those properties are somehow interrelated, then theoretical understandings of both those units are necessary to explain state action' (Wendt, 1987, 366)⁵⁹. Each dimension explains a distinct set of causal powers and interests broadly classified as social or intrinsic ones (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 173; Giddens 1984, 25). In order to build a constructivist theory in IR then one requires at least two elements:

1. A model of the internal organisational properties of states.
2. A model of the social structure in which they are embedded, including its organising principles, reproduction requirements and how it emerged historically (Wendt 1987, 370).

Although synthesising actors and structures may seem straightforward in theory, its practical application often involves trade-offs where one takes precedence over the other (Lebow 2008, 2). Nevertheless, Wendt's (1987) notion of structure and agency provides a valuable framework for anchoring one's own theoretical perspective. This shall be done against the background of existing OS accounts exploring how they have conceptualised states' internal properties and their interplay with social and material structure.

4.1 Properties of States Pursuing Ontological Security

The specific intuition behind ontological security is that all social actors feel the need for a stable sense of self to get by and realise a sense of agency in the world. 'We need to experience ourselves as whole and continuous in time, as "being" and not constantly "becoming" in order to be able to act' (Mitzen and Larson 2017, 2). Ontological security thus describes a stable mental state (or social existence) derived from a sense of continuity, order and stability, which individuals strive for in order to avoid anxiety (Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2018).

Ontological insecurity instead denotes a state of disruption in which the 'self has lost its anchor for the definition of its identity and, consequently, its ability to sustain a narrative and answer questions about doing, acting, and being' (Rumelili 2015, 58). If an event occurs that is not consistent with the meaning and self-perception of an individual, this will threaten their sense of self and the future (Kinnvall 2004, 746; Zarakol 2010, 6). This can trigger an ontological crisis i.e., a situation in which aspects of the social and physical world are destabilised to a point that self-narratives are called into question and routines can no longer be sustained. Giddens (1991) suggests that such 'critical situations' are 'radical disjunctions of an unpredictable kind..., situations that threaten or destroy

⁵⁹ 'Thus society is not the unconditioned creation of human agency (voluntarism), but neither does it exist independently of it (reification). And individual action neither completely determines (individualism) nor is completely determined by (determinism) social forms' (Wendt, 1987, 362).

the certitudes of institutionalised routines' (Giddens 1984, 61). To counter them, states seek to reduce anxiety by altering or reasserting routines while invoking comfortable narratives about their self-identity and the future (Giddens 1991, 3; Steele 2021, 12).

In mainstream IR, seeking security primarily means to repel violence and protect the integrity of state borders. Scholars variously refer to this type of security as material or physical (Wæver 1998, 81; Manners 2002a, 8). By material, they usually refer to the interest in maintaining military or economic power and protecting citizens from physical harm (Rumelili 2015, 54). The pursuit of ontological security (security-as-being) differs from the pursuit of material security (security-as-survival) in at least two ways (ibid.): First, ontological crises are constructed at a higher level and require interaction and discourse to become salient, whereas material insecurity becomes rather self-evident when individuals or groups are confronted with violence or their access to resources is threatened. Second, the pursuit of ontological security often happens semi-consciously, whereas the pursuit of material security is generally treated as an 'ongoing, intentional endeavour that consciously guides state choices' (Mitzen and Larson 2017, 3).

The existing literature on OS thus provides important properties of states as agents. However, it remains largely silent on structure in which states find themselves while pursuing ontological security. As a result, researchers have often taken one of two approaches: either they have applied state properties derived from OS without consideration of structural factors, or they relied on the standard understanding of structure in IR, namely Hobbesian anarchy (Lebow 2016, 22–24).⁶⁰ The former reflects Brent Steele's (2008) approach, who employs an explanatory framework that focuses on the internal properties of states, without explicit reference to structure. Steele (2008) identifies the notion of 'shame' as a key factor which can affect states' sense of ontological security. Shame produces a deep feeling of insecurity – 'it is a temporary but radical severance of a state's sense of self' (Steele 2008, 3). Consistently ignored threats to ontological security produce shame which can compel states to 'recognise how its actions were (or could be) incongruent with its sense of self-identity'. Experiencing a sense of shame is therefore necessary for a state to confront its 'disrupted self-visions and therefore regain ontological security' (ibid; Eberle and Handl 2020; Subotic 2018).

Steele's (2008) work reflects foundational assumptions about state action in OSS, yet the author departs from Giddens's (1991) commitments in framing states as rather independent from external structures (Steele 2008, 45). According to Steele (2008), states are 'rational egoists' who 'base their egoism not upon (independent and exogenous) material structures but upon self-identity needs'.⁶¹ This understanding excludes the possibility that ontological needs may overlap among like-minded states and result in collective action. My concept of *community angst* builds on Steele's (2008) notion of *shame*, which arises when a state perceives an incongruence between its practices and its self-identity. However, my concept diverges in considering that such perceptions can be shared among states, thereby serving as a motivation for collective action (Mitzen 2006a; 2018). In this sense, *community angst* refers to a shared sense of anxiety rooted in perceived collective identity misalignment, which can prompt coordinated efforts to restore ontological security.

⁶⁰ The Hobbesian view in IR suggests that the international system is characterised by a state of anarchy, where the absence of a central authority leads to a perpetual state of military competition and conflict among states.

⁶¹ Steele (2008) comes to that conclusion after tracing NATO's intervention in Kosovo back to individual ontological needs rather than a shared collective ethos. Additional OS factors he outlines are 'honour' and 'humanitarian' concerns.

The findings of this work also challenge Steele's (2008) assumption that the pursuit of OS is necessarily rational and conscious, a view that has been dominant in OSS. Steele (2008) argues that actions aimed at restoring OS are rational because 'such behaviour must have made sense to the state agents who decided upon that course of action at the time' (Steele 2008, 45). However, actors' ability to associate goals with a particular decision does not necessarily make that decision rational. In fact, this understanding of rationality contradicts Giddens's (1991) view that OS is pursued implicitly, as opposed to the conscious pursuit of material security. According to Giddens (1991), who draws on Freud and Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety as existential dread, 'anxiety depends fundamentally on unconscious operations' (Giddens 1991, 45; Krickel-Choi 2022, 6). In line with this I find that the pursuit of OS is usually not guided by logical reasoning but influenced by emotions, biases and mythologies (Barthes 1957). Indeed, it is doubtful that leaders are reflective enough to consciously judge that current events are challenging their biographical narratives and social routines, requiring decisions that prioritise anxiety control over utility maximisation.

In remaining loyal to Giddens's (1991) commitments, I expect that states' pursuit of OS is characterised by what Robert Jervis (2017) called 'irrational cognitive consistency' (Jervis 2017, 128–30). It refers to the avoidance of value-trade-offs in order to 'purchase psychological harmony' (ibid.). Scholars have found that the pursuit of OS often comes at the price of reduced utility or even physical security. This likely occurs because, in times of ontological crisis, executives prioritise comforting values that align their self-perception with their biographical narrative (Della Sala 2020; Eberle and Handl 2020). However, they establish their priorities by default, neglecting conflicts among values, which frequently leads to ambiguities and inefficient outcomes (Lebow 2008, 25). Jervis (2017) writes that 'belief systems often display overkill' and that 'when a person believes that a policy contributes to one value, he is likely to believe that it also contributes to several other values, even though there is no reason why the world should be constructed in such a way' (Jervis 2017, 129)⁶². Thus, in their pursuit of OS individuals may prioritise a comforting value while unconsciously disregarding contrasting values, or they may hold the belief that conflicting values can be reconciled even when there is no logical basis for doing so. This differentiation is analytically important because it sets certain expectations for concepts and mechanisms to be considered in line with an OS ontology. It suggests that utility maximising behaviour where evidence is carefully balanced at all times is less likely to be driven by ontological security needs.

Jennifer Mitzen's (2006) seminal article "Ontological Security in World Politics" explicitly applies OS to how states act under the structure of anarchy. Both Mitzen (2006) and Steel (2008) converge on a key finding that states 'pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence' (Steele 2008, 2; Mitzen 2006, 352). Mitzen (2006) illustrates this through the example of prolonged conflict, arguing that states may prioritise certainty in such situations because ending conflict would challenge the role understandings that the belligerents have developed over time.⁶³ She identifies an *appropriative moment*, 'where both states

⁶² Jervis (201) provides the example of people who favoured a nuclear test-ban treaty believed that testing created a serious medical danger, was a source of international tension but would not lead to major weapon improvements. Yet, nothing in logic or experience suggests that such a relationship should hold (Jervis 2017, 129).

⁶³ As such, 'the attachment dynamics of ontological security-seeking thus turn the security dilemma's link between uncertainty and conflict on its head, suggesting that conflict can be caused not by uncertainty but by the certainty such relationships offer their participants' (Mitzen 2006b, 342–243).

take on the identity that is embodied in the competitive routines and therefore become attached to the competition as an end in itself' (Mitzen 2006b, 360). In doing so, she offers an alternative explanation for prolonged conflicts, diverging from the mechanism typically described in the traditional security dilemma (Tang 2009, 593). While realists argue that uncertainty regarding the opponent's intentions hinders states from breaking free from ongoing conflict, Mitzen's (2006) OS approach suggests an intriguing proposition: states might not seek to escape dilemmatic conflict because, over time, this conflictual relationship provides certainty of self to a point that 'the entrenched security dilemma becomes a type of collective identity' (ibid.).

Maintaining certainty of social roles adds a second important state property for theory building in addition to Steele's (2008) notion of shame. It highlights how changes in the role understandings of states with which one has a vested emotional relationship can trigger uncertainty and fear. Therefore, to comprehend a state's ontological needs, researchers must go beyond identifying specific aspects of an actor's biography that prompt anxiety; they must also consider the significance of relationships with others, where abrupt or radical changes can provoke ontological fear (Eberle and Handl 2020; Mälksoo 2016). Overall, these foundational works in IR offer valuable insights by applying OS to specific cases and uncovering findings that challenge conventional understandings of material security and power. However, it is important to note that most OS scholars have tended to focus on conflict under conditions of anarchy. What happens, though, if OS is applied not to war but to deep forms of cooperation, aligned with a more Kantian perspective of international relations?

4.2 The Organising Principles of the Community Dilemma

The Kantian understanding of IR suggests that international cooperation and peaceful relations among states are indeed possible, and that the pursuit of peace and prosperity is a shared interest of states (Kant 1939, 21). Accordingly, international institutions and norms play a crucial role in regulating state behaviour and promoting cooperation. Although long contested in the IR discipline, this is now a well-established fact. It is derived from one of the most robust empirical "laws" in IR namely that democracies do not go to war with each other (democratic peace theory) rooted in the Kantian idea of perpetual peace (Barkawi and Laffey 2001). The dominant explanation suggests that the reason why democracies do not fight each other is because they perceive each other as peaceful and as sharing the same kinds of non-violent domestic norms and values (Hayes 2012). It follows that as states recognise each other's similarities they cooperate with each other and form communities which are maintained by institutions that govern these interactions and create shared expectations (Risse 1996, 371). These norms regulate the interactions of group members, reflect democratic values and resemble domestic decision-making norms (Schimmelfennig 2003, 7). However, rather than merely serving as a premise for action, norms and values can become constitutive of how states understand themselves (Katzenstein 1996). A theory that relies on such a structure of collectivism and cooperation thus replaces anarchy and self-help with community and norms, which makes any description of structure more context dependent. Whereas the effects of anarchy are thought to be the same across time and space, the influence of ingrained community norms on state action requires first a deconstruction of those norms and how they originated (Meijer 2024; Wrangham 2019; Johnson and Fowler 2011). More generally, we may ask what role does OS play in the constitution and maintenance of security communities?

The EU represents the deepest form of international cooperation to date, where states ‘harbour no concerns about physical harm from one another’ and have even agreed – to a limited degree – to pool sovereignty over the use of force (Adler and Barnett 1998; Wæver 2005; Greve 2018). As an extreme case it serves well to explore how the pursuit of OS can drive cooperation. Patricia Greve (2018) explored the role of OS in maintaining security communities and found an obvious link between the two. Members of a security community maintain ‘dependable expectations of peaceful change’, rooted in mutual trust and a sense of “we-ness”. It follows that members of a security community feel ontologically secure in their collective identity when they experience stability and ‘certainty of being’ as part of the community (Greve 2018, 860).⁶⁴ At the example of the EU, Greve (2018) then draws attention to the fact that community integration can undermine individual member’s OS as it puts their national sovereignty into question. If the differences of member states are not recognised by the community this could erode trust and group cohesion (ibid.). In doing so the author highlights the conflictual relationship between individual and group identity from an OS perspective (Della Sala 2020).

However, Greve (2018) does not address the other end of the spectrum: the intersection of individual and group OS concerns, and how shared identity threats can affect the wider community. In other words, what happens when states appropriate a certain script of friendship to which they have become so attached that group cohesion becomes an ontological need? There seems no reason why the core properties of a security community could not become so ingrained in state identity that any threat to it creates uncertainty and fear, triggering community-oriented behaviour (Berenskoetter 2007; Koschut and Oelsner 2014).

The logic would be similar as in Mitzen’s (2006) ontological security dilemma; however, in this case, it demonstrates the deepening of cooperation within a Kantian security community in crisis, rather than continued conflict among belligerents under Hobbesian anarchy. Just as prolonged conflict can become so entrenched that its continuation provides certainty of being, the entrenched role expectations of security community members can offer a similar certainty of self, preventing actors from radically updating their beliefs in the face of conflictual behaviour. Rather than breaking apart, they reinforce cooperative behaviour for the sake of maintaining certainty of self as members of a cohesive and benevolent security community.⁶⁵ Table 8 shows how the two logics seem to go hand in hand, the only difference being the structural context of friendship/community vs enmity.

⁶⁴ Greve (2018) suggests ‘members of a security community could thus be understood to be in a state of physical asecurity (harbouring no concerns about physical harm from one another); and ontological security (experiencing stability and “certainty of being” as part of the community)’ (Greve 2018, 859).

⁶⁵ Under conditions of community, each party comes to know itself through routines of friendship, and it becomes cognitively and affectively difficult to relate ends and means without those routines as a baseline. Breaking with them is fraught with ontological fear (see Mitzen 2006, 362).

Table 8: Seeking Ontological Security Under Conditions of Enmity vs Community

	Structural Context	spontaneous friendly behaviour	spontaneous adversarial behaviour	Outcome
<i>Mitzen's (2006) Ontological Security Dilemma</i>	<i>Enmity:</i> Attached to adversarial expectations / roles	Ontological Insecurity (OIS)	Ontological Security (OS)	Conflict as an end in itself
<i>Proposed Community Dilemma</i>	<i>Friendship/ Community:</i> Attached to friendly expectations / roles	Ontological Security (OS)	Ontological Insecurity (OIS)	Cooperation as an end itself

Although the psychological microprocesses underlying these dynamics require further research, theoretically, it seems plausible that states cooperate just to maintain certainty of self, both at the individual and group level. What is required is that states have internalised the community ethos into their core national identity to an extent that their security of being depends on it. This, however, can create a dilemma between the desire to pursue narrow national interests and the need to safeguard the community through forms of self-affirming cooperation aimed at countering the ontological challenge.

This *community dilemma* represents an inverted dynamic of the security dilemma in international relations. To reiterate, the security dilemma suggests that when one state increases its physical security through military strength, other states begin to fear for their own security because they do not know whether this state intends to use its growing military for offensive purposes or not (Herz 1950; Booth and Wheeler 2008). As a result, security-enhancing measures can lead to tension, escalation or conflict and an outcome that neither party really wants. By contrast, the community dilemma is not based on the logic of anarchy, but on the implications of existing within a deep-reaching security community. If we assume that states have integrated to such an extent that their ontological stability crucially depends on being bound to other states within a given group, it becomes plausible that they reform or deepen institutional ties primarily to safeguard the community, at least temporarily disregarding national prerogatives and outcome efficiency. However, since such cooperation is pursued implicitly as a means of anxiety control, it often results in institutional designs that states would not have intentionally proposed on utility-maximising grounds. Unlike in the security dilemma, where state sovereignty and integrity must be guarded to survive physically, in the community dilemma sovereignty must be pooled for the community to endure ontologically.

If this line of reasoning is correct, a theory of EU integration would need to identify the conditions under which an ontological crisis erupts within this community. Before diving deeper into the specific conditions that trigger such crises in the EU, a brief parenthesis is necessary with regards to the micro-processes that guide OS seeking behaviour.

4.3 Mechanisms and Micro-Processes Driving OS Seeking Behaviour

The primary goal of this thesis is to establish the constitutive conditions for EU defence integration, whereas the examination of specific micro-processes is secondary. Nevertheless, since the analytical framework is rooted in a specific ontology of actors and power, its explanatory mechanisms should broadly align with that ontology (Guzzini 1999, 447). Informed by seminal works, I have preliminarily identified three conditions of ontological angst underpinning EU defence integration. First, the internal properties of the group, where *core states experience community angst*. Second, the internal relationships among core members, where *a core state fears exclusion*. Third, the external relationships between the core and significant others outside the community, where *core states feel estrangement from the US*. The presence of these variables gives rise to ontological crisis, which is countered by ad hoc CSDP integration.

To better understand the behavioural mechanisms that guide OS-seeking behaviour, a useful starting point is the assumption that the pursuit of OS is normative rather than strategic behaviour. This suggests that decisions underlying defence integration are based on cooperation for non-instrumental purposes – what is often referred to as the *logic of appropriateness* (March and Olsen 1989; Goldmann 2005). The opposite would be the *logic of consequences*, the idea that defence integration is driven by a narrow interest in utility maximisation (see table 5). Identifying the mechanisms that drive state behaviour is thus important for better assessing whether defence integration is rooted in community effects or rationalist self-help behaviour. In the analysis, I will reference these logics and their related mechanisms to explain state behaviour in different cases.

The most common mechanisms underlying the logic of appropriateness are ‘role-playing’ and ‘normative suasion’ (Checkel 2007, 11). Role-playing refers to situations in which ‘agents adopt certain roles because they consider them appropriate in a particular setting’ based on their normative self-conception (ibid.). This comes about without deep reflection and is not driven by persuasion. Normative suasion instead refers to persuasion by other actors and occurs when ‘agents actively and reflectively internalise new understandings of appropriateness’ (Checkel 2007, 13). Role-playing and normative suasion are socially driven which sets them apart from rational strategic calculation – a mechanism that aligns less with OS seeking behaviour. That said, utility maximisation must not be completely absent for the theory to hold, for example, it can serve as an initial catalyst for integrative dynamics. However, ultimately, consequentialist reasoning must give way to normative action in the critical phase of decision-making. Table 9 below provides an overview of these mechanisms as well as conditions under which they are likely to apply based on existing literature (Checkel 2007, 9–14).

Table 9: Mechanisms Underlying Anxiety-Reducing Behaviour

Mechanism	Definition	Likely under following conditions
<u>Logic of Consequence</u>		
Strategic Calculation (<i>only as initial catalyst</i>)	Careful analysis of the costs and benefits of different options, and development of strategies designed to maximise utility while minimising risks	- Agents are confronted with situations involving (a) competition/conflict (b) scarcity of resources (c) interactions with agents outside of community settings (d) social structures that are less formalised and display weaker normative foundations.
<u>Logic of Appropriateness</u>		
Role Playing	Non-calculative acceptance of social roles based on environmental triggers	- Agents are in settings where contact is (a) long and sustained (b) intense (c) of emotional character
Normative Suasion	Internalisation of new understandings of appropriateness based on social persuasion by other agents	- The socialised agent (a) is in a novel and uncertain environment, (b) has few prior ingrained beliefs that are inconsistent with the socialising agent's message, (c) wants to belong to the ingroup of which the socialising agent is part (d) is exposed to principled/emotive communication.

Based on this theoretical understanding, mechanisms associated with the logic of appropriateness should underlie each condition of OS crisis. The empirical analysis will therefore refer to these logics in each case, drawing on the indicators established in Table 9 and Table 5. Next, I will provide a more detailed outline of the proposed OS conditions, which I assume jointly make EU defence integration more likely to occur (Mahoney and Acosta 2022).

4.4. Community Angst – Seeking Cohesion and Progress

The idea of ‘community angst’ suggests that in instances where core identity norms (the EU ethos) are undermined, there arises a feeling of ontological insecurity, which can be alleviated through practices aimed at restoring a positive sense of self i.e., institutional cooperation and reform. Community angst is thus closely related to Steele’s (2008) conception of *shame* and how it triggers OS-seeking behaviour. In both instances biographical narratives are undermined yet, with the slight variation that I assume it is possible for states to share some of these aspects whose undermining can contribute to collective anxiety control. The logic that OS can trigger institution-building can further be derived from Social Identity Theory (SIT), which adds nuance to the mechanism. SIT posits that in-group cooperation comes from the individual’s depersonalisation of self and the taking on of a collective personality (Turner et al. 1987; Johnston 2008, 150). If an ingroup at some point experiences devaluation, individuals coalesce around an archetypical member to maximise the valuation of the in-group. Consequently, we can assume that EU member states who share the collective ethos integrate when they experience ‘community angst’ i.e., ingroup devaluation as a result of an undermined group ethos (Wagoner and Hogg 2016).

There are two implications from this type of theorisation. First, it follows that not all EU members share the ethos to the same degree. Here it is assumed that France and Germany form the community core and thus drive defence integration. The UK for its part has been mostly situated outside of that core, however, in certain historical periods UK governments have also felt a strong belonging to that core sharing its constituent normative features. The majority of other EU countries, however, especially those who have not been founding members are expected to join the integrative effort at a later stage mostly for narrower instrumental purposes. The second implication is that the EU is considered to be a unique “community of fate” for states in the core group which in times of ontological crisis takes precedence over other communities and institutional arrangements. Consequently, EU defence integration is primarily about Europe and the EU, and only secondarily about NATO and the United States. The latter, however, is viewed as the E3’s significant other, with whom maintaining a stable relationship is generally preferred – both for OS reasons (to avoid estrangement) and for strategic interests (the US security umbrella).

The EU’s community ethos refers to the common social norms and ideas of order that the community represents. In the words of Emile Durkheim (1997), ethos refers to the ‘collective conscience’, i.e. the set of shared beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes that act as a unifying force within a group (Durkheim 1997).⁶⁶ As a special kind of group, namely a security community, the EU’s identity is shaped by people’s ‘expectations of peaceful change’ as well as expectations of progress towards the EU (Adler and Barnett 1998).⁶⁷ If these expectations are undermined this poses a threat to the group. What these expectations are and the events that can undermine them is the subject of the subsequent paragraphs.

In brief, EU defence integration is inextricably linked to the EU’s founding credo “never again”. It represents a cultural myth (or meme) that encapsulates the shared ideas of a European past and future on which expectations of peaceful change and progress are based (Helferich 2021b).⁶⁸ As such, the beaches of Normandy, the horrors of Auschwitz, the Battle of Britain, but also the Schuman Declaration, Simone Veil, the Elysée Treaty and Beethoven’s 9th Symphony are summed up in this “cultural unit” of just two words. The constant dissemination and repetition of narratives associated with “never again” shapes the collective identity of Europeans like no other identifier and is thus crucial for the continued existence of the EU as a political order. De Vries (2022) argues that foundational narratives can frame and constrain actors’ strategic choices, thereby ‘co-determining institutional structures’ (De Vries 2022, 3; Lebow 2008, 10–13). For politicians, they can serve to justify past actions, but they also limit the scope for future decisions (Nicolaidis and Howse 2002, 769). In extreme cases and especially in combination with other sources of anxiety, such situations can endanger the community, which then also poses an identity threat to those states for which EU cooperation has become an essential characteristic of the self. In order to understand past decisions to cooperate and future paths of integration, it is crucial to study foundational myths and how they shape EU policy (Bachleitner and Bachleitner 2021).

⁶⁶ In a similar vein Snyder (2018) defines foundational narratives as ‘the collection of connections that citizens and elites make about the nature of a political order’ (cited in De Vries 2022, 3).

⁶⁷ The idea that progress is another important factor that holds security communities together emerged in the course of the work on this research project.

⁶⁸ The term meme is originally rooted in the field of evolutionary anthropology (memetics as opposed to genetics). It describes a unit of condensed ideas which spreads culture through imitation (Dawkins 2016, 258).

This research agenda, however, has only recently gained momentum. For a long time, the study of historical memory as an enabler of EU integration was limited by the assumption that the experience of WWII was so profound that it gave politicians a *carte blanche* to shape European integration with little public scrutiny. This period of the ‘permissive consensus’ ended when successive political crises placed the EU at the centre of national debates, and the project was no longer seen as unquestionable (Tsoukalis 2016). In response, researchers began examining how shared memory frames enable integration during times of crisis (V. A. Schmidt 2020; Hofmann and Mérand 2020; De Vries 2022; Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2018). However, this approach has been criticised for its reductionism. Scholars in political philosophy argue that such soul-searching risks excluding certain voices and undermining the *demoicratic* strength of the European project (Nicolaidis and Pélabay 2008; Cheneval and Nicolaidis 2017). Meanwhile, empiricists have questioned the feasibility of reliably measuring shared sentiments across 27 states as drivers of policy. This critique is valuable as it highlights the limitations of ontological variables and the need to empirically ground assumptions to make them intersubjectively comprehensible.⁶⁹ Therefore, it is crucial to trace variation at the national level to obtain a more nuanced picture.

With this in mind, I shall turn to the question of what expectations of peaceful change and progress are reflected in the *never-again* credo. Under what conditions, then, can these expectations be undermined? The aim is to abstract testable assumptions that can be examined in the analysis of events, which have been said to underlie EU defence integration. Drawing on treaties and discourses in which the EU identity manifests itself, it is argued that there are merely two factors that constitute the basic expectation of peaceful change and progress inside the core EU community:

1. to prevent mass violence in the heart of Europe
2. to work towards an ever-closer Union i.e. preventing EU disintegration

The analysis later shows how these expectations were undermined during transformative periods of CSDP integration, whereas other conflictual periods had a lesser impact on the community’s ontological security and thus triggered different behavioural registers.

4.4.1 Never Again as Community Ethos

Needless to say, there is not just one story about the founding of the European security community, but numerous narratives ‘nested in space and time’ (De Vries 2022, 5; Della Sala 2020). While for Germany and Italy it was the hope of redemption, for France it was national and European sovereignty, for Belgium the cement of national unity, for Portugal and Spain the return to democracy, and for Latvia and Estonia a shield against Russian aggression (ibid.). Notwithstanding the plurality of narratives that characterises any democratic political order, this does not preclude the existence of some common minimalist expectation at the community core. The search for the EU’s ethos usually starts with WWII and the holocaust as the most formative communal experiences in Europe. Unlike other historical events that have impacted European nation states,

⁶⁹ The goal here is not to reify the diverse identity of the EU in a prescriptive way. Rather, it is about describing the ways in which political leaders imagine the EU as a *community of fate* based on shared reference points.

such as colonialism, it is the unique transnational nature of suffering caused by especially WWII that has transcended national boundaries and led to unprecedented emotional entanglements across nation states.⁷⁰ It is this lived experience of pain and suffering that has given rise to the teleological credo of “never again!”, which constitutes the nucleus of the European community, regardless of whether it is voiced as *Nie Wieder Krieg*, *No More War*, *Plus Jamais De Guerre*, *Nunca Jamas Guerra*, *Nooit Meer Oorlog*, or *Aldrig Mere Krig!* (International Federation of Trade Unions 1929).

In contrast to a mere slogan that is deliberately constructed to reach specific gains, this expression carries the emotional weight of a teleological credo. In essence, it is grounded in the belief that a higher cause exists, directing Europeans toward a shared future goal that is fixed *a priori*. To empirically identify such a supreme cause and the future goal towards which Europeans strive, one may turn to the preambles of the founding treaties, which define the purposes of European integration. An analysis of the Rome (1957), Maastricht (1992) and Lisbon Treaties (2007) reveals a consistent pattern reflecting a hierarchy of expectations towards the EU. All preambles either begin or conclude with two types of metaphysical principles. First, there is the idea of strengthening peace in Europe (i.e., preventing conflict); second, the aspiration to work toward an ever-closer Union among the peoples of Europe. These can be seen as the *alpha* and *omega* of the EU, and thus may be said to constitute the core ethos of the European community. Figure 4 provides an overview of the relevant clauses and their location within the preambles.

Figure 4: The EU Ethos as Derived from Treaty Preambles

α – Supreme Cause	Ω – Ultimate End
<i>Humanist inheritance of Europe and new enlightenment, informed by the experience of War and division</i>	<i>Ever closer Union among the peoples of Europe</i>
RESOLVED by thus pooling their resources to preserve and strengthen peace and liberty, and calling upon the other peoples of Europe who share their ideal to join in their efforts (Rome, final clause, final metaphysical principle)	DETERMINED to lay the foundations of an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe (Rome, first clause, first metaphysical principle).
RECALLING the historic importance of the ending of the division of the European continent and the need to create firm bases for the construction of the future Europe (Maastricht, second clause, first metaphysical principle)	RESOLVED to continue the process of creating an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity (Maastricht, antepenultimate clause, final metaphysical principle)
RECALLING the historic importance of the ending of the division of the European continent and the need to create firm bases for the construction of the future Europe (Lisbon, third clause, second metaphysical principle)	RESOLVED to continue the process of creating an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity (Lisbon, antepenultimate clause, final metaphysical principle)

⁷⁰ Dietrich Schwanitz (1999) characterised this shared trauma stating that ‘the human imagination resists imagining what has come to be called the Shoah or Holocaust – the systematic industrial murder of Jews in extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek and Sobibor. As WWII and the Nazi crimes are of such nightmarish dimensions that they defy all reason, thinking about them has taken on religious characteristics’ (Schwanitz 1999, 203).

It is true, therefore, as Judt (2010) notes, that ‘post-war’ is the essence of Europe (Judt 2010).⁷¹ However, more than just a cognitive realisation that everyone is better off if ‘swords’ are turned into ‘ploughs’, the idea of an “ever-closer union” emotively denotes that this is a constant effort which defies the question of an end state (De Vries 2022, 4). As only continuous cooperation and integration via the EU guarantees that ploughs will not be turned into swords again. Hence, it is not surprising that “ever closer union” is the very first clause in the founding Treaty of Rome (1957) and it is a direct complement to the idea of preserving peace. As a mythology, it has united committed Europeans who have defended it against challengers from both within and outside. A particularly illustrative example occurred in 1997 when British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind persistently questioned the end state of European integration during his tour of Germany, only to face public criticism and a diplomatic reprimand from Helmut Kohl, who deemed it unacceptable and discourteous for a British minister to raise such questions (Lever 2017, 167).

From the ethos derive certain expectations, and it is the undermining of these expectations of peaceful change that motivates cooperation in times of ontological crisis. These expectations can be operationalised as an independent variable as follows: If the expectation of preserving peace holds, it follows that any inability to act in the face of mass – particularly ethno-nationalist violence – close to the heart of the European continent will create ontological insecurity by questioning the union’s moral authority. Needless to say, it is hardly possible to define an exact threshold of violence or a precise geographic border that would determine when and where the community experiences anxiety. However, for the purpose of comparing different events, it is sufficient to assume that the more intense the violence, the closer it erupts to the European heartland, and the more unprepared the EU is to respond, the greater the anxiety. Crucially, attacks on the territorial integrity of the EU or its citizens are excluded from this framework, as such events constitute a material security crisis rather than an ontological one. This would likely trigger a different psychological framework and evoke other institutional registers, particularly those of the transatlantic alliance.

Next, I turn to the operationalisation of the second expectation that constitutes the EU’s core ethos – the idea of “ever-closer union,” which speaks to the notion of community cohesion. As such, discourses that directly advocate disunity or challenge the continuation of integration can be expected to create anxiety. Again, it is difficult to predict precisely what must be said, and by whom, for this effect to materialise. However, for analytical purposes, it suffices to establish that such discourses must go beyond standard diplomatic friction and explicitly focus on disintegration or community stagnation. Furthermore, the more radical the argument and the more salient it becomes, the stronger the level of ontological fear among core members is likely to be. On this basis, one may analyse different events in terms of how they affected the ontological security of core member states. The causal logic suggests that events undermining expectations of peaceful change and progress generate community angst, which, in turn, necessitates cooperation to restore ontological security – thereby prompting moves toward defence integration. Table 10 below provides an overview of how the “never-again” myth relates to treaty text and the way these relationships have been operationalised.

⁷¹ In a single sentence one may summarise the EU ethos as follows: The EU is grounded in the teleological humanist idea that European integration is an expanding solidarist endeavour to guarantee peace among its members by practicing multilateralism as an end in itself.

Table 10: Conceptualising and Operationalising Community Angst

<i>Denotation</i>	<i>Connotation</i>			<i>Operationalisation</i>	
Sign	Reference Point	Signified	Expectation (Myth)	Observable Indicators	Operational Logic
NEVER (preventing mass violence)	Past experience / supreme cause	‘...preserve and strengthen peace and liberty’ (Rome); ‘promote peace and security in Europe’ (TEU)	The community is responsible to prevent mass violence and protect the inalienable rights of the human person in Europe.	Inability to act in the face of mass violence in the heart of the (western) European continent	The more intense the violence, the longer the inactivity, and the closer it happens to Europe, the higher the level of community angst
AGAIN (the ever-closer union)	Future end	‘...ever closer Union among the peoples of Europe’; ‘Construction of the future of Europe’ (TFEU; TEU)	The community is ever expanding and has no expiry date or end state; for Europeans it is impossible to fundamentally oppose this process as that means opposing peace and progress.	affective discourses among executives that evoke disunity or disintegration of the EU	The stronger the rhetoric or the disintegrative development, the higher the level of community angst

The above constitutes the minimalist expectations of peaceful change which refers to the core ethos of the EU when it comes to security and defence integration.⁷² Fulfilment of these basic ontological tenets is key for the European project to continue functioning. Needless to say, there are several other expectations towards the EU reflected elsewhere in the preamble of founding treaties. For example, ensuring the rule of law, economic progress, sustainable living etc. It is not unlikely that all of these can create anxieties too, and further research may want to explore the extent to which challenges to these norms have affected institution-building in various domains. However, one may expect that ‘never again’ carries a qualitatively different weight in the EU context, as it pertains to the foundational myth of cooperating on defence to build trust in times of deep uncertainty and division. Indeed, it is important to note that the EU project has undergone substantial change over time. Surely, enlarging the EU to 15 then 28 members, the experience of financial crisis, Brexit, Covid, democratic backsliding etc. have all left their mark. This however does not necessarily alter the minimalist expectation at the community core. An interesting counterfactual question in that regard is to ask if the next EU treaty would display a different ordering of values in its preamble to reflect a changed ethos?

⁷² This table was inspired by Barthes’ (1957) framework of two levels of signification (Barthes 1957).

4.5 The Prodigal Son – Seeking Recognition and Inclusion

The second variable captures a different source of anxiety as a catalyst for defence integration. *Prodigal son* refers to a core member's fear of being left behind by a group that has become hardwired into their national identity. Mitzen (2006) argued 'society must be cognitively stable in order to secure the identities of individuals'; and over time 'individuals will become attached to these stable group identities' (Mitzen 2006b, 352). One important way in which states maintain stability is by routinising their relationships to others. Such inter-societal or inter-state routines help maintain identity coherence, which in turn provides a measure of ontological security (ibid.). When established routines and roles with significant others become strongly disrupted it can trigger uncertainty and fear. In security communities, this can happen, for instance, when a member acts in less cooperative ways than the rest and thus deviates or undermines the group norm (Hohman, Gaffney, and Hogg 2017). Deviation from the expected role thus creates uncertainty and insecurity, which may lead to pro-social behaviour in order to restore certainty of being part of the community (Greve 2018, 859).

The literature on SIT adds further nuance to the mechanism.⁷³ It suggests that members of a community can feel that their self-image and behaviour is problematically incongruent with that of the core group. 'If a real or imagined disjuncture appears between group norms and those of any individual member, the trauma to self-esteem can motivate an actor to reduce this discrepancy through greater conformity' (Johnston 2008, 81; 2001, 500). Put differently, to converge around the core group, a state must feel that their role within that group is problematically uncertain undermining its national self-conception. Conforming behaviour is thus rewarded by the group (back-patting and rapprochement), while non-conforming behaviour is punished (status devaluation and peripheralisation) (ibid.). The role-playing aspect coupled with the implicit nature of wanting to maintain cognitive congruence anchor this variable in an OS ontology.

It should be noted, however, that such behaviour can also be explained by rational choice and strategic calculation, depending on the evidence. In fact, the literature on security communities initially conceptualised group conformity more in line with an instrumental logic (Adler and Barnett 1998, 40; Deutsch 2015, 38). However, the proposed OS theory conflicts with materialist or rational choice mechanisms (see section 4.3). Instead, it suggests that certain important elements of the 'we-dimension' in a relationship remain implicit or submerged, but are nonetheless crucial for integrative dynamics to emerge (Mitzen 2006b, 360). Therefore, for the condition to be present, pro-social mechanisms such as role-playing and normative suasion must ultimately supersede strategic calculations when it comes to wanting to integrate with the core group.

⁷³ These mechanisms echo aspects of consistency theory, understood as 'a class of social psychological theory holding that people are chiefly motivated by a desire to maintain congruence or consistency among their cognitions' American Psychological Association, *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. "Consistency Theory," <https://dictionary.apa.org/consistency-theory>.

4.6 Estrangement – Recognising Similarities and Forging Belonging

The third and final variable relates to how disruptions in relationships with significant others that are not part of the community can lead to OS and defence integration. Jennifer Mitzen's (2006) research shows that significant others are not limited to states with which one has a cooperative relationship. This could also involve conflictual ones. What matters is that these relationships have become emotionally meaningful and routinised to a point that role expectations have become entrenched. However, the level of entrenchment arguably depends on whether states interact within a security community environment or not. Mitzen (2006), on the other hand, makes no distinction in this regard as the author does not consider social structure to form in a way that is powerful enough to alter the effects of anarchy.

Nonetheless findings from SIT indicate that the effect of ontological security should vary depending on whether the source of anxiety is the destabilisation of ingroup or outgroup relations (van Bezouw, van der Toorn, and Becker 2021). As a baseline, within security communities, group relations are of a friendly nature and to a higher degree constitutive of national identity. This leads to the previously outlined effect where a destabilisation in the core group contributes to integrative dynamics due to conformity behaviour (Hohman, Gaffney, and Hogg 2017). The question arises as to what is the effect if the core of the community becomes estranged from a significant other that is part of the outgroup?

Consistent with the OS literature one can expect that also changes in such identity stabilising relationships can trigger ontological instability. Yet, this is lower than if it happens within the ingroup. To answer this question more fully, one may draw from SIT, particularly the notion of *in-group favouritism* (Turner et al. 1987; Wagoner and Hogg 2016). SIT suggests that the extent of perceived differences between the basic characteristics of an in-group and its out-group is a necessary condition to explain how conflictual or cooperative the in-group tends to be (ibid.; Johnston 2008, 199). Furthermore, if an ingroup perceives differences with an outgroup, which is crucial to maintaining a stable sense of self, this can prompt the ingroup to engage in more cooperative behaviour among themselves. In turn, as the ingroup recognises their similarities and engages in more cooperative behaviour, this also alters the relationship with the outgroup making it at least temporarily more contentious. Which emotional relationships with outgroups matter to explain a particular outcome must be determined empirically depending on the policy domain one considers in a given historical period.

In the present case, it has been well-established that any explanation of CSDP needs to encompass the United States and NATO, through which Europeans have organised their security for decades. However, in the constructivist literature the conditions under which the transatlantic relationship matters for EU integration has remained under-theorised. This study finds that EU defence integration tends to occur during periods when the EU core is experiencing 'estrangement' from its significant other across the Atlantic. More precisely, transatlantic division has to exist across new cleavages and constitute an unprecedented 'norm collision' (Kratochvil 2000). As a concept, estrangement has been used in a variety of social science literature (e.g., Marxism, cultural studies), yet here it refers to intergroup relations, in particular identity differentiation between ingroup and outgroup members.

In conventional terms, feeling estranged is defined as having lost former closeness and affection or to render alien, strange or foreign.⁷⁴ In IR estrangement has been defined ‘as a process of deep and enduring dissonance about ideas of order among friendly states’ (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010, 424). Dissonance becomes particularly acute when disagreements challenge fundamental principles for building and maintaining international order, including the use of force. It tends to surface in disputes over the role of common institutions, during negotiations on strategic doctrines, and in crises when friendly states expect one another to honour shared commitments in interpreting and responding to events (*ibid.*). Such dissonance among friends is problematic because shared notions of order and routine are challenged and embedded narratives destabilised, causing ‘an acute form of disorientation’ (*ibid.*; Taylor 1992, 27).

Empirically, the measurement of estrangement creates challenges. These challenges can be resolved, however. This chapter argues that for the European community to integrate, transatlantic division must occur along new cleavages and be normatively unprecedented. Since highs and lows have always characterised transatlantic relations, researchers can easily find moments of diplomatic friction in any period that might appear to confirm dissonance. Avoiding this requires a fine-grained analysis that also accounts for instances of rapprochement. A brief comparative review of historical ruptures in transatlantic relations is therefore necessary, as only against this backdrop can one assess whether later moments of dissonance are truly unprecedented. The question then becomes how the resulting ontological insecurity takes effect and leads to community integration. In other words, what is the actual link between normative clashes with the US and EU defence integration?

In short, estrangement from a significant outgroup member leads ingroup members to recognise their similarities triggering a desire to form closer bonds and revalidate their relationship. This fosters an integrative dynamic based not on careful consideration of institutional costs, but on a heightened sense of collective identity (Turner et al. 1987; Turner 1991; Johnston 2008). This shared identity justifies cooperation in the abstract and makes it an end in itself. In a similar but much more rationalist way, Berenskoetter & Giegerich (2010) have used estrangement in a single case study to explain why Germany invested in ESDP in 1999. They suggest that once estrangement from a befriended other (here the US) has led to deep dissonance, states take one of two options: They either ‘adapt’ by restoring resonance through existing institutional arrangements. Or they choose to ‘emancipate’ by making an investment in an alternative friendship that better reflects their idea of international order resonating with domestic principles (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010, 451). In the German case, the authors identify a process of estrangement that leads to emancipation and results in investment in EU defence. ‘ESDP became an attractive alternative for German decision makers’ because it enabled a more convenient international order (*ibid.*).

The account constitutes an insightful attempt to apply the logic of OS to examine defence integration in a single case study. Yet, it does so in a way that seems inconsistent with the ontology of OS as originally understood. Similar to Steele (2008), the authors conceptualise the alleviation of OS as a rational process. Both, adaptation and emancipation ‘are rational strategies aimed at restoring resonance with a friend without having to abandon domestically valued principles’ (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010, 425).

⁷⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, *OED Online*, s.v. “estranged,”
<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=estranged>

Theoretically, this presents two issues. First there seems to be a mismatch between a latent/implicit stimulus and a calculated/explicit response. In the literature estrangement is typically treated as a latent and emotional process that differs from rational processes of ‘separation’ which are guided by strategic reasoning. The combination of irrational stimuli and rational action thus seems problematic without an intervening process. In addition, the described notions of emancipation and adaption bare strong resemblance to the idea of ‘forum-shopping’ – typically found in choice-theoretic accounts. Therein, individual states carefully balance costs and benefits and then simply ‘choose the venue that serves their national agenda best’ (Hofmann 2019, 887). This logic however makes the pursuit of OS about utility gains rather than self-maintenance to satisfy identity needs. It appears that linking ontological crisis to such rational behaviour overlooks the full potential of this lens.

A final point of contention in this regard relates to the empirical measurement of such rational forms of emancipation. It requires researchers to show how states engage in cost-benefit analyses of competing institutions and how to align them to achieve efficient outcomes. In the authors’ analysis, however, the rationalisation of these trade-offs in Germany is largely inferred from political rhetoric that portrayed ESDP and NATO as complementary. Based on Jervis’s (2017) understanding of irrationality, however, this appears insufficient to demonstrate that actors were not merely seeking psychological harmony by ignoring trade-offs. If the latter were the case, one would expect to find that actors associated multiple positive outcomes with a single policy – outcomes that seem unrelated or even contradictory – which would indicate the presence of irrational cognitive consistency (Jervis 2017, 128).

I shall treat estrangement and the response to it as a predominantly semi-conscious process. As derived from SIT, estrangement suggests that in moments of crisis, identity difference with a significant other prompts members of the ingroup to recognise their similarities and move closer together. This contributes to an integrative dynamic or reinforces existing ones. As the process of separation is implicit, justifications for institution-building within the ingroup should at times be ignorant of value trade-offs. The befriended other – the USA – however, perceives the situation differently and should therefore draw attention to unacknowledged trade-offs. This in turn leads at least temporarily to a more conflictual relationship between in-group and out-group until narratives and routines are aligned with the new institutional reality (Eberle and Handl 2020; Mitzen 2006a).

Adopting this stance assumes that the European security community is not only distinct from the US and the transatlantic alliance, but it also takes precedence in terms of ontological security needs. Importantly, though, defence cooperation within the ingroup does not preclude cooperative efforts with the outgroup later for the simple reason that continuity in this relationship also ensures ontological security. Empirically, then, we should expect a temporary sidelining of the US as the European community initiates defence integration. This is then followed by intensified cooperation with NATO and the US especially as strategic interests in US security guarantees regain dominance.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Given NATO’s distinct history and characteristics, additional theoretical work is necessary to understand the process of institution-building within the transatlantic alliance, for which the present framework may be relevant.

In summary, these three conditions – community angst, fear of marginalisation, and estrangement – are understood as constitutive of an ontological crisis in the EU, which, in turn, serves as the driving force behind defence integration. Together, they reflect the main sources of anxiety identified in the OS and SIT literature, encompassing both the internal psychological dimension of self-identity challenges and the social-relational one situated within a structural context of community (Figure 5). It is proposed that embedding these elements within a single framework provides a valuable tool for investigating CSDP integration. The next step is to apply this framework to three case studies that represent key transformations in EU security and defence cooperation: first, the origins of the CSDP, which began as ESDP (1998–2000); second, the expansion of this policy domain during the Iraq invasion (2003–2005); and finally, the most recently completed transformation, which unfolded in the shadow of Brexit and Donald Trump’s first presidency (2016–2018).

Figure 5: Conditions Underlying an Ontological Security Crisis



PART II

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY FORMATION IN CRISIS

5.0 ESDP: Community in Completion (1998–2000)

The Yugoslav secession wars marked a resurgence of mass violence in Europe not seen since WWII. Caught off guard, the handling of the conflicts not only undermined core European values but also revealed fractures within the transatlantic relationship. At the same time, the establishment of the European Monetary Union (EMU) promised to boost European integration. However, it also generated fears of exclusion between core members within and without the single currency and its institutions. The convergence of these three ontological factors – the anxiety within the European community sparked by especially the Yugoslav wars, the growing estrangement from the US concerning the maintenance of international order, and British apprehensions of being yet again excluded from future European progress – ultimately culminated in an ontological crisis that underlies the historic creation of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

The prelude to ESDP is important, however, in examining how socialisation dynamics and community effects unfolded. The following exposition shall provide context for the later application of the proposed framework. The story of a separate European defence capacity really starts with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing Maastricht Treaty. In combination, they mark a growing desire within Europe to assert greater control over foreign and security affairs (Deighton 2002). As the Cold War thawed, there was widespread belief that liberal democracy had triumphed, and peace dividends could now be reaped, for example, by downsizing armed forces. However, this optimistic outlook was swiftly challenged by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.

The gulf war highlighted not only how ill-equipped European allies were for this sort of crisis response but also that there was hardly any coordination on such matters. Each country had to decide for itself if and how it would join the US-led coalition (Howorth 2014c, 5). These experiences informed the establishment of the *Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)* through the Maastricht treaty in 1992. Interestingly the treaty foreshadowed that defence for Europeans was about much more than projecting power. First mentioned in the Maastricht provision on CFSP was the notion that the Union needed to 'assert its identity on the international scene'. From the beginning, the focus of EU foreign/security integration centred on the political process itself, rather than concrete outcomes. Therefore, CFSP promised in vague terms to cultivate 'the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence'.⁷⁶

However, amidst the Yugoslav secession wars, there was little time for political process. In 1991, Foreign Minister Jacques Poos of Luxembourg had declared, 'this is the hour of Europe and not the hour of the Americans' in what was intended as a heroic declaration of European self-determination (Watt 2012). However, such heroism could hardly resonate with political leaders of an increasingly post-heroic community. The situation took an even worse turn with the Bosnia war in 1992, unleashing violent turmoil within the EU's boundaries. Atrocities including ethnic cleansing, massacres of civilians, and even concentration camps subverted the belief in transcended peace (Caplan 2014).

⁷⁶ European Union, *Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty)*, signed 7 February 1992, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu/sign/eng>.

In both the first and second phase of the secession wars, hopes to demonstrate European soft power swiftly blew apart. The entire civilian toolbox consisting of monitoring missions, sanctions, embargoes, and peace conferences failed to prevent the ensuing barbarism. It is important to note, however, that the Bosnian War challenged the European security community at a nascent stage, beginning before the Maastricht Treaty had entered into force and created the EU. Commission President, Jacques Delors, had stated, for example that the European Community was like ‘an adolescent facing the crisis of an adult... It now only has the weapons of recognition and economic aid. If it were 10 years older, it might be able to impose a military peace-keeping force’ (Drozdiak 1991).⁷⁷ As such Bosnia provides an important prelude to the Kosovo crisis (Caplan 2005).

In the aftermath of the Bosnia war, Europeans intensified their efforts to establish a defence institution that would enable them to jointly “assert their identity” on the international scene. Interestingly, however, NATO initially became the chosen venue, even though it included the US and Turkey as leading non-European actors. At the 1996 ministerial meeting in Berlin, NATO announced the so-called European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI). It would enable European members to utilise NATO assets when the alliance as a whole was not engaged. The mantra was ‘separable but not separate’ to eschew any American fears of European *autonomy*, which would later become the key feature of ESDP (British MoD Official 2023; Senior German Diplomat b, 2023). At the same time, an institution with the term identity in the title hardly evoked ideas of power politics, which echoed with European post-heroism. What is important though is that the EU had no role under ESDI, primarily due to Anglo-American insistence that the EU should not have a role in defence matters. Instead, a seemingly outdated intermediary institution, the Western European Union (WEU) established in 1948, should allow Europeans to manage affairs whenever ESDI would be activated e.g., to handle future crises like the one in Bosnia. The WEU had been a collective defence institution dating back to even before NATO but was superseded by it in 1949 and since then restrained to a weak forum where countries who were members of both the EU and NATO could loosely coordinate policies.⁷⁸ However, it had laid dormant for most of its existence and even Britain described it as ‘skeletal’ and ‘a sickly child’.⁷⁹

Nonetheless, when France and Germany proposed integrating the WEU into the EU to establish an EU defence capacity, Tony Blair vetoed the proposal during the 1997 Amsterdam treaty negotiations. The Labour government, like its predecessors, had initially no desire to cede power over defence to the EU.⁸⁰ It was only after much wrangling that Britain was willing to include the so-called Petersberg peacekeeping tasks in the Amsterdam treaty.⁸¹

⁷⁷ This came after Jacques Delors had called for a more heroic engagement at the outset of the secession wars where he declared, ‘We do not interfere in American affairs. We hope they will have enough respect not to interfere in ours’ (cited in Zielonka 1998, 36).

⁷⁸ The WEU initially arose from the Treaty of Brussels in 1948 and initially provided a collective defence institutions for France, the UK and the Benelux countries to ensure Germany’s peaceful transition. It lay dormant until the 1980s and was transferred to the EU in 1999 until it was abolished in 2011.

⁷⁹ TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, pp. 179, 209. A different note describes the WEU as ‘parasitic on NATO, it is pretty much unloved, and disregarded as a major political force by everyone’ TNA, PREM 49/291, Part 3, p. 32.

⁸⁰ In a confidential note from FCO secretary of State Peter Mandelson to Robin Cook with the PM and Deputy PM Robertson in CC it is stated ‘clearly we are all agreed that there should be no question of conceding to the EU a military or defence competence’ TNA, PREM 49/54, Part 1, p. 68.

⁸¹ The Petersberg Tasks include ‘humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacekeeping’; They were initially set out by the Western European Union in 1992 and then integrated into EU law in 1997 who could now avail itself of the WEU, which later became obsolete, however. Western European Union, *Petersberg Declaration*, June 1992.

This meant that the EU could now avail itself of the WEU and all EU members could take part in the implementation of WEU-led humanitarian and peacekeeping missions. Nonetheless, a separate EU defence capacity was averted and instead a complex institutional web of EU, WEU and NATO created. At the time, however, Blair mainly continued on the traditional British foreign-policy path. The uncomfortable feeling of isolation he experienced at Amsterdam however would linger with Blair and affect Britain's future trajectory in Europe (Senior British Diplomat c, 2023).⁸² After the landmark Franco-British St Malo Declaration in December 1998, the historical breakthrough eventually came in June 1999 when EU states formally established a distinct defence capacity for themselves known as the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). With its various sub-institutions and committees, it would allow the EU to engage in crisis response missions and take decision independent from NATO – at least in theory...

As noted earlier, scholars have since provided a number of arguments to explain this decision. To reiterate briefly, those explanations grounded in materialism (neo-realism & neo-classical realism) argued for an interest in balancing against the US and/or Russia while tying down all too powerful Germany in another joint institution. Scholars working within neo-liberal institutionalist frameworks have countered these interpretations and instead highlighted the functional benefits of such an EU capacity. Such arguments emphasise that Europeans could now choose between different institutions to meet their regional security needs and were not dependent on NATO states like the US or Turkey anymore.

In my analysis of the initial decision-making period, however, neither materialist nor rationalist motivations alone pass the empirical test. The findings instead highlight ontological security concerns as the key driver of a policy where process-oriented thinking trumped interests in effective outcomes or threat reduction in the initial phase. The following chapter identifies the proposed three sources of OS (*community angst, fear of exclusion and estrangement*). Taking into account those latent social dynamics changes the nature of ESDP from a lowest common denominator outcome to a political process that stands out for actors' congruence of sentiments (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021). Acknowledging the shared ontological concerns calls into question explanations that rely on traditional role scripts such as 'British Atlanticism' or 'French Gaullism' which tend to misrepresent the intricate interplay of social processes.

5.1 Britain Left Behind

From 1997 onwards events came thick and fast in Europe with one major international development following the next at a breath-taking pace.⁸³ Tony Blair's landslide election was followed by a sea change in France that led to an uncomfortable cohabitation between Jacques Chirac (centre-right RPR) and Lionel Jospin (socialists PS) in June 1997 and one year later Gerhard

⁸² The experience in Amsterdam played a key role in opening Blair's thinking on EU defence, as interviewees who travelled with him from Amsterdam noted. For that reason, the 1998 Strategic Defence Review did not mention the EU, as thinking was still evolving (Senior British Diplomat c, 2023; British MoD Official 2023).

⁸³ When Tony Blair gets elected in May, the EU is about to embark on a monetary union (€), the Kyoto Protocol and the Ottawa Convention are in the making, Ireland and Britain conclude the Good Friday Agreement, and the NATO-Russia Founding Act coupled with the integration of the Visegrad countries fundamentally reshape East-West relations. As such there is very little continuity in European politics which constitutes a favourable environment for institutional change in international politics.

Schröder defeated Helmut Kohl in Germany, ending a 16-year reign⁸⁴ The pivotal actor in this constellation was Blair and his government's fear of being excluded from the European core in the new millennium (Prodigal Son). Already during the election campaign, John Major had accused Blair of yielding to Brussels out of fear of isolation, in contrast to what the Conservative party would do if elected. This perception was later picked up in scholarly analysis arguing that Britain stopped blockage of EU defence because the government feared it had missed the train on the Euro. Consequently, it tactically chose defence as a policy area to show European commitment (Dover 2005; Lundestad 2018). My analysis broadly supports this argument; however, it differs crucially regarding the social processes that influenced the policy process. Whereas choice-theoretic accounts emphasise reduced transaction costs and efficiency gains as motivators, I highlight how such rationales gave way to community-oriented behaviour in the crucial decision-making phase. This framing changes the very nature of ESDP as a policy of community maintenance and group confirmatory behaviour rather than narrow power maximisation.

Tony Blair campaigned on a promise to realign Britain's relationship with Europe. Days before taking power he stated, 'you cannot underestimate the degree to which we will be going to Europe with a different agenda'.⁸⁵ When Blair entered No. 10, the international agenda presented him with an opportunity to make good on this promise in the face of the British EU Council Presidency and the Cardiff European Council in June 1998. After Amsterdam, Cardiff was the second major international stage where the new Labour government stood in the spotlight. Moreover, in the aftermath of Amsterdam, Blair stated repeatedly that he did not like the brakeman role he played in defence policy which would inform his Cardiff approach (Senior British Diplomat b, 2023; British MoD Official, 2023). A lot of energy is thus invested in the Council Presidency which was seen as an opportunity 'to change the perception of the EU in the UK and the UK in the EU'⁸⁶.

It was these two issues that stood like an iceberg in the way of Labour's sail towards Europe. First, the fact that British electorate was highly sceptical of the EU. This rendered European affairs as an all or nothing game where Blair could only stay afloat if he was domestically perceived to lead on British terms in Europe. That role, however, clashed with the perception on the continent where politicians were highly sceptical of the Labour government's EU commitment for historical reasons but also because of the UK's opt-out of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). In the context of the Cardiff summit, Steven Wall, UK representative to Brussels stated, 'We think (rightfully) that we are as innocent as the day is long. Most of our partners think, on the contrary, that we are as cute as a wagonload of monkeys and all too ready to pull any trick'⁸⁷

⁸⁴ In this unusual constellation of centre-left leaders, Blair, Clinton and Schröder form a group under the banner of the "third way", which stands for a progressive form of social democracy distinct from the centre-right politics of the past. Arguably, this newcomer factor and fluidity coupled with the high density of international issues constitutes a favourable condition for the change that was about to happen in European defence. As such, it creates space for socialisation effects that can open up new policy avenues, which is less likely when incumbents conduct foreign policy based on well-established parameters.

⁸⁵ 'The battles the present Government has fought are not the battles that I will be fighting. I will be fighting for the single market, enlargement, reform of the Common Agriculture Policy, better co-operation on common and foreign security policy. You cannot underestimate the degree to which we will be going to Europe with a different agenda. We will not be going there to bang on about how disgraceful it is that people should receive minimum holiday entitlements' (Hutton, Wintour, and Adonis 1997).

⁸⁶ Blair himself sent a note stating 'our presidency represents our prime opportunity over the next years to strengthen our position in Europe' TNA, PREM 49/61/2, p. 65; TNA, PREM 49/68, Part 4, pp. 58–64.

⁸⁷ TNA, PREM 49/308, Part 12, p. 52.

Despite these challenges, Tony Blair was prepared to square the circle seeking to gain the trust of both constituents. This reflected his genuine personal commitment to Europe and later EU defence, which was confirmed by all interviewed Advisers to the PM. To do so, the aim for the EU Council Presidency was twofold: first winning the trust of European partners by playing the role of the ‘honest broker’ knowing that ‘partners will be judging us primarily by how efficiently and impartially we run the Council’s business and how successfully we can broker compromises on difficult issues’, notably EMU.⁸⁸ This choice of role is interesting because regarding the single currency, the Brits actually had an interest in delaying progress to prepare their own economy for potential EMU entry, which would allow them to be there at the start. Yet instead, they chose potentially costly community-oriented behaviour for the purpose of winning trust.⁸⁹ Second, there were plans to come up with their own policy areas that would resonate with the British public and European elites. The idea was that ‘the EU needs to be seen to be tackling the big issues of the time’ and be closer to citizens.⁹⁰ This led to the brainstorming exercise in Whitehall, including a task force, mentioned in constructivist accounts of ESDP, which emphasise the role of thinktanks and Brussels bureaucrats (epistemic communities) in driving the political process. Both arguments – that ESDP was driven by civil servant entrepreneurs (*constructivism*) or that Blair crossed the European Rubicon for narrow self-interested reasons (*choice-theoretic rationalism*) – are relevant but insufficient.

To begin with, of the policy proposals presented to Blair’s private secretaries, only one is defence-oriented, that of Brussels representative Stephen Wall, who in his paper ‘Redirecting Europe’ bluntly proposed to create an autonomous EU defence capacity. Yet, Wall’s proposal was unique and received hardly any attention because thinking on this issue took place within a very small circle of government. Indeed, ‘foreign policy was firmly in the hands of the Prime Minister’ (Scott 2004; British Adviser to the PM, 2023).⁹¹ Within this close circle was Defence Secretary George Robertson, who, on 12th June – three days before Cardiff – sent a classified brief to the PM that would later play an important role. The document is titled: ‘European Union – A Possible Initiative on Defence’ and commences as follows:

I have been considering whether, as part of our agenda of ensuring that Britain plays a leading role in Europe, there is perhaps scope to seize the initiative on defence (where we are often perceived as backmarkers). I thought you would wish to have the possibility in mind at the Cardiff European Council.⁹²

Robertson – who was initially an opponent of EU defence - explained that the current institutional infrastructure ‘is not a very satisfactory long-term arrangement, either in practical or political terms. Many partners clearly do not regard the current arrangements as meeting their European aspirations’. This was a problem as ‘we are likely to be constantly on the defensive, reinforcing the

⁸⁸ TNA, PREM 49/68, Part 4.

⁸⁹ As Roger Liddle remarked at the time ‘as far as our Continental partners are concerned, we lack authority because we are on the sidelines of the only game in town that matters - the single currency. Given the present level of confusion and uncertainty about the project, some (the Governor of the Bank, for example) see this as an unalloyed advantage. But it is surely a dangerous illusion that Britain can behave like an amused and unconcerned spectator while others make fools of themselves on the field’ TNA, PREM 49/763, Part 1, p. 59.

⁹⁰ TNA, PREM 49/68, Part 4, p. 51.

⁹¹ Instead, domestic issues were often left to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown.

⁹² TNA, PREM 49/291, Part 3, p. 50.

perception that we do not genuinely share the European vision in this area'.⁹³ One notes that the paper hardly spends time on how EU defence would lead to better threat reduction or British power projection. This is brushed over by stating that NATO is 'for hard defence'.⁹⁴ Instead, the tone was oriented towards Britain's role in the European community. Robertson suggested reflecting on radical options but did not advocate for a fully-fledged EU defence capacity by merging the WEU into the EU.

Such an option was first advocated by the inner circle in a joint paper by Robertson and Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook on 14 August 1998, which outlined various solutions to the EU/NATO/WEU equation. Several interviews confirm that those two papers provided the nucleus for rethinking among a small circle of executives who increasingly felt the urge to script a more pro-European role for Britain to keep pace with the integrative momentum (British Adviser to the PM, 2023; Senior British Diplomat a, 2023). At the time of their publication, however, they received little attention by the PM as the aim was still to work within the scope of existing EU competences, that should 'not require new community resources'.⁹⁵ Therefore, Jonathan Powell's agenda called 'Europe for the People', which focused on job-related themes such as employment and social security was in the focus as it was in these policy-areas that Blair had experience – not defence.⁹⁶

The later discovery of defence as a means to remain in the EU core was strongly driven by intertwined community dynamics. These included back-patting, which the government received for demonstrating success and goodwill during the Council Presidency, coupled with fear of losing the just-won momentum as EMU approached in 1999. In response to Cardiff, newspapers across Europe were ablaze with positive news about Blair's effect on the EU. 'Europe has discovered its unity, thanks above all to Tony Blair' and 'the Blair phenomenon has introduced a new ideological factor wrapped in great enthusiasm ... so that today the ideologist is found not in Paris but London'.⁹⁷ They reinforce the view that Britain is en route towards 'the centre of gravity' in Europe where Labour genuinely wanted to be. Moreover, that it could play a lead role in shaping Europe's relations with the world. This was reinforced by the fact that during the UK Presidency the EU concludes a Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) with the US and initiated the transatlantic economic partnership in the context of the EU/US summit in London. Moreover, the first ever China EU meeting takes place. All of these were considered ground-breaking events and, in large part, to Blair's credit.⁹⁸

⁹³ Earlier Robertson instead opposed ESDP: 'The basic question is clear: do we wish the EU to become a defence organisation or not? My answer is no for the reasons you and I have discussed'. TNA, PREM 49/54, Part 1, p. 65.

⁹⁴ Robertson stated, 'The object would be to end interminable institutional wrangling in this area by jumping beyond the status quo and ... reconcile the development of a genuine European defence role with our (and Europe's) vital interest in preserving the transatlantic Alliance and the primacy of NATO for "hard" defence'. TNA, PREM 49/291.

⁹⁵ TNA, PREM 49/68, Part 4, p.29.

⁹⁶ The proposals on "Europe for the people" came from Robin Cook and Jonathan Powell, both sceptical of EU defence at the time. CFSP is only barely mentioned as point 7/8, as part of diffuse ideas such as an early warning system and work on a code of conduct for arms exports. This shines a different light on the assumption that defence was a "natural" area for Labour's EU policy as is often claimed.

⁹⁷ In addition, Chirac describes Blair's speech at the Assemblée Nationale as 'exceptional and truly outstanding', Romani Prodi calls Blair 'a true European' and the German FAZ states that 'Europe's position towards Britain had undergone a real transformation'. TNA, PREM 49/309, Part 1 of 3, p. 65.

⁹⁸ The PM's office notes the first ever EU-China meeting organised by the British Presidency is as 'major progress'. The MRA was signed in 1998 and prepared during the EU/US summit in London. TNA, PREM 49/309 Part 13, p. 71. European Union, *Mutual Recognition Agreement between the European Community and the United States of America*, 1998.

Archival documents indicate that feedback from around Europe was closely monitored by the Prime Minister's Office.⁹⁹ As a result, British feelings of belonging to the ingroup intensify leading to a heightened sense of social identification with the European community.¹⁰⁰ In light of Europe day in May 1998, it is decided that the EU flag should be flown from now on in Parliament square and on government buildings alongside the Union Jack to 'symbolise the fact that our relations with our European partners are close and positive, and that Britain's membership of the EU is a normal and natural state of affairs'.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the Prime Minister in July urges all ministers to 'make every effort to attend EU meetings – Councils, informal Councils and so on' so that the 'momentum and goodwill generated by the Presidency should not be lost'. Overall, there was now the perception that the 'performance over the Presidency ... has transformed the UK's relations with its EU partners', however, that 'we are still to some extent on probation in their eyes'.¹⁰² Such fears of exclusion as the EU entered the new millennium shaped British thinking at the time, soon centring around the introduction of the euro in January 1999.

5.2 Britain Catching Up and Seeking Recognition

As the UK pulls closer to the core, the speed of European monetary integration increases, which heightens fears of losing the gained momentum.¹⁰³ In autumn 1998, months before the showdown of EMU, the cables from Germany, France, and Brussels are dominated by inquiries about whether the single currency would meet its scheduled launch or if delays that the UK implicitly hoped for could be expected. Yet, it becomes evident that all eleven expected countries would join the Euro on time.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, in this period crucial institutional developments were taking place such as the creation of the ECB and its governing board – without British membership, however, despite attempts to get a seat at the table. Indeed, these developments coupled with symbolic statements about a new European solidarity in the Eurozone affected British fears of losing the progress made and being unable to participate in core EU politics in the new millennium. The cognitive link between EMU and the defence initiative was acknowledged and confirmed in various interviews with decision-makers and Advisers. As a diplomat put it 'being out of EMU was in the back of everyone's head when we began developing the defence initiative, but of course it would not have

⁹⁹ TNA, PREM 49/309, Part 1 of 3, p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ Around that time a note on EMU by Blair's closest advisor Jonathan Powell stated. 'We know Britain isolated from the rest of Europe is wrong. We believe it is essential for Britain to be a key player in Europe. We believe it matters economically to our prosperity; and it matters politically to our status and standing. We know that outside of the Euro this position of leadership and strength in Europe is impossible'. TNA, PREM 49/733, Part 11, p. 31.

¹⁰¹ TNA, PREM 47/755, Part 16, p. 39.

¹⁰² TNA, PREM 49/309, Part 13, p. 9.

¹⁰³ The notion of "missing a vehicle" was repeatedly mentioned. For example, in a letter of 100 business elites calling for a more public commitment to the Euro in November 1998, which Blair is afraid to commit to given economic difficulties to prepare the economy for EMU and EU public suspicion TNA, PREM 49/730/1, Part 8, p. 67.

¹⁰⁴ Even opt-out countries like Denmark, with whom the British maintained a close rapport on the matter, began considering joining EMU at that time. The prospects for recovering from the financial crisis appeared increasingly bleak in 1998, prompting opt-out countries to reconsider the single currency. In this period the UK drafted the national changeover plan analysing what the quickest way of joining would be. Yet, this was not going to be easy as convergence criteria (interest rates) were not met, and wrong timing for entry was feared after the disaster of the ERM mechanism in 1993. This dilemma even led to a brief consideration to try to delay EMU, which was however quickly dropped as that would have undermine the wider community effort. TNA, PREM 49/310/1 Part 14, p. 117.

been rational to state this as an argument for EU defence' (Senior British Diplomat b, 2023).¹⁰⁵ The implicit nature of this reasoning further speaks to the absence of a strategic cost-benefit approach. Against this background (and the rising tensions in Kosovo), Blair revisited the briefs of Robertson and Cook. 'The time seemed ripe for a radical 'headline-grabbing' move on Europe.'¹⁰⁶ As such reopening the debate on defence offered a stage for Britain to demonstrate leadership and launch a second game in town, thus enabling its involvement in EU high politics in the years to come. In preparation for the informal European Council Meeting in Pörtlach, Austria, on 24-25 October 1998, Blair geared up to 'herald a new role for Europe in defence and call for fresh thinking'.¹⁰⁷ Driven by positive experiences on this stage, this speech would become one of Britain's most pro-European moments.

An in-depth examination of this period reveals intriguing insights into the nature of ESDP. Most notably that EU defence integration was strongly motivated by a genuine desire to affirm Britain's commitment to the European community. Pörtlach provided an opportune venue for Labour to table a radical initiative, given its focus on bigger picture ideas for the future and the informal meeting style. Blair used this opportunity to discursively situate Britain within the European core, using defence integration to eradicate any doubts about the country's European credentials. At Pörtlach, Blair argues with great pathos for 'Europe to be a stronger force for good in the world' and 'a power to be reckoned with'. Time and experience in office had given him the chance to think afresh on defence and 'if there has ever been any doubt before, let me make that clear today' - the UK was ready to put European security and defence policy at the top of their own foreign policy agenda.

Interestingly, Blair situates himself inside the EU core via soft forms of othering. As such he highlights differences between the European ingroup and outsiders (Russia and the US) to reinforce a sense of belonging with the ingroup – in line with SIT notions. According to Blair, the question was: 'Do we want a pro-active foreign policy in which we are all prepared to make a major effort for the values we support ...? My answer is clear: if we want Europe to match the Americans for clout around the world, including on our own continent, we must show that political commitment, and be ready to act where necessary'.¹⁰⁸ Importantly Blair did not see Europe in direct competition with the US nor did he want to undermine or duplicate NATO. Nonetheless he draws a distinction between the Europeans as the dominant group whose power needed to be maintained and the US as the partner outside of that group. Moreover, Europe should aim for 'a more equal partnership', as in any case 'we cannot have it both ways: we either accept a second-best role in world affairs, or we aim higher, but that requires real responsibility and political will'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ In archival notes one finds more direct links between EMU and CSDP stating that not being part of the historic progress in EU integration 'underlies the importance ... of working hard at building alliances; of positive UK initiatives in areas such as defence, ... and of further deepening of our relations with the French and Germans'. TNA, PREM 49/730/1, Part 8, p. 14.

¹⁰⁶ Similarly, John Holmes conveyed the idea that it was now time to act and show European credentials urgently. 'I think you can afford to go further on defence and foreign policy than the official advice. There is a window of opportunity for influencing the debate on the future of Europe and it is not going to stay open for ever. You need to seize it now. We need to show we have broken with the traditional British thinking on Europe. If we cannot do it with an elected Commission, then defence is our best hope of breaking out of the stereotype. It is a time to take risks'. TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p. 198.

¹⁰⁷ TNA, PREM 49/310/2, Part 14, p. 54; TNA, PREM 49/810, Part 7, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸ TNA, PREM 49/310/2, Part 14, p. 53ff.

¹⁰⁹ TNA, PREM 49/310/2, Part 14, p. 56

In that way he creates ingroup/outgroup dynamics and clearly positions himself on the European side which raises trust and speaks to the hearts and minds of European elites. Therefore, Pörtlach, like the Presidency, fulfilled its objective. Sources report that Blair garnered standing ovations for his speech, solidifying his image as the “leader of Europe”.¹¹⁰

Yet a notable exception emerges: Jacques Chirac – ironically the president of the country with the longest history of leveraging the EU to counter American influence. For Britain, gaining France’s trust should require more diplomatic effort, as I will demonstrate later through an analysis of the historic St Malo Declaration – the birth moment of the ESDP. In any case, after the EU’s defence initiative is formally launched during the June 1999 Cologne EU Council summit, Blair reflects positively on his past EU engagement in a speech titled ‘Making the Case for Britain in Europe’. He notes that at the start of his premiership ‘Britain was utterly marginalised’ in Europe. But in less than two years Britain had managed to drive policy in key policy areas such as defence bringing the country back into the centre of decision-making.¹¹¹ Finally, as Europeans gather in Helsinki to decide capability goals for ESDP, a British brief affirms: ‘UK comfortably at the centre of EU gravity. Finns can therefore be equally confident about the viability of an ambitious text on our lines, more ambitious than the first Presidency Draft’.¹¹²

Arguably, such rhetoric about a self-reliant and ambitious European defence capacity contradicts traditional notions of British Atlanticism. The proposed OS reading thus offers fresh insight into the claim that ESDP served to save NATO, as highlighted in existing constructivist and choice-theoretic literature (Howorth 2004; Dover 2005). Rather than merely crossing the European Rubicon in pursuit of tangible economic or security gains, or acting on civil servants’ initiative, this analysis reveals a clear link between community effects and the shift in the Blair government’s sentiments towards EU defence integration. The dual imperative of actively shaping EU policy while avoiding marginalisation from the core group in the future enabled the Labour government to embrace ESDP. However, another pivotal driver of this political transformation was the ‘community angst’ triggered by the Kosovo conflict, offering further insight into ESDP as a policy of anxiety control.

¹¹⁰See press conference after Pörtlach. EUISS, *From St-Malo to Nice: European Defence – Core Documents*, 2001, “Informal European Summit, Pörtlach, 24–25 October 1998”, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep06989.5>.

¹¹¹ In Blair’s speech, the discussion of Britain’s earlier marginalisation in Europe directly followed the discussion of achievements in defence policy, which indicates a cognitive link.

¹¹² TNA, PREM 49/725, Part 10, p. 46f

6.0 Community Angst and the Failure of the European Peace Order

The secession conflicts in Yugoslavia constitute a security event that fundamentally undermined expectations of peaceful change and progress in the European security community. For the first time since the beginning of the European peace project, political elites were confronted with mass violence within the geographical borders of Western Europe, and they proved incapable of reacting in a way that was in line with the normative self-conception of their security community. The lack of practices and routines to deal with the crisis contributed to community angst i.e., a perceived fundamental incongruence between the internalised group ethos and the practices of oneself and that group. While there was some variation in how countries related to the identity threat posed by the Kosovo war, there are key commonalities which underscore a shared group ethos. Based on the analysis, the pronounced sense of ontological insecurity was a product of the culturally constructed responsibility towards Yugoslavia and the intensity/nature of violence. Additionally, it was compounded by the recently expanded promise of European integration, which resulted from the communalisation of core state powers (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014). This further widened the perceived disjunction between expressed ontological self and tangible actions.

Due to the historical ties and geographical proximity, the Western Balkan occupied a special position on the boundaries of the EC during the Cold War. As a non-aligned state, relations with the Yugoslav Federation were closer than with any Central and Eastern European country and also stronger than with the countries of North Africa, whose prospect of joining the EU had arguably died with the Algerian war in the 1960s.¹¹³ This special responsibility towards the region derived from various notions of cultural, historical and geographical proximity was expressed in several interviews. As a British policymaker remarked: ‘there was certainly a special obligation to act for Europeans – we had essentially created the state of Yugoslavia after WWI’ (Senior British Diplomat b, 2023; Senior German Diplomat b, 2023). Woodward (1995) further illustrates this relationship arguing ‘the idea that Yugoslavia would be the test case of a more unified Europe and of new security institutions in the EC ... arose before those institutions were well in place. Yugoslavia was to serve as a vehicle to create those institutions and force that unity’ (Woodward, 1995: 162).

The inability to uphold this responsibility towards the region becomes evident in two notable episodes during the initial phase of the secession war in Bosnia: Srebrenica and Dayton. In the former, Europeans failed in their attempts to prevent another genocide on European soil. During the Dayton peace talks, Europeans were relegated to a subservient role, requiring the involvement of an external power to end a violent conflict ‘at home’ (Senior German Diplomat b, 2023). The Kosovo war took place in a similar context, exacerbating existing levels of community angst. From an ontological perspective, a positive development in this phase was that the prospects of complete paralysis were lower; unlike in Bosnia, the US quickly became convinced that it actually ‘had a dog in that fight’ (Rees 2021). Yet, this also reinforced the view that Europeans lacked agency and were overpowered by outsiders. More detrimental to ontological security was the diminished element of surprise in the Kosovo conflict, because Kosovo had long been a simmering fire. Mediation efforts between Serbs and Albanians had intensified in the context of the 1995 Dayton Agreement to the point where the looming crisis was foreseeable, but effective action remained elusive.

¹¹³ After signing the 1980 Cooperation agreement, Yugoslavia enjoyed preferential trade relations with the EC and it was estimated that over 50 percent of trade was with the EC (Juncos 2013, 66).

This was aggravated by the fact that the EU had in the meantime taken several measures that suggested it had learned from Bosnia and reached adulthood (Maurer, Raube, and Whitman 2024). As such, crisis response tools were being rolled out via the ESDI as well as the Amsterdam Treaty (Petersberg tasks and High Representative for Foreign Policy). Consequently, there was great that the EU would be able to deliver on its promise to be a force for good in its heartland. Despite these efforts, the Kosovo war mirrored the Bosnia experience in many ways.

In fact, there seems to be a temporal connection between the escalation of violence in Kosovo and progress on defence reform. Blair's disclosure in Pörtlach came at a time where efforts by European governments to achieve a diplomatic resolution had unquestionably failed and the effort needed to be broadened.¹¹⁴ At a EU Council meeting, EU member states expressed their frustration regarding their secondary role within the OSCE-led verification mission and show fear for not being able to safeguard the mission.¹¹⁵ Amidst a worsening situation, marked by the breach of a UN ceasefire in December 1998, military pressure was again exerted through NATO via an 'activation order'. At this peak point, when the first phase to calm the aggression had faltered, the historical St. Malo declaration was unveiled. Subsequently, in spring of 1999, Europeans remain anxious to show leadership and convene a peace conference – this time not at a US military base, but a 14th century chateau in Rambouillet near Paris. Yet, once more, it is the US that leads the negotiations which yield no settlement, but a decision for military action via NATO even without UN approval.¹¹⁶ Shortly after the conclusion of the bombing campaign, the formal establishment of the ESDP happened during the June 1999 Cologne Council meeting.¹¹⁷

Throughout the diplomatic and military effort, European states and the EU assume subordinate a role to the US within the OSCE, UN, and NATO. Similar to the situation in Bosnia, a US general leads the military operation, and the bulk of aerial sorties are conducted by American aircraft. Contrasting this actuality with the normative commitments that Europeans had professed for the region exposes a distinct incongruence between the moral responsibilities ascribed to the EU in theory and the realities on the ground. This ontological incongruence further becomes evident when examining the European Council's statement at the onset of the NATO bombing campaign, which portrayed the EU as the primary agent in the peace initiative.

¹¹⁴ Initially there were efforts to take the lead in Kosovo with the Peace Implementation Council in Bonn, yet it ended in a shambles, leading to the reconvening of the US-led Contact Group in December 1997.

¹¹⁵ At Pörtlach, the Finish President Ahtisaari and others were 'worried about the idea of a 2000-strong verification mission. OSCE had not really the capacity to mount this operation. The EU should give a lead as the biggest shareholder in the OSCE'. The same concerns were expressed, for instance, by France, Greece, Austria and the Netherlands. TNA, PREM 49/310/2, Part 14, p. 33ff

¹¹⁶ The fear of repeating earlier mistakes is represented in numerous statements e.g. in Tony Blair's speech at the NATO 50-year anniversary 'In Kosovo, we will not repeat those early mistakes in Bosnia. We will not allow war to devastate a part of our continent, bringing untold death, suffering and homelessness'. Tony Blair, "Speech at NATO's 50th Anniversary", 1999, UKPOL, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/tony-blair-1999-speech-at-natos-50th-anniversary/>.

¹¹⁷ Unlike Bosnia, where the warring parties were two separate states, Kosovo was nominally part of Serbia, which led to a clash of norms between territorial unity vs. self-determination and non-interference vs. human rights protection, all of which could not be upheld at the same time. The solution found in the idea of the *responsibility to protect* and an intervention based on air power and the paramilitary Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) on the ground did not solve these problems in a way that could gloss over earlier feelings of paralysis. TNA, PREM 49/322, Part 4.

On the threshold of the 21st century, **Europe cannot tolerate a humanitarian catastrophe in its midst**. It cannot be permitted that, in the middle of Europe, the predominant population of Kosovo is collectively deprived of its rights and subjected to grave human rights abuses. We, the **countries of the European Union, are under a moral obligation** to ensure that indiscriminate behaviour and violence, which became tangible in the massacre at Racak in January 1999, are not repeated. **We have a duty to ensure the return to their homes** of the hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons. Aggression must not be rewarded. An aggressor must know that he will have to pay a high price. That is the **lesson to be learnt from the 20th century**. [...] In the final analysis, **we are responsible for securing peace and cooperation in the region**.¹¹⁸

Reducing this ontological incongruence became a key driving force behind ESDP. Crucially, the terminology and frameworks employed by leaders to address this discord did not centre around notions of strategy, threat, or power. Instead, they revolved around normative and introspective themes such as the credibility of the Union and its perceived incompleteness. Rarely however did leaders define the practical goals and military added value of ESDP. Next follows a closer examination of the sentiments expressed by national executives in order to trace variation and understand in more detail how the Kosovo war intersected with underlying ontological concerns within the EU core group.

6.1 National Variation in Community Visions

When analysing the national framings of Kosovo and ESDP, one notices that there is significantly less variation and disunity than currently assumed in the literature. Once the process was launched at St Malo, all actors share two principal goals which also constitute their red lines. First the need to make the defence initiative an institutional reality as failure of the process at such a critical moment – (after Amsterdam, during Kosovo, before EMU/enlargement) – could undermine the EU project.¹¹⁹ Second the goal was not to destroy what was already there, most notably NATO's hard defence guarantee. The analysis shows there was no significant difference across the E3 in this regard and even 'French executives shared the belief that nothing could replace NATO' (Former French Minister, 2023; French MoD Official, 2023). Therefore, all state leaders engaged in similar figurative language that emphasises the need "to speak with one voice" and for the 'EU be in a position to play its full role on the international stage' (Rutten 2001). Specifically, there was a shared perception that 'Europe should develop the capacity to deal with failures like Bosnia or Kosovo'. What this meant in effective politico-military terms, however, was unclear across the E3, but also beside the point, because the core issue was more of a principled nature namely to establish the EU's independent actorness. This required a priori a security and defence capacity, because 'without the ability to defend itself, the EU would be nothing more than a forum' (Senior British Diplomat c, 2023).¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ European Council, *Presidency Conclusions, Berlin European Council, 24–25 March 1999*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/acfb2.html

¹¹⁹ The notion of lacking credibility and the need to reinvigorate the European project form a recurring leitmotif. Note for instance the remarks by the Greek PM in the lead up to Pörtschach: 'We give the impression of having run out of ideas, vision and motivation for revitalising the European project and mobilising our people. We therefore need to ask ourselves: What future do we envisage for Europe on the eve of the 21st century? In answering this question, we have to rediscover the primacy of politics and make European integration part of a broader project for building European Political Union'. TNA, PREM 49/310/1, Part 14, p. 62.

¹²⁰ Aas the Greek Prime Minister put it at Pörtschach, 'whatever we decide, one thing must be clear: The Union will be incomplete if it does not have real foreign policy and security and defence capabilities'. TNA, PREM 49/310/1, Part 14, p. 45.

It is thus between these broad poles – ensuring political union via progress in defence and preserving NATO – that variation across the E3 can be traced. Yet these are differences in degree and not in kind. They relate to how much autonomy is called for and the scale of crisis response the EU should be able to do. Herein, France and the UK engage in a similar postcolonial framing, which emphasised their expeditionary tradition and maintaining a global role for their countries' post-imperial status quest.¹²¹ Hofman and Mérand (2020) find that 'Blair and Chirac saw eye to eye in their desire to keep their countries relevant in overseas crisis management, ideally with the institutional support of the EU and military support from other EU member states – under the informal leadership of French and British governments' (Hofmann and Mérand 2020, 165). Germany's policy stance, instead, was forged against the backdrop of its quest for moral redemption (Helferich and De France 2022). At the same time, France and Germany saw the ESDP as an opportunity to reignite the Franco-German motor and provide a new rationale for the European project (*Europe Puissance* and *Handlungsfähiges Europa*).¹²² They therefore focused more on the institutional dimensions of the debate, whereas the UK placed greater emphasis on military capabilities. Nonetheless, even British pragmatism was limited to the extent that it did not risk derailing the process. However, it fell short of insisting on resolving the initiative's inherent contradictions – such as the mismatch between political ambition and the persistent lack of willingness across the E3 to invest meaningful resources.

Despite these different sub-narratives, the assumption that Paris, Bonn and London pursued significantly divergent goals in ESDP and only reached a lowest common denominator – as highlighted in choice-theoretic accounts – is misguided. Analytically, this is important because the notion of the lowest common denominator suggests that states have fixed interests in terms of institutional outcomes and that ESDP represents the lowest equilibrium after all conflicting views have been crossed out. The difference in interests then explains the lack of institutional effectiveness in maximising utility or power. What is suggested here, however, is that for all core countries the social function trumped their interest in maximising material utility – as all three lacked a clear vision of the way ahead which was intertwined with a lack of political will to spend resources to make ESDP genuinely functional. This becomes increasingly clear in the process, yet all three actors, including those with a more pragmatic orientation, go ahead so not to derail the process and safeguard the community via a sense of progress. This highlights how community integration became a goal in itself, ultimately taking precedence over the pursuit of military efficiency and defending the narrow national interest.

¹²¹ A German note reveals that, in fact, very few aspects were not 'ready for consensus' in May 1999, indicating an absence of red lines. Legal questions related to treaty change, the role of the Commission, and a collective defence clause were to be avoided. Barring these details, all states agreed that the ESDP needed to exist and should not undermine NATO. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (PAAA), B 220 – ZA, 350.10/f, 5. Mai 1999, p. 6.

¹²² PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.10/f, 14. Juli 1999, p. 2.

6.1.1 Britain – Principled Rationalism

A dominant view in both constructivist and choice-theoretic accounts of ESDP is that Tony Blair crossed the ‘European Rubicon’ because he feared the unravelling of NATO. The argument goes that Blair thought ‘unless Europe got its security act together, NATO was dead in the water’ (Howorth 2004, 221).¹²³ However, the evidence suggests that this stance merely became a fall-back position for the British to navigate the complex political realities at the time. Blair resorted to this position after realising that EU defence was much more difficult to communicate to the US to the extent that it could put the “special relationship” at risk, if not handled carefully. Additionally, establishing an EU defence capacity would demand resources that neither France nor Germany (nor the British treasury) were passionate to invest. France and Germany struggled with EMU targets and were more concerned with social policy, whereas ‘Whitehall had bigger fish to fry’ especially after having just completed the extensive Strategic Defence Review (SDR) (British MoD Official, 2023). As Blair recognised the constraints of his leadership, he reverted more to the traditional role of British Atlanticism in public. However, this should not obscure the primary impetus behind his initiative, which is rooted in community-maintenance and ontological security concerns.

As noted earlier, a pivotal catalyst in the initial stages were British fears of being excluded from the European core based on a genuine commitment to the European project. This ontological concern was then amplified by community angst as the Kosovo War increasingly undermined the shared EU ethos. Consequently, the process of restoring identity congruence became inherently intertwined with the task of protecting the in-group to which reintegration was aspired. This reading highlights how the British initiative was primarily about the EU and only secondarily about NATO. The evidence suggests that the European impotence exposed by Kosovo clashed with both Blair’s self-image as a leader and with his vision of the EU.¹²⁴ As a former Adviser remarked “Tony Blair felt that the Europeans had been humiliated over Bosnia, where they could not respond as one, and he found that shaming’ (Senior British Diplomat a, 2023). Kosovo was then seen as the ‘the latest case of Europe as political lightweight’.¹²⁵ Reiteratively, Blair expressed his frustration with European failings in Yugoslavia and discursively links this to an EU responsibility. ‘We cannot contemplate, on the doorstep of the EU, a disintegration into chaos and disorder’. ‘On Kosovo unless Europe took a clear and strong position straight away people would go elsewhere for leadership’.¹²⁶

¹²³ In addition, Howorth argues “There is little doubt that Blair’s gamble was primarily motivated by a sense that unless the European members of NATO made a concerted effort to improve their military capacity, the Alliance itself would begin to unravel’ (Howorth 2014c, 78).

¹²⁴ There seems to be a degree of idiosyncrasy here that is difficult to disentangle, as Blair’s thinking was strongly shaped by ideas of leadership - as reflected in the prominent role the term plays in both the introduction to his biography and a dedicated book “On Leadership”.

¹²⁵ TNA, PREM 49/310/1, Part 14, p. 30. Similarly, at the St Malo press conference, Blair cuts through the otherwise warm atmosphere by stating: ‘it is important to have the capacity as well as the political leadership in Europe to be able to take responsibility... When, for example in Kosovo, we have a situation where, frankly, we have not been able to act as I would have wished for Europe, I think this underlines the need to cooperate and work together’. Kosovo had not been mentioned previously, and the discussion had focused on Franco-British friendship and shared history. Blair’s pivot signals a deeper crisis of self-legitimation, which points to a deeper layer of ontological insecurity behind the institutional effort. Government of France, “Conférence de presse conjointe à Saint-Malo”, 4 December 1998.

¹²⁶ Even more strongly the idea of a European interest is voiced in Blair’s ‘Vision for Europe speech’ in Ghent.

Tony Blair, “A Vision for Europe”, *The Guardian*, 24 February 2000

Tony Blair, “Address to the House of Commons on Kosovo”, *The Guardian*, 23 March 1999,

From these normative failings emerged a resolute moral commitment to ESDP. Blair states, ‘what before Kosovo may have been desirable, has now, post-Kosovo, become a necessity’¹²⁷. That this was first and foremost an issue for the European community and less so about NATO is reflected in several statements, for example, during his speech at the Charlemagne prize in May 1999. Here Blair argues that the central challenge for Europe is that ‘posed by the outside world, about how we make Europe strong and influential, how we make full use of the potential Europe has to be a global power for good’. He concludes stating ‘the next era must be about how we build Europe’s strength, power and responsibility vis-à-vis the outside world’.¹²⁸ In this context, the Labour Government had previously noted a sense of sclerosis in the EU.¹²⁹

Milzow (2012) finds that in the debate around Kosovo and St Malo there arises the distinct notion of the ‘European interest’ across the E3. It had first been noticeable in the Maastricht treaty which states that the aim of CFSP was to ‘safeguard the common values, fundamental interests, independence and integrity of the Union’. The Labour government shared this vision arguing for instance that a highly capable Mr CFSP (HR) was necessary to express the ‘European will’. Milzow (2012) finds that this notion of the European interest, ‘provided ESDP with content and purpose’ as leaders failed to define the actual contents of such a policy beyond the abstract idea of speaking with one voice on the world stage (Milzow 2012, 4).¹³⁰

Although Blair spoke less forcefully and frequently about the European interest than Chirac and Schröder, this is mainly due to the different audiences he had to appeal to. Blair was aware of the difficulty to convince the British public as well as American elites, which is why he tactically emphasised that he was in charge of the defence initiative which served British interests and NATO. Yet, the American reaction did not take long and came forcefully with Madeleine Albright’s famous “three D’s” published on 7 December 1998 – three days after St Malo.¹³¹ By 1999 the Labour government increasingly engaged in rhetoric that suggested the European defence initiative was about strengthening NATO. Yet it would be misguided to interpret these political constraints as initial motivators. Moreover, this would overstate British fears of US abandonment and overlook that Blair, like Schröder and Chirac, wanted both a strong EU and NATO but in the first instance self-determination to restore a positive sense of self for the European community in the new millennium. Indeed, an EU institution to save NATO appears to be an awkward line of reasoning at first glance. That the US and NATO were merely an intervening factor but not the main addressee is reflected in several statements.

¹²⁷ “Making the Case for Britain in Europe,” *The Guardian*, 27 July 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/1999/jul/27/emu.theeuro2>.

¹²⁸ Tony Blair, “Speech Extract,” Charlemagne Prize, 1999, <https://www.karlspreis.de/en/laureates/anthony-tony-charles-lynton-blair-1999/speech-extract-by-anthony-c-l-blair>.

¹²⁹ The goal of the Cardiff meeting had been to ‘give a sense of momentum ... prevent sclerosis in the community’ TNA, PREM 49/308, Part 12, p. 36.

¹³⁰ See for example the joint letter by Chirac and Schröder to the Austrian Council Presidency, which also highlighted the idea of defending European interests and values through defence integration.

¹³¹ Albright warned there could not be any *decoupling, duplication or discrimination*. Lord Robertson in his later role as NATO SG seeks to ally these concerns with “his three I’s”: *Improvement, Inclusiveness and Indivisibility* (Rutten 2001, 63). Madeleine K. Albright, “The Right Balance Will Secure NATO’s Future”, *Financial Times*, 7 December 1998.

UK proponents felt ‘we cannot leave it to the Americans to sort out problems on Europe’s borders in Bosnia or Kosovo’.¹³² However, this concern did not stem from fear that American commitment to NATO would wane if Europeans appeared weak. Quite the contrary, NATO was perceived strong again especially after the 50th anniversary celebrations in Washington in 1999, which was described as a ‘big transatlantic love fest’ (Senior German Diplomat b, 2023).¹³³ Rather, European policymakers considered it a moral duty to possess an autonomous defence capability to com. To this extent Blair was prepared to take risks even with the Americans. An archival note in the early stages of the process states ‘many Americans were schizophrenic on a stronger European defence. And we would need to make clear that, if they did not accept what we wanted to do within NATO, then we would have no alternative but to go outside it’.¹³⁴

Britain in that regard stood out for a more pragmatic approach, which had its limits though. For instance, when it came to intelligence sharing or operational Headquarters, where the UK was less prepared to move even though this would be key for Europeans to really be able to take charge of a Kosovo style crisis.¹³⁵ In fact, the issues for Europeans to engage in peacemaking without the US/NATO had been clearly stated by the British Chief of the Defence Staff, Charles Guthrie and others. As Defence Secretary Robertson stated in his early drafts, the ideal military solution for Britain would not have been the ESDP: ‘One obvious way forward would have been to merge NATO and the WEU. This would be militarily sound but unacceptable to partners and, indeed, would do little to emphasise our wider European credentials’.¹³⁶ From an early stage, therefore, it is clear that in the medium term, the ESDP will be reduced to the lower end of Petersberg tasks without the help of NATO.¹³⁷ Notwithstanding these constraints, Blair’s rhetoric on ESDP and the goal of turning the EU into ‘a power to be reckoned with’ do not change; especially internal justifications remain on a high metaphorical and emotive level about European self-determination for the sake of making ESDP a reality somehow.

Overall, the driving force for Britain was a genuine commitment to the European security community in order to restore a positive sense of self and progress. During the St Malo discussions, Blair even linked the necessity of European defence to the broader integrative momentum,

¹³² Another quote states: ‘Need for a clearer EU role in the defence foreign policy area should be flagged up, linked to dissatisfaction with the European performance over Kosovo (where the Prime Minister believes that the Americans should not be in the lead)’. TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p. 222ff.

¹³³ In Pörttschach a note asks if ESDP would damage NATO. The response is: ‘NATO - a great success. Has just proved its effectiveness again in Kosovo. Important not to undercut NATO. But stronger European military capability will strengthen NATO, not undermine it’ TNA, PREM 49/310, Part 14, p.53, 117.

¹³⁴ ‘There is a risk of the [Washington] Summit coming up well short of our EDI ambitions. This in turn would play into the likely outcome of the Cologne EU Council; and could have wider implications for the success of the Prime Minister’s major contribution to European construction’. TNA, PREM 49/721, Part 6, p. 34. A few times Blair would provide Americans insights into his pro-European motivation which would then ‘ruffle feathers in Washington’ or sometimes just be treated as ‘water above the dam’. After a speech on ESDI in the New York Times on 13 November archival notes state US Assistant Chief of staff Paul Gebhardt was ‘extremely agitated. His interpretation was that the article suggested a radical change in British policy, with a much greater European than NATO focus. For example, it seemed to him to suggest that the *main justification for enhancing European capabilities was that it would be politically good for the EU*’. TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p.50.

¹³⁵ TNA, PREM 49/327, Part 6, p. 10.

¹³⁶ TNA, PREM 49/291, Part 3, p. 49.

¹³⁷ ‘As things stand, it is therefore unlikely that Europe alone will be able to mount and sustain major peace enforcement missions in the 2003 timescale’. PREM 49-327, part 6, p.171-2.; ‘He accepted that an operation on the scale of Kosovo was not the sort of thing that we could do in the EU in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, it was the only recent practical experience and therefore we should use it’. TNA, PREM 49/723, Part 8, p. 69.

including efforts towards monetary union. This highlights that, even for the British government, defence was a matter of principle and an essential step in solidifying the EU as an international actor. The general openness and continued high commitment, despite increasingly evident practical constraints, suggest that Britain's otherwise pragmatic approach was also predominantly about community-oriented behaviour rather than military utility.¹³⁸

6.1.2 France – Ideological Pragmatism

As in the British case, the use of traditional role concepts to explain France's motivation behind ESDP is limited and invites mischaracterisations. In the academic debate, the French viewpoint on ESDP is frequently contextualised within Gaullist paradigms, notably the concept of establishing a European pole of power to offset American influence, as highlighted in strands of realism. However, the analysis shows that France's perspective was not significantly more pro-European than that of Tony Blair in many regards. While ESDP was even more a matter of principle for France, the French executive, with few exceptions, did not seize the initiative to push for an ambitious EU defence capacity. Despite some of the rhetoric, France overall demonstrated a measured approach, highlighting a preference for a gradual and collaborative long-term process rather than a strategic pursuit of military power maximisation.

The concept of *community angst* offers valuable insights into French motivations and suggests that France's perception of the European Community was being subverted by the current institutional setup which was amplified by the experience of the Kosovo war. This reinforced the conviction that the very essence of the EU was in danger unless permanent institutions were established to embody the Union as a fully-fledged international actor. In France this progress narrative was reflected in the newly developed notion of 'Europe Puissance' that should be the new rationale for European integration in the 21st century moving beyond the rationale of Franco-German reconciliation. In France, this progress narrative was reflected in the emerging notion of *Europe Puissance*, which was to become the new rationale for European integration in the 21st century, moving beyond the legacy of Franco-German reconciliation.¹³⁹ So far, the academic debate has largely overlooked the ontological motivations specific to France, resulting in a skewed perception of ESDP as being less problematic for France and more driven by French influence than is warranted.

¹³⁸ Against the background of falling defence budgets, the UK was cautious not to demand higher defence spending. 'Targets for inputs - particularly financial inputs - have had an unhappy history in NATO and would run the risk of bogging EDI down in arguments over relative measures of spending. In view of the recently announced reductions in some of our partners' defence budgets - notably that of the Germans - setting financial criteria could at worst undermine the credibility of the entire initiative'. TNA, PREM 49/723, Part 8, p. 93. The idea that one can do significantly more by spending less - seems irrational in the sense that it avoids trade-offs. Elsewhere, it is stated that the initiative would not work if Europeans further reduced budgets, yet the UK was also not prepared to raise defence budgets. 'The collective European commitment to e.g. all-weather aircraft would require additional UK expenditure. (It would add enormously to the credibility of the UK's initiative if a post-Kosovo increase (even if modest) in UK defence spending could be announced'. TNA, PREM 49/722, Part 7, p. 62. This again speaks to the process-oriented nature of the approach.

¹³⁹ The German government similarly believed that in the current 'post-réconciliation' era, 'we need a new vision as a meaning-giving motif'. In this, Germany shares the mythology of an 'action-capable Europe' (*handlungsfähiges Europa*) or *Europe Puissance*. Their slight difference lies in the fact that France is more prepared to push this within a core group as reflected in the term 'géometrie variable' PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.10/f, 14. Juli 1999, p. 2; PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.06 FRA, 17. Dezember 1999.

Shortly after his election, Chirac declared in a speech to ambassadors in August 1997 ‘history teaches us that a civilisation, in order to keep control of its destiny, must give itself the means of its security’.¹⁴⁰ The quote offers insight into the teleological dimension of French thinking on the issue. However, despite the high level of pathos in several of these statements, having the means to ensure European security did not mean to duplicate or weaken NATO. The perspective gets blurry because the Gaullist wing of Chirac’s party required the President to wear different hats. Domestically, Chirac often presents himself as the driver behind the defence initiative, attributing the shift in the UK’s defence stance to his efforts. Especially after St Malo, Chirac claims authorship of the initiative by tracing it to his August 1998 speech in which he had talked about convincing European partners to do more for European defence.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, in this speech Chirac had also underscored the importance of ‘the transatlantic partnership which remains a cornerstone of stability and security in the world’.¹⁴² Throughout the political process, most French officials show a benevolent attitude towards the US (though not always reciprocated), often even cautioning enthusiastic Brits about the risks of decoupling, and repeatedly reaffirming their commitment to a strong NATO.¹⁴³ As interviews unequivocally confirm ‘the idea for the EU to do territorial defence or to replace NATO was never in our heads’ (Former French Minister, 2023; French MoD Official, 2023).

In fact, British archival sources document the difficulty of pushing France to be more proactive. A British note states, ‘Vedrine said that each side needed to take account of the domestic political constraints on the other. Frankly, the French were comfortable in the position on European defence in which they now found themselves. Any movement was likely to bring more difficulties than benefits’.¹⁴⁴ While the British turnaround is widely welcomed in France, archival sources reveal fear that something worse might come out of this initiative, if pushed too quickly. Here it is worth remembering that Chirac’s most recent initiative to Europeanise NATO by taking charge of NATO’s Mediterranean command AFSOUTH had failed in 1997 which had cost him credibility. Moreover, failure of the 1954 European Defence Community (EDC) was all too present at a time when the Amsterdam Treaty had not yet been ratified. Now there was reticence to commit to an ambitious initiative that could backfire and weaken the European community at a critical

¹⁴⁰ Jacques Chirac, “Discours sur le rôle de la France dans le monde”, 27 August 1997, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/172520-discours-de-m-jacques-chirac-president-de-la-republique-sur-le-role-d>. The logic that a defence capacity was a natural necessity for the EU was also expressed in conversation with Blair. ‘After the single market and the single currency, CFSP was the next big step for Europe; The question was how far Britain was prepared to go’. TNA, PREM 49/327, Part 6, p. 15.

¹⁴¹ In March 1999, Chirac began tracing the defence initiative back to his personal efforts also referencing Kosovo. He stated that he had ‘long pleaded for Europe to take more responsibility for its own defence [because] Europe must play its full role in resolving crises which are of concern to it, as it has started to do in Kosovo’. Jacques Chirac, “Message sur la ratification du traité d’Amsterdam”, 2 March 1999.

¹⁴² ‘It will be necessary to see whether we should create, when the time comes, a Council of European Union Defence Ministers to affirm our solidarity in this area. This would clarify, balance and make more effective the transatlantic partnership which remains a cornerstone of stability and security in the world’. Jacques Chirac, “Discours sur la mondialisation, l’intégration européenne et la réforme de l’OTAN”, 26 August 1998.

¹⁴³ See British and German archival notes e.g., by John Holmes written during the St Malo summit: ‘Chirac repeated again that France did not want to weaken NATO. NATO was a key element in world peace. If the argument was pushed a long way, France might have different ideas in some areas about NATO, for example whether NATO should be a world policeman. Nevertheless, even if the French and Americans had difficulties, there was a profound alliance between them’. TNA, PREM 49/327, Part 6, p. 17; PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.06 GBR, 22. Februar 2000, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Another brief states ‘British and French positions spelt out in familiar terms. Richard about the net, Vedrine apparently more sceptical about benefits to France of any substantive move on European defence’. TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, pp. 9-10.

moment.¹⁴⁵ Interviews confirm these concerns underscoring suspicion that Blair was merely trying to coax France into rejoining NATO's military command through the back door, in return for which France would receive nothing of substance but would sacrifice the European defence industry on the altar of NATO.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, there was fear of inadvertently creating distance between France and Germany, a partnership Chirac aimed to reinvigorate as the European engine that had lost momentum.¹⁴⁷

As a result, France initially only proposed moderate alterations to the institutional setup – just enough so that the EU would have some role in defence. The French idea was to transform the WEU into an EU Defence Agency anchored within a fourth Maastricht pillar (thus excluding EU institutions and relying on national veto powers). This move would grant the EU a defence capability on paper, and its industry-oriented approach would address worries regarding EU militarisation or political decoupling from the US. For the British, however, this was unsatisfactory, as they had ‘something more radical’ in mind.¹⁴⁸ For Britain, the French proposal provided little benefit to ‘making Europe a force to be reckoned with’. Moreover, transforming the WEU into a defence agency would not be a ‘headline-grabbing’ initiative or allow the UK to engage in proper high politics on the EU level. Britain thus reacted anxiously stating, ‘we should not rubbish French ideas at this stage. Rather, we should seek to persuade them that there is a case for a more radical (i.e. our) approach’.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, Britain understood that France was in for a rhetoric game by proposing simply some sort of defence add-on in the fourth Maastricht pillar removed from CFSP in the second pillar. Accordingly, the brief states ‘unless European defence structures are closely associated with CFSP, one always risks that European defence policy will be driven more by rhetoric than hard realities’. Recognising French hesitations, the British make significant efforts to gain trust and assure France that they had not ‘pre-cooked ideas with the Americans’.¹⁵⁰

At this stage it is worth pausing for a theoretical parenthesis. In this initial stage France and the UK were stuck in a sort of Mitzenian (2006) limbo. The antagonistic relationship they had built over EU defence over decades led France to engage in practices that maintained this identity construct as it provided certainty of being despite contrary evidence and even though it was not in the country's broader interest. The two, however, managed to overcome this dilemma because of the structural implications of belonging to the same security community that is facing ontological crisis. The shared perception of belonging to a certain type of in-group that faced a crisis which

¹⁴⁵ Fear of moving on defence too quickly was already voiced in 1997 by defence minister Millon. He stated ‘France was not in such a hurry. It wanted the WEU to be set up as a European Defence Identity and then move to other things. If we tried to do too much now it would ruin everything’. TNA, DEFE 13/3216, p. 63.

¹⁴⁶ This French concern was reflected in British archival sources: ‘Bernard himself assumed that the basis for our thinking was the need to play some sort of lead role in European affairs, given our absence from the Euro and from JHA. In other words, we were making something of a public relations gesture but were not really interested in the substance. I hope I disabused him of all that also’. TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p.194.

¹⁴⁷ Moreover, these trust issues interacted with idiosyncratic factors such as Chirac's malaise that Tony Blair was now the rising star on the European horizon, thus ‘threatening to steal French thunder on an issue they regard as theirs’. TNA, PREM 49/310, Part 14, p.36. A senior German diplomat also highlighted that view stating in an interview ‘Chirac was irritated by Tony Blair as the new star on the horizon as he had hoped Europe would look to him after the end of the Kohl era’ (Senior German Diplomat b, 2023).

¹⁴⁸ TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p. 103.

¹⁴⁹ The UK instead suggested a separate defence capacity. ‘We envisage something more radical. We think there is scope for combining a major step towards Europeanising NATO with developing CFSP to give it a real defence role. We are concerned that simply rebadging WEU as a still-separate “Defence Agency” may not take us much forward from the unsatisfactory status quo’ TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p. 103.

¹⁵⁰ TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p. 63.

threatened a shared part of their identity enables them to overcome insecurities in their bilateral relations. Consequently, recognition of the community dilemma – the need to cooperate for the sake of community maintenance – superseded existing issues on a bilateral level. This becomes possible after both actors succeed in conveying to each other their shared concern for the in-group.

This happened in the run-up to St. Malo, a period marked by constant efforts on both sides to reassure each other. Interestingly, between Pörttschach and St Malo, France struggled to provide counterproposals for about two months.¹⁵¹ Beyond trust concerns, a significant challenge for France posed cohabitation. The country found itself in an exceptional situation where a Prime Minister, who had just lost the presidential election to the incumbent President, subsequently triumphed in the parliamentary elections. This resulted in a power struggle between the Matignon, Elysée and Quai d'Orsay, further amplified by the fact that ESDP intersected with both EU and defence policy. In this context, a former French minister remarked 'at the time we really did not think the government would last for an entire legislative period' (Former French Minister, 2023). Due to this predicament, it is only a few days before St Malo that France responded with its own draft. Despite French drafting issues, however, the final declaration was much more pro-European than transatlantic in orientation, which won Britain the trust of French executives.

The way by which this came about is because a small circle of close Advisers drafted a set of principles from scratch late at night thereby bypassing traditionalists on both sides of the channel. Nonetheless, both heads of government read the final draft, even made small amendments, and found that it reflected their own sentiments (British MoD Official, 2023; Ricketts 2017, 32). The principles, in turn, mirror both countries' commitment to complete the Union and thereby safeguard its progress and integrity. It is indicative that the ESDP begins with a statement of just five principles, and the nature of these principles is also telling. The declaration is filled with phrases that relate to OS concerns and word fields related to the Union's actorness. It is argued that the union needed to be able to "play its full role", "act", "decide", "make its voice heard" and "give expression". These figurative expressions of ensuring agency diverge from traditional notions of power politics and the pursuit of strategic advantage. In fact, no word is said on why a European defence capacity is strategically necessary and for what security enhancing purposes, when there was NATO.

Similar to Blair, an important reference point for Chirac was the war in Kosovo. It had reinforced a feeling of paralysis and drastically undermined French expectations of peaceful change and progress. Even more emphatically, French executives refer to Europe's historical responsibility, arising from the geographic proximity and nature of the conflict. Chirac states, 'no European worthy of the name can accept what's happening in Kosovo'.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ 'Levitte said that there would not be a French paper tomorrow either. ... I remonstrated mildly with him about this – we were revealing our position, while the French kept theirs to themselves. Levitte was again apologetic. He said that the real problem was a struggle between anxious to move the agenda forward over NATO and Vedrine who was a zealous guardian of the De Gaulle/Mitterrand line on NATO. Jospin also had problems because of communist participation in his government'. TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p. 98.

¹⁵² Jacques Chirac and Martti Ahtisaari, "Conférence de presse conjointe sur les relations franco-finlandaises et le conflit du Kosovo", 10 May 1999.

Such expressions exemplify a strong identification with an in-group, whose sense of self was threatened.¹⁵³ As a result, Chirac argues Europe would now have to ‘draw the lessons from this crisis’ and ‘draw up the outline of a *real* defence project for our Union’. He advocates for a ‘*real* European defence’ to become ‘a *real* instrument for the common representation of European interests on the international stage’.¹⁵⁴ One notes again the construct of the “European interest” in these statements at the expense of outlining concrete purposes. Moreover, the repeated emphasis on the term *real* indicates a perceived lack of authenticity behind the initiative – it was not taken *for real* as a serious defence project (Milzow 2012, 144). This intersects with another element in Chirac’s rhetoric namely the notion of ESDP as a long-term collaborative process with an open outcome – epiphenomenal of the European project itself. In several statements he frames ESDP as construction site, *le grand chantier de la défense* – thus indicating ‘that the process of ESDP’s construction was also to be its culmination’ (Milzow 2012, 146). There one notes a clear disconnect between the urgency of new security threats and the way the ESDP was framed to mitigate them.¹⁵⁵

This apparent ignorance in value-trade-offs was further reflected in actual policy. France (like Germany) did little to push the Berlin Plus process in parallel once ESDP was launched. This led to frustration in the UK as it was clear that without having access to NATO assets, Europe would merely have a defence capacity on paper.¹⁵⁶ However, it would be of no use to put out fires such as those in Bosnia or Kosovo, which had served as reference points. In fact, ‘Berlin Plus’ – which started as ESDI in 1996 – was not launched until 2003, further emphasising that possessing an EU defence capacity took precedence over its quick and effective utilisation. France, even more than Britain, did not insist on concrete gains but was prepared to push ESDP for performative reasons, rooted in the expression of European values – *pour mettre en œuvre nos valeurs européennes* (Former French Minister, 2023). Rather than seeking to balance the US or maximise French military power, the effect was ontological. For both France and Britain, ESDP was about establishing an independent European defence capacity to alleviate identity disruption by crafting an institutional response to the prevailing ontological crisis, thereby safeguarding the community through innovative practices and rejuvenating a positive sense of self for Europe in the new millennium.

6.1.3 Germany – Political Redemptionism

The view commonly held in academia is that Germany’s interest in creating an EU defence capacity can be best explained through rational choice models, such as an interest in forum shopping or reducing transaction costs. According to such arguments, the Yugoslav Wars made Germany recognise the functional benefits of being able to choose between NATO and the EU, since NATO alone was no longer able to satisfy its security interests (Weiss 2011; Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010; Hofmann 2011). An ontological lens as suggested here, however, finds that the desire to create a defence institution was primarily influenced by the state of the EU with cost/benefit

¹⁵³ Across the E3 this special European responsibility becomes visible when speaking abroad, for example in the US. ‘I’ve already had occasion to say that, as far as the Europeans are concerned, it is our continent which is involved here, and we want our continent to be in peace, to be at peace, and we will not accept that situations such as the present situation in Kosovo should continue’. Blair and Schröder similarly act as representatives of Europe during trips abroad. Bill Clinton and Jacques Chirac, “The President’s News Conference with President Jacques Chirac of France”, 19 February 1999, *The American Presidency Project*.

¹⁵⁴ Jacques Chirac, “Discours sur les relations franco-finlandaises et l’élargissement de l’UE”, 10 May 1999.

¹⁵⁵ Jacques Chirac, “Discours sur la coopération, la diplomatie française et la sécurité européenne”, 26 August 1999.

¹⁵⁶ TNA, PREM 49/725, Part 10, p. 29.

calculations about NATO assuming a secondary role. I argue that the German leadership saw the European project undermined by the lack of an EU defence capacity feeling the need to overcome the perception of the EU as merely a forum and give a new rationale to European integration¹⁵⁷. The situation was aggravated by the violence in Kosovo and its particular character of ethnonational domination, which ‘struck at the core of the German guilt complex’ (Senior German Diplomat a, 2023). It underscored the necessity for a robust EU institution that could facilitate strong European consensus in order for Germany to be able to most legitimately define a national position on the use of force in the post-Cold War era.

Germany perceived the lack of European cohesion in security and defence as a crucial missing element in the EU’s foundation, posing a potential threat to its stability. This was due in particular to strong domestic rhetoric, which had emphasised that EMU meant much more than just economic integration. On multiple occasions, German executives evoked the idea that Maastricht was ‘ultimately the political answer to the aberrations of the 20th century’ and that ‘the political core of Maastricht is the creation of a lasting peace order for Europe’.¹⁵⁸ For Germany, European integration was very closely linked to the idea of *political union*. Coined in the 1990s, the term implies the pooling of political authority and power to foster a more integrated and cohesive EU entity, prioritising the process of unification over immediate tangible results.¹⁵⁹ While Blair and Chirac also referred to the broader integrative programme to justify ESDP, in Germany this was even more pronounced. Already in September 1994, an influential position paper by the Christian Democrats called for a deepening of the CFSP explicitly stating that this was an ‘indispensable factor in giving the EU its own identity’. In the words of a senior German diplomat ‘the idea was that we needed this to have a *vollwertiges Europa*’ [completed or fully-fledged Europe] (Senior German Diplomat b, 2023).¹⁶⁰

The violence in Bosnia and Kosovo heightened the perception of an incomplete EU and exposed how this architectural flaw was a threat to the project. The sense of paralysis and external dependence at the time stood orthogonal to the discourse about political union and lasting peace. Anti-systemic parties in Germany sensed this vulnerability and took advantage of it. In November 1998, PDS Chairman Gregor Gysi placed his fingers on the wound in a heated Bundestag debate, stating: ‘It has been said that a currency can create peace. I do not believe that. That is only true if the conditions are right. A currency can only secure peace if it succeeds in reducing tensions. But if it creates new tensions, it can also have the opposite effect. You know that. You know that the single currency did not prevent a war in Yugoslavia. It was one of the worst in recent years.’¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.10/f, 11. Februar 1999, p. 15–16.

¹⁵⁸ See Foreign Minister Genscher’s speech in the Bundestag. Similar language was used by members of other parties for example Theodor Waigel. ‘European unification is a response to the European brotherly wars, to the aberrations of German and European history’; ‘After two devastating and painful world wars, the European project opens up opportunities for our children and grandchildren that our fathers and mothers, our ancestors, would never have dared to dream of’. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, speech in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 13/230, 23 April 1998, 230th session, Bonn, <https://dserv.bundestag.de/btp/13/13230.pdf>.

¹⁵⁹ An interviewee remarked the term ‘political union’ occupied the middle ground between the more integrationist sounding idea of the “United States of Europe” – initially employed by Kohl and the less ambitious notion of the “Europe of Nation States” (Senior German Diplomat b, 2023).

¹⁶⁰ Or as Foreign-Minister Kinkel had stated in 1997 – ‘there was an opportunity and a duty to create a new structure in Europe’. TNA, DEFE 13/3216, p. 30.

¹⁶¹ Gregor Gysi, speech in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 13/230, 23 April 1998.

For Germany in particular, the conflict clashed with its vision of Europe, but it also cut straight into the country's own guilt sentiment – both factors underscored the imperative of establishing a defence role for the EU. German executives felt a special responsibility toward Yugoslavia because the crisis was perceived to be rooted in the legacy of the World Wars, Germany had started. Chancellor Kohl's remarks exemplify this sentiment at the time stating 'the problems that are now present in the former Yugoslavia in all their bitterness are influenced by previous alliances, pacts and special relations. We cannot simply put history aside in such a question. It remains present with all the traces of blood and tears that it has left'.¹⁶² The distinct nature of ethno-nationalist violence necessitated Germany to actively confront its own history resulting in an unprecedented moral quandary. On one hand, refraining from action would mean tolerating barbaric violence, diametrically opposed to Germany's historical repudiation of such brutality on European soil. On the other hand, taking action would necessitate deploying lethal force abroad, a step equally anathema to the nation's pursuit of moral atonement (Bachleitner and Bachleitner 2021).

Germany's deeply ingrained post-heroic identity renders it largely incapable of asserting national interests in matters of security and defence. Consequently, it relies on liberal international institutions to confer legitimacy. In this light, the EU emerges as the embodiment of genuine liberal values in their most pristine form, standing as the quintessence of the European peace narrative. NATO embodies these values to a lesser degree because of its different normative foundations and membership. In the Kosovo context, however, Germany required the highest degree of legitimacy to transgress its civilian power identity in such unprecedented ways. Yet it was unable to channel its voice via the EU to express its interests. Unlike France and Britain, Germany was incapable of establishing narratives for action based on some sort of postcolonial quest for global relevance (Hofmann and Mérand 2020, 158).

The German mantra instead became "no national go-it-alone" [*Sonderweg*] (Senior German Diplomat a, 2023). Chancellor Schröder's statements point towards a sense of post-heroic paralysis at the time. 'We do not pretend to play the role of a leading power internationally or to take political initiatives in crisis situations without consulting our partners. We are interested in good cooperation worldwide'.¹⁶³ Unsurprisingly, there was great relief in Germany about the Kosovo ceasefire in the autumn of 1998 as it was impossible to conceive of a non-diplomatic plan of action. As foreign minister, Joschka Fischer put it, 'there was no alternative to the Holbrooke-Milosevic Treaty except war and suffering and death. It worked, thank God. I don't know how we would talk here if it hadn't worked, and it had come to action there'.¹⁶⁴

When, however, it did come to military action in March 1999, mobilising support required invoking Germany's darkest past as the ultimate justification. This was reflected in Joschka Fischer's now-iconic formulation: 'Never again war, never again Auschwitz, never again genocide, never again fascism' – a statement that directly echoed the European Union's peace ethos. In the context of the Balkan wars, Fischer, like Kohl, framed European integration as 'a matter of war and peace in

¹⁶² Helmut Kohl, speech in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 13/230, 23 April 1998.

¹⁶³ Further illustrative of Germany paralysis. 'We know very well that it is not adequate to mobilise a military threat potential to enforce human rights in Kosovo. Much more important than a possible military strike is the task of monitoring compliance with agreements and ensuring peace on the ground'.

Gerhard Schröder, speech in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 14/3, 10 November 1998, 3rd session, Bonn.

¹⁶⁴ Joschka Fischer, speech in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 14/3, 10 November 1998, 3rd session, Bonn.

the 21st century'.¹⁶⁵ Both contrasted the vision of 'the Europe of the 21st century, the Europe of integration' with 'the Europe of the past, the Europe of nationalism and war'. Reflecting on the Peace Implementation Conference held in Madrid in December 1998, Fischer stated:

'The historical disunity of Europe was glaringly obvious in Madrid on that day, but at the same time the historical challenge which lies before us was also made clear. Both alternatives make up the current reality of Europe, but we, the Europe of integration, must not give the Europe of the past any chance for the future because that would be a disaster for our continent'.¹⁶⁶

This reflects the symbolic tension between integration and fragmentation that shaped the European community in the post-Cold War era.

Germany therefore also exhibited a strong sense of community angst albeit with a different national flavour. France and the UK partly needed an EU defence capability to counter fears of losing their status as military actors in the 21st century if Europe were unable to show leadership. Arguably, orchestrating an intervention like that in Kosovo on a European level would even be a source of pride in the remaining heroic corners of French and British society. Germany, on the other hand, had little interest in showing leadership on such missions in any forum. Instead, the protection of its peace identity depended on finding a common voice at the European level, as domestic avenues were psychologically obstructed (Senior German Diplomat a, 2023). All international alternatives to the EU – such as the WEU or a European pillar within NATO through the ESDI – were less compatible with the performance of Germany's post-war self-conception¹⁶⁷. Former British Ambassador to Germany Paul Lever (2017) argues that the EU uniquely provides Germany with a platform to engage confidently in debates about Europe's role, interests, and strategy. Discussing such matters nationally would be far less comfortable, as it would constantly evoke the country's past (Lever 2017, 123).

Chancellor Schröder therefore aligned with Blair and Chirac as a staunch supporter of the 'European interest' to substantiate the justification for ESDP. At the international level, this was reflected in several communiqués and for the first time in a joint letter with Chirac to the Austrian Council Presidency in December 1998.¹⁶⁸ Even more strongly the notion of the 'European interest' was advocated on the national level reflecting an implicit hierarchy between the European in-group and others outside. Defence Minister Scharping, for instance, stated during a debate on Kosovo:

¹⁶⁵ Helmut Kohl, speech at the Catholic University in Leuven, 2 February 1996, German Historical Institute.

¹⁶⁶ In the German gospel, especially, 'only the Europe of integration is viable and...will peacefully put to rest the discord on our continent and be able to make the EU into a political subject able to help shape the future of a dramatically changing world'. Joschka Fischer, "Rede zur deutschen EU-Ratspräsidentschaft vor dem Europäischen Parlament", 12 January 1999.

¹⁶⁷ This leads to a peculiar way in which ESDI is discussed in Germany. Politicians often refer to ESDI and ESDP synonymously as if there were no differences. Thus, instead of a means to reform NATO, ESDI is discussed as an instrument for European integration. Joschka Fischer stated 'after the single market and Economic and Monetary Union, the creation of a European Security and Defence Identity could be of great importance for the further deepening of the EU'. This suggests either a lack of awareness or a strategy to discursively downplay institutional differences (Former German Minister, 2023).

¹⁶⁸ Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, "Lettre commune de Jacques Chirac et Gerhard Schröder au Président du Conseil européen", 8 December 1998, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/152559-lettre-commune-de-mm-jacques-chirac-president-de-la-republique-et-gerh>.

It must be clear to us that Germany can only effectively pursue its foreign and security policy interests via Europe and ... with regard to its armed forces, Germany can in the future only meaningfully prepare and decide what is *in harmony* with European interests and *compatible with* the interests of the Alliance [NATO].¹⁶⁹

Although Germany was the strongest advocate for incorporating civilian crisis response into the ESDP, practical considerations of how exactly to manage crises through NATO or the EU were of secondary importance. Like France, Germany made little effort to advance ‘Berlin Plus’, without which the ESDP could hardly function effectively; nor was it prepared to reverse the trend of declining defence budgets. Moreover, as late as April 2000, diplomatic notes reveal that the specifics of a joint ESDP mission had yet to be discussed.¹⁷⁰ This and other dynamics clash with choice-theoretic and materialist accounts of Germany’s interests. While there were some comments about the US no longer being able to ‘fulfil its traditional role’, in Germany it is extremely rare to find arguments that pit EU defence against NATO in a zero-sum logic (Former German Minister, 2023; Schneider, 2024, 26).¹⁷¹

Since ESDP was pro-European in orientation and nominally excluded the US, there needed to be reassurance that the US would not react with undue hostility. Reassurance arrived in April 1999 during the 50th anniversary of NATO in Washington. In the very birthplace of NATO, Tony Blair, aided by Chirac and Schröder, convinced the Americans that ESDP would strengthen NATO and provide an incentive to increase defence spending in Europe – knowing that there was no desire whatsoever to do so. A British brief after Washington reads, ‘the eventual outcome was just about as good as we could have hoped for, and was the result of a good team effort, including UKDEL. The US had come down firmly on-side in the end, and had been instrumental in keeping the Turks under control. The Germans had been very pleased with the result, and the French apparently so’¹⁷²

A key element in reconciling transatlantic differences was that the drafting of NATO’s strategic communiqué was, to a large extent, carried out by the same European team responsible for ESDP. This continuity enabled Europeans to construct a reconciliatory narrative and gave Germany the green light to fully support the initiative. German Minister of State Günter Verheugen accordingly advocated for a ‘political decision’ at Cologne. Thus, one month after Washington, under German chairmanship, the ESDP is formally launched in Cologne, marked by a resolute call for an independent EU capacity. Dismayed, American officials would instead refer to it as ‘the sins of Cologne’.¹⁷³

This interplay again illustrates that military or strategic rationales were not the driving force behind ESDP for the German leadership either. As with Chirac and Blair, the absence of consequentialist

¹⁶⁹ Rudolf Scharping, speech in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 14/3, 10 November 1998, 3rd session, Bonn. Even more emotively FDP Minister Kinkel had earlier remarked: ‘Our prosperity, our position in the world stand and fall with Europe. Nothing can replace Europe for Germany’. Klaus Kinkel, speech in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 13/230, 23 April 1998, 230th session, Bonn.

¹⁷⁰ PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.10/£, 18. April 2000, p. 3.

¹⁷¹ Federal Ministry of Defence. 1994. *White Paper*, p. 29; PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 301.02, 2. Februar 2000.

¹⁷² Similarly, a German note states that ‘It would be necessary to patiently convince Washington’ ... and ‘if the EU could relieve the USA of such worries, Turkish questions would also be resolved’. TNA, PREM 49/721, Part 6, p. 6. PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.06 ITA, 15. November 1999, p. 3.

¹⁷³ The US said that Washington was genuinely concerned about what was described in US briefing documents as “the sins of Cologne”. TNA, PREM 49/723, Part 8, p. 41.

thinking in Germany is reflected in Schröder's emphasis on the *long durée* in shaping ESDP. At the expense of defining its scope and purpose, Schröder offered generic statements, describing the EU as 'on the right track to realise its common European Security and Defence Policy.' When the Nice Treaty enshrined ESDP in EU law, he referred to it as an 'intermediary goal' – without, however, specifying an endpoint to the process.¹⁷⁴ Milzow (2012) therefore concludes that 'Schröder conveyed the impression that the path towards a European defence policy was more important than its accomplishment,' a view echoed by his senior advisers (Senior German Diplomat b, 2023; Milzow 2012, 146). As one cable from the time notes: 'Beware of ...defining today the contours of a finalised Europa: Europe is a project, a process'.¹⁷⁵

6.1.4 Community Angst: Preliminary Conclusion

The aim of this section was to determine the extent to which EU defence integration is driven by the need to counter ontological threats to the European community's ethos. It found that, both at the EU level and in disaggregated terms, there was a perception that the inability to act in the face of mass violence in a region of Europe for which the EU core felt a particular responsibility undermined expectations of peaceful change and progress. The timing of defence integration as well as the relationship executives draw between European integration, ESDP and Kosovo seems to confirm the hypothesised mechanism that defence integration served as means to safeguard the European community and restore a positive sense of self and progress. While important nuance could be gained by tracing variation on the national level, the analysis highlighted crucial similarities across the E3, for instance a broadly shared commitment to the transatlantic alliance. Another important element that bound German, British and French framings of ESDP is the notion of the 'European interest' in that period as well as discursive focus on process rather than outcome. As Milzow (2012) notes 'everything in their legitimisations of European defence was hyphenated with European'.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, 'leaders' emphasis on the creation of ESDP, along with their neglect of its content and rationale, suggests that, to them, the mere existence of a European defence policy also constituted its purpose' (Milzow 2012, 139–46).

The findings call into question two prevailing explanations of ESDP. First materialist arguments that EU defence serves to balance the American hegemon by working towards a competing pole of military power, as suggested by e.g. neo-realist analysis (Posen 2006; Jones 2007; Rosato 2011). Second, choice-theoretic explanations, which argue that ESDP primarily served to strengthen NATO while providing an alternative forum for pursuing diverging national interests (Howorth 2014c). While such considerations undoubtedly played a role in this process, they do not seem to be catalytic. Instead, it is during times of ontological crisis that diverging national prerogatives were overcome, as states found themselves trapped in the community dilemma. In their efforts to overcome this dilemma, states united around norms of shared leadership, reinforced by a perception of identity differentiation from the American hegemon. The analysis now turns to this latter dynamic.

¹⁷⁴ Gerhard Schröder, speech in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 14/135, 28 November 2000, 135th session,

¹⁷⁵ PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.06 FRA, 17. Dezember 1999, p. 3.

¹⁷⁶ Milzow's (2012) finds 'the vagueness of the St Malo declaration was thus the result not so much of opposed interests but of a broader lack of clarity about the nature and purpose of the European defence policy. (Milzow 2012, 139).

7.0 Mars and Venus Growing Estranged

A third and final important factor in EU defence integration seems to be dissonance between the European core and the USA - as a befriended 'other' and outgroup of the European security community. The notion of estrangement captures this phenomenon suggesting that increased identity differentiation between Europeans and the US can reinforce integrative dynamics as it increases ingroup valuation. For estrangement to be present transatlantic dissonance has to exist across new cleavages and constitute an unprecedented norm collision. Against the background of the previous discussion, however, one may ask how is it possible that Europeans did not want to oppose the US or NATO but at the same time experienced estrangement? This paradox can be resolved by introducing a group identity level, on which social interactions operate below the more stable and persistent material interests. It is more implicit and reflects a broader psychological inclination in which decision-making processes are embedded.

Estrangement starts from the SIT assumption that individuals perceive themselves and their in-group relative to significant others outside of that group (Gaffney and Hogg 2023). Once members of an in-group perceive identity differentiation with a significant 'other', this reinforces their sense of belonging to the ingroup, thereby fostering ingroup valuation and often outgroup devaluation. As a side effect, this may temporarily lead to a more conflictual relationship with the outgroup until intergroup relations transition to a higher level and readjust according to new institutional realities (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010; Eberle and Handl 2020). Indeed, the challenge of measurement is significant. However, these problems can be addressed through further research and innovative methods. In contrast, no improved methodology can correct a fundamental misinterpretation of the social relationships at play. Arguably, the prevailing perception that EU defence integration is driven by fear of the United States and Germany has contributed to such misinterpretations.¹⁷⁷

Obviously, the transatlantic relationship is not impervious to limited resources that constrain state action. Moreover, recurrent periods of estrangement have the potential to drive a wedge between groups, which over time could lead to manifest group rivalry in this domain. Recognising the competitive facets inherent in this relationship is therefore crucial. However, the primary objective of this study is to examine whether the impetus for institution-building stemmed from a zero-sum mindset or whether trade-offs were initially overlooked in order to foster psychological harmony (Jervis 2017; Lebow 2008). It is argued here that the latter is the case and that Europeans' propensity to cooperate is driven by community effects, including dissonance with outgroup members, which fosters ingroup solidarity.

To gauge the degree of estrangement in the late 1990s, a brief historical analysis of the normative trajectory of transatlantic relations is valuable, as this context is key to assessing the depth of subsequent norm collisions. The analysis shows that the ESDP emerged during a period when Europeans came to view – more than ever – that they are “from Venus” in matters of international order, while the US remains firmly rooted in a Martian perspective (Kagan 2004).

¹⁷⁷ IR tends to conceptualise state relations in either cooperative or competitive terms with little in-between space.

To begin with, the United States played a crucial role in the formation of what eventually became the EU by urging European integration after WWII. In fact, American post-war policy can be described as an unparalleled instance of nation-building. The US embraced the resurgence of a power pole that had historically posed an existential threat to its security, with no guarantee that this scenario would not recur in the future. While long-term economic benefits from a united and peaceful Europe were certainly anticipated, the US could afford this approach at a time when it accounted for 50% of the world's GDP.¹⁷⁸ Today it is often forgotten that immediately after WWII there was almost uncontested support for European defence integration in the US.

In 1953, for instance, Congress passed the Richard Amendment which aimed to channel 50% of relevant US military assistance through the European Defence Community (EDC) before it was even established. When the EDC failed, there were plans to punish France for having vetoed its own proposal. Yet instead the realisation set in that the US 'can and must encourage unity in Europe but we cannot compel unity'.¹⁷⁹ Divergences first became problematic at the height of the Cold War in the 1960s during the Kennedy Presidency. In 1962, the US faces serious balance of payment issues which leads President Kennedy to raise duties on glass and carpets (Lundestad 1998, 94). This in turn triggers the first trade war between the US and the EC. This period would set the path for the US policy stance on European integration, including defence, in the latter part of the 20th century. Sloan (2016) describes the US stance from then on as a 'yes, but' approach suggesting US governments were keen on 'supporting the European effort but warning of the potential negative consequences' (Sloan 2016, 120). With regards to defence policy, this period marked a shift towards the view that if a European pillar in defence was to be created, it would have to be firmly located within NATO and never separate (Weiss 2011, 5).¹⁸⁰

Subsequent presidents then vacillated in their stance on European foreign/security cooperation. Carter was more accommodating and offered 'unqualified support for the EC', Reagan instead stressed that much had changed since the Treaty of Rome and urged greater burden-sharing in defence, Bush in turn downplayed the increasing divergences stating 'what an absurdity it would be if future historians attribute the demise of the Western alliance to disputes over beef hormones and wars over pasta' (cited in Lundestad 1998).¹⁸¹ However, it was an almost uncontested view that Europeans needed to be kept within the transatlantic alliance and not develop an autonomous defence capacity that would undermine US influence in Europe. For the cohesion of the alliance, it was helpful that these divergences were superseded by the Cold War, which united the US and Europeans against a common enemy. The Cold War therefore provided both a material and an ideational structure that pitted Americans and Europeans together which prevented major norm clashes about the maintenance of international order. During this entire period, Europeans and

¹⁷⁸ Today, the US accounts for about 25% of world GDP and frequently exhibits scepticism towards European integration. When adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), the US accounts for approximately 15%, the EU for 14%, and China for 19% of global GDP. International Monetary Fund, "Share of World GDP at Purchasing Power Parity", *World Economic Outlook Database*, 2024.

¹⁷⁹ US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, vol. 5, pt. 1, doc. 417, 16 June 1953, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v05p1/d417>.

¹⁸⁰ By 1971, this view had solidified, and European integration was no longer regarded as an end in itself. After several years of balance-of-payments deficits, the US also recorded its first trade deficit. President Nixon now emphasised 'the problems which European integration implied for the US and for our political and economic relations with our allies across the Atlantic' (Lundestad 1998, 46).

¹⁸¹ George H. W. Bush, "Remarks at the Boston University Commencement Ceremony", 21 May 1989, George Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/437>.

Americans broadly shared similar norms, on a most basic level the idea that international institutions and the use of force serve to counter the Communist threat. This however changed with the end of the Cold War with the effect that differences were no longer shackled by the existence of a common threat, moreover, there was now space for different ideas on international order and the use of force.

This is where the European community became less intertwined with the US triggering a process of estrangement in the 1990s. Being liberated from an existential threat at their doorstep reinforced the European community's *post-heroic* tendency, while the US largely retained a *heroic-belligerent* outlook on world politics. These two dispositions differ in their threat perceptions, understandings of leadership, and valuation of shared international norms. Both post-heroic and heroic societies have generalised their positions and understand them as natural human behaviour. In post-heroic societies it is generally assumed that actors in international politics possess a natural preference for peace or at least the peaceful resolution of conflicts (Münkler 2015; Scheipers 2014). Furthermore, post-heroic democracies embrace a fairly unexpansive interpretation of liberalism, collective achievement and shared accountability. Heroic-belligerent societies instead tend to adopt a more Manichean outlook, viewing themselves as justified in containing or, if necessary, confronting regimes perceived as evil, preferably but not necessarily through shared accountability.

These differences in outlooks are reflected in the debates about NATO in the 1990s. Most European governments felt uncomfortable with the US trajectory towards liberal interventionism. They did not want to look far beyond Europe when it came to maintaining order. In contrast, the US administration saw NATO increasingly as a means for global power projection in a dangerous post-proliferated world (Rynning 2005, 83). The idea was for NATO to 'flexibly manage a diverse range of threats in a world where some operations were likely to be contested and fail to gain universal approval' (ibid; 87). Some viewed this division over 'going out of area' and acting without UN approval as the worst transatlantic division since the Suez crisis in 1956.

This collision of post-heroic vs heroic outlook is also reflected in plans of the US congress to contain regimes it considered as pariahs even if that undermined established international norms. The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) from 1996 obliged the US President to impose sanctions on persons or companies who make certain investments in Iran or Libya. The goal was to contain the Iranian nuclear programme as well as Libyan support for terrorist groups by hindering any investment in these countries' oil and natural gas reserves. Similarly, the so-called 'Helms-Burton Act' aimed to force the international community to isolate Cuba by sanctioning those offering investments or loans to Cuba.

Across the E3 this was viewed as an act of hegemonic unilateralism of illiberal kind. Indeed, the US stance represented a polar-opposite approach to these pariah states namely containment short of war rather than the broadly shared European idea of change through trade¹⁸² Both acts trigger irritation as their extraterritorial effect infringed on rules recognised by international organisations such as the WTO and IMF (Smis and Borghet 1999, 227).

¹⁸²A German note states regarding ILSA and Helms-Burton, "that the extra-territorial sanctions legislation of the USA is fundamentally unacceptable to the EU". PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 301.02, 12. Februar 1999, p. 14. Britain and France objected to such extraterritorial sanctions also for national economic reasons as BP and Total relied on trade links with Iran and Libya. TNA, PREM 49/570/2, Part 4, p. 39; TNA, PREM 49/81/1, Part 1, p. 49.

Generally, these frictions were not new, as the US had several times in the past prevented Europeans from cooperating with states it considered pariahs – partly for security reasons, but also for economic purposes. This began in the 1960s when the US first intervened in the gas pipeline deal between Bonn and Moscow under JFK, which successfully halted the project at the time. Twenty years later, in 1982, Reagan made a similar attempt but this time not only Bonn, but also Paris and London showed reluctance to give in (Lundestad 2018, 172). In both cases however Europeans backed up and arguably the condition of the Cold War prevented a deeper sense of estrangement to emerge. However, the tensions with US Congress over ILSA and Helms Burton in the late 1990s signified a new level of norm collision as Europeans not only refused to back down but even threatened to retaliate. As such, ‘the EU adopted blocking and claw-back legislation ... and prepared to fight the battle on legal grounds’ with no intention of giving in (Smis and Borghet 1999, 228). The later split over the Iraq war in 2003 represented a more extreme expression of US unilateralism, yet the fracture over these norms had already surfaced well before Iraq.¹⁸³

7.1 National Variation in Norm Collisions

What this brief overview shows is that, on the one hand, transatlantic norm collisions have intensified over time, and, on the other hand, there has been an increasing resistance to US interference and a desire for self-determination in Europe after the Cold War. Moreover, the division into post-heroic and heroic societies made it difficult for the two groups to keep political differences in one area from affecting relations as a whole.¹⁸⁴ The estrangement resulting from this in the mid-1990s spurred Europeans to realise their collective identity, providing an impetus for further integration, particularly in foreign and security policy, where identity differentiation became most pronounced. Interestingly, both the UK and Germany, in the year 2000, secretly assessed changes in the transatlantic relationship – highlighting normative clashes while nonetheless recognising that strategic interests in NATO remained crucial. Such dynamics of estrangement from the US can be traced on three levels: the macro level – related to norms concerning the maintenance of international order; the meso level – linked to norms governing the transatlantic partnership; and the micro level – concerning military practices. Increasing dissonance was expressed to varying degrees across the E3 in the lead-up to the ESDP on these levels. Nevertheless, the analysis supports the claim that, overall, there was unprecedented normative dissonance across new cleavages among the E3, within which the ESDP decision-making process was embedded.

7.1.1 France – Brushed off

France experienced significant norm collisions on all three levels – macro, meso, and micro – with a slightly weaker effect on the micro level. In sum, these collisions contributed to unprecedented dissonance with the US ‘other’ while increasing valuation of the ingroup bolstered France’s inclination towards EU defence cooperation. Ever since France had withdrawn from the NATO integrated command, under Charles De Gaulle, in 1966, it had tried to pursue a more independent

¹⁸³ In the end a confrontation could be averted as both sides refrained from prosecuting each other. However, the debate over Nord Stream II in 2019 and Trump’s America first policy have further undermined the taboo of sanctioning closest allies.

¹⁸⁴ TNA, PREM 49/1684/2, Part 11, p. 47.

security policy from the US. This Gaullist desire of establishing a transatlantic alliance where France is on par with the US and the UK has left a lasting legacy in parts of the French civil service. Despite the mythologies, however, the French preference for more European autonomy should not be interpreted as an interest in rivalling American power. De Gaulle and all subsequent administrations made clear that France would continue to participate in the political aspects of NATO remaining true to its treaty obligations and a loyal ally to the US (Sloan 2016, 50). What French elites took issue with was not American hegemony per se, but Europe's 'culture of dependence' in domains where more independence was possible and in the French view healthy (French MoD Official, 2023).¹⁸⁵

As the Cold War ended, there was first a notable period of Franco-American rapprochement. France had supported the First Gulf War in Iraq in 1991 under Mitterrand (Operation Daguet) and the Assemblée Nationale even took the unprecedented decision to place French forces under US command. Also, in Bosnia, France had cooperated closely with the US in diplomatic and military matters. In the face of the new geopolitical landscape, Paris hoped for a Europeanisation of the transatlantic alliance as well as more recognition on a national level. After Jacques Chirac was elected to government in 1995, he immediately inserted himself into the reform process of NATO. The challenge the alliance faced after the Soviet threat had gone was severe and it pertained to norms France held dearly about the transatlantic partnership (Lundestad 2018; Weiss 2011). The question came down to how one could build a more flexible Alliance structure that would allow responses to conflicts outside the NATO territory (non-Article 5 situations). Implied in this was improved burden-sharing and a better balance between the US and Europeans. The response came in two initiatives. First the so-called Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) which refers to a flexible command structure through which allied forces could be organised on a task-specific basis to undertake missions beyond NATO borders (Sloan 2016, 108).¹⁸⁶ The second was the aforementioned ESDI, which would allow Europeans to borrow NATO assets and act through the political body of the resurrected WEU.

France interpreted these initiatives as signs that the US was genuinely prepared to put the partnership on more equal footing. In their 1997 speeches, Chirac and Defence Minister Millon would initially praise these initiatives and describe them as a 'historic event' and 'the most important reform of the Alliance since its creation'.¹⁸⁷ Washington, on the other hand, was thinking more in terms of an incremental development, yet it was reluctant to let Europeans too far off the lead. In parallel to these efforts, Chirac had also requested European control over NATO's Mediterranean command AFSOUTH offering in turn to re-join the integrated military command. However, this was out of the question for the US military especially because the AFSOUTH had commanded US forces in the Balkans and was considered of high strategic importance. The sentiment that arose from this was expressed in several interviews namely that in all of these endeavours, France was

¹⁸⁵ A diplomatic note states, 'Errera said France had a problem with the "culture of dependence" on NATO. They wanted to turn this into a culture of non-dependence'. Notably, British officials expressed alignment with this view, stating the aim was 'to give Europe the autonomous capability needed to act alone and to change the NATO-dependent mentality'. TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p. 148.

¹⁸⁶ The ideas were first proposed at the NATO Brussels summit in 1994 and then continued in Berlin in 1996.

¹⁸⁷ Boniface, Pascal. 1997. "The NATO Debate in France". In *NATO Enlargement: The National Debates over Ratification*, NATO Academic Forum, October 7. <https://www.nato.int/acad/conf/enlarge97/boniface.htm>.

missing recognition and appreciation as a partner and befriended ally.¹⁸⁸ French executives felt that they had extended a hand across the Atlantic – further than some domestic audiences had desired – only to be met by a cold shoulder (Former French Minister, 2023; British Diplomat, 2023). In contrast, French executives were held in much higher esteem in Europe, not only because Chirac was the most experienced head of state, but also because of the role France played in the EU expansion process. Dissonance over the transatlantic partnership and France's role therein thus provided an important psychological backdrop for EU defence integration.

This sense of dissonance interacted with a wider concern about the US approach to international order. In France there was increasing apprehension that the US might leverage its power to bypass the UN Security Council (UNSC) and other institutions which upheld principles of multilateralism. (Sloan 2016, 115). Bypassing the UNSC in the Kosovo case was supposed to be an absolute exception, especially as France regarded its permanent seat and veto right at the UNSC as a key symbol for maintaining its role as global power. On the other hand, the UN personifies the principle of 'sovereign equality' which modern France values deeply. The norm implies that all sovereign states are equal before international law and are thus protected from encroachment by more powerful states. It forms a cornerstone of post-war diplomacy in Europe, and in France it is seen as rooted in the country's enlightenment heritage (French Policy Analyst, 2024). The US trajectory towards unilateralism challenged these norms and role expectations in this period. Consequently, France's esteem for the US diminished, as it perceived a growing inclination to pursue heroic foreign policy objectives, effectively assuming the role of a 'world policeman' (French MoD Official, 2023). Moreover, the US came to embody a different approach to maintaining international order than Europeans. The effect of the norm collisions then was validation of the ingroup by identity differentiation from the significant other across the Atlantic. (Mérand 2010, 370).

In addition to identity differentiation at the macro and meso levels, there was also estrangement over military practices. Normative difference in this regard became visible over the course of the first Gulf War, Bosnia and Kosovo interventions. Interviews suggest that the period gives rise to the idea of the "European Way of War". This was most strongly expressed by British and French interviewees, and it captures a specific European approach to the use of force. Interviewees emphasised that France and Britain shared a particular regard for taking the perspective of the local population due to their colonial histories (French MoD Official, 2023; British MoD Official, 2023). Reflecting a more post-heroic inclination, they prioritised minimal use of force, while Americans leaned toward swiftly eliminating any potential threats. For example, a French interviewee remembered feeling disenchanted by General Clark's speeches in Congress, where he criticised Europeans for their cautious approach to the bombing campaign in Kosovo, which according to Clark would have lasted months longer if it had been done the 'European way' (Former French Minister, 2023).¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ In addition, a British brief stated about France 'The wounds of the failed reintegration in 1996 have not yet fully healed. Whilst therefore there is a lot of public satisfaction at the headline progress, much of the detail still requires sensitive handling'. TNA, PREM 49/805, Part 7, p. 24.

¹⁸⁹ Clark, Wesley. 1999. *Interview with Gen. Wesley Clark*. PBS Frontline: "War in Europe". <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/clark.html>.

Many of these normative differences first surfaced in this period. They contributed to soft forms of othering and a psychological disposition that led to ingroup validation and outgroup estrangement. However, these psychological processes remained subordinate to the deeply ingrained material interests that have shaped transatlantic relations throughout most of the 20th century. As such, France had little interest in expending resources to oppose the emerging post-war order, as American hegemony via NATO ultimately served its core security interests. The lower level of consciousness at which norm clashes operated is evident from how they were mentioned in interviews, typically framed as important context or background factors. If this normative dissonance had been more salient to broader segments of the French executive, a more time-sensitive and zero-sum mentality regarding the ESDP in France might have emerged, as hypothesised by neo-classical realist analysis.

7.1.2 Britain – Minding the Gap

Looking beyond the close personal relationship between Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, there is evidence that the UK's stance on the ESDP was also shaped by norm collisions with its special ally. While British estrangement from the US was lower than that of France and Germany, it remained substantial across all three levels. The evidence suggests that, at the macro level, many in the British executive felt US foreign policy was becoming unpredictable and losing its moral grounding (British Adviser to the PM, 2023; Senior British Diplomat b, 2023). At the meso level, the UK shared concerns that role expectations within the transatlantic partnership were not being met, fearing that America might reduce Britain to the role of 'America's foot soldier'. Lastly, at the micro level, Britain's sense of belonging was influenced by a convergence of European military practices that came to distinguish Europeans from the US.

When reflecting on the early years of the Blair administration, the seemingly close bonds between Blair and Clinton quickly come to mind. Observers described the two as 'soulmates' and during telephone calls they would address each other as 'mate' and 'bud' (Wintour 2016). However, beyond this seemingly natural partnership, there were perceived differences in the trajectory of the two countries within the British government, including the Prime Minister's office. In January 2000 planners distribute a confidential paper to the Tony Blair's office titled '*Transatlantic Problems: Mind the Gap*'. In the paper and debates around it, Advisers reflect on 'new, underlying changes which could account for the growth in disputes [with the USA]'. Specifically useful for this analysis is that the authors differentiate between old and new issues suggesting 'long term chronic conditions' do not account for 'recent growth in transatlantic tension', but instead 'big gaps between the US and Europe are emerging in new areas'.¹⁹⁰ The confidential nature of the paper lends itself well to assess how normative differences may have affected processes of social identification.

When it comes to the maintenance of international order, Blair was personally the greatest proponent of a more expansive approach to liberal interventionism of all European executives. In his infamous Chicago speech, he outlined his vision of the 'doctrine of the international community', which envisaged the enforcement of peace even without the broadest possible international legitimacy (James 2024). This was peculiarly in line with his notion of leadership and his aversion to isolation. While Blair himself was a slight outlier in this respect, there is ample

¹⁹⁰ TNA, PREM 49/1684/2, Part 11, pp. 58–61.

evidence that British elites felt estrangement from the US on issues of international order.¹⁹¹ First, the 'Mind the Gap' paper shows that the Blair government drew a sharp distinction between the Clinton administration and Congress more broadly. The former was 'sometime well-meaning but often weak' whereas Congress was considered to be 'frequently malevolent'. Moreover, it was perceived that the 'Congress/Whitehouse relationship on foreign-policy had collapsed' because the middle-ground bipartisanship which side-lined extremes had broken down. As a result, Congress would now use its foreign-policy levers for domestic political advantage which made the US 'an even more difficult and unpredictable partner'. The US approach to international security was thus seen to undergo a 'fundamental shift' giving rise to a 'growing gap' with Britain and Europe.¹⁹² Overall, the evidence suggests that British elites identified with the European perspective on international order, increasingly viewing the US as more of a stranger than a cousin after the Cold War (Patten 2006).

In fact, growing US unilateralism worried the Brits in a similar way as most Europeans. It was noted for instance that the US was 'unwilling to follow the European lead in pooling more political and legal authority' at the international level. Moreover, it was thought that the US had become sceptical of established institutions like the UNSC and non-proliferation treaties, believing them to be inadequate in addressing the proliferation that had already taken place. Conversely 'Europeans don't share that threat or risk perception. Remain committed to deterrence and global-non-proliferation and arms control regimes. And give much higher priority to the strategic relationships with Russia and China than dealing with any minimal rogue threat'.¹⁹³

Furthermore, Europeans were not willing to follow the US in rising defence budgets and expansive revolutions in military affairs, as their approach to conflict was not about 'overwhelming force' and 'rapid war winning' but instead about sufficient force and low-tech peacekeeping (ibid; LaFeber 2009, 74). On the one hand, Britain feared that this divergence could 'reduce the likelihood and ability of the Europeans and the US to act jointly'. On the other hand, this was not a fear of being abandoned outside of the American security umbrella, but more about how this umbrella began to operate. With regards to abandonment, the US tilt to Asia was already in the late 1990s considered to be an old topic. 'The Pacific Tilt has been around for over twenty years without real impact. Ditto for America's changing demographic (more Hispanic and Asian) and geographic (more South and West) profile' (ibid.). Britain thus felt confident that Europe would remain Washington's top priority, as deeply entrenched material interests had not changed for either side, which runs counter to neo/neo-classical realist arguments.¹⁹⁴

The problem was rather normative in nature such as the prospect of facing 'the dictates of Congress'. In combination with the different spending priorities on defence this would lead to a problematic division of labour 'with Americans safe in the air' and 'Europeans facing retaliation on the ground'. Indeed, being relegated to the role of 'America's foot soldier' was not in line with

¹⁹¹ James (2024) argues hawkish assumptions about Blair in this context have been overstated: 'the Chicago speech was not a grand revision of international politics. It was a reflection of the international crises of the 1990s, a riposte to the prior Conservative government's realpolitik approach, and an appeal against US isolationism' (James 2024).

¹⁹² TNA, PREM 49/1684/2, Part 11, p. 70ff.

¹⁹³ TNA, PREM 49/1684/2, Part 11, pp. 60f.

¹⁹⁴ Similarly, isolationism i.e., that the US withdraws from the world stage as well as protectionism in trade are considered to be 'evergreens' that are not at the roof of this new sense of dissonance.

Britain's view of the special relationship, nor with Blair's vision for Europe.¹⁹⁵ It can be seen as a significant psychological factor that drew Blair closer to Europeans in an effort to 'see where maximum freedom of manoeuvre could be obtained without displacing NATO or making others in NATO nervous of our intentions'.¹⁹⁶

Similar to France, Britain was therefore experiencing a *post-imperial minority complex*, which was strongly shaped by its relationship with the USA. In Britain's case, this is evident in Blair's discourse on European leadership in the new millennium and the capacity to equal American clout around the world.¹⁹⁷ Several notes on the Balkan interventions further expressed disenchantment about a lack of appreciation for the European contribution.¹⁹⁸ What this suggests is social identification with the European ingroup which shared many of Britain's struggles in this partnership. In fact, the idea of the "European Way of War" was first mentioned by a British respondent who played a key role in drafting both the St Malo declaration and NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept (British MoD Official, 2023; Everts et al. 2004). Beyond normative disparities concerning the use of force, the findings indicate that British respondents linked it to a common European vision of close alignment between policymakers and the military. In the American approach the different constituencies would often pull in different directions leading to overly heroic expectations. 'We felt NATO was a bit clunky, to put it mildly; half of the time diplomats and military sit completely separately. Especially in a small war context you need the military as a political tool – you need to integrate the two and that was what both we and the French believed' (British MoD Official, 2023). At no point however would a British respondent question the viability of NATO as merely 'all that stuff was running in the background' (ibid.).

In summary, therefore, latent dynamics on all three levels can also be traced in the British case, pushing British elites closer to the European core than to the US – despite the close Blair/Clinton relationship. While outgroup devaluation can primarily be attributed to the malevolent perception of Congress's foreign policy practices, in-group validation is rooted in shared European perceptions of order and status. That much of this trend would be reversed over Iraq and Brexit should not distract from how broader feelings of closeness were developing at this point in time.

7.1.3 Germany – Growing Estranged

Germany shared core British and French concerns across the board, albeit with a slightly different normative emphasis. While France and the UK experienced dissonance stemming from their diminished roles in the transatlantic partnership, Germany's dissonance emerged from heightened expectations of assuming a leadership role therein. The country is particularly uncomfortable to support the defence of American interest globally in the way that this was expected. The collision first arises following George Bush's unwavering support for German reunification, which raised anticipations of reciprocal support. Throughout the 1990s Germany was then referred to as a

¹⁹⁵ TNA, PREM 49/1684/2, Part 11, p 63. Another iteration was the notion that the Americans would do the cooking and Europeans the washing up. I am grateful to Anne Deighton for this insight.

¹⁹⁶ TNA, PREM 49/327, Part 6, p. 16

¹⁹⁷ TNA, PREM 49/310, Part 14, p. 103

¹⁹⁸ 'The US and Holbrooke re-ran Dayton, reflecting the Dictates of Congress, while keeping the Europeans in the dark about diplomacy and the military planning. Kosovo was a success, but the US got the credit while we underpinned it'. TNA, PREM 49/292, Part 4, p. 203.

‘partnership in leadership’ – an expression that suggested the most powerful European country had a special role in the US endeavour of ordering the post-Cold War world (Asmus 1991).

The first Gulf War, however, highlighted severe differences in German vs American views of international order and how it should be maintained. In Germany there was a cross-party consensus that foreign policy was not to be conducted by offensive military means, which meant that Bundeswehr interventions outside of the NATO territory were seen as illegitimate. This civilian power narrative of peace policy (*Friedenspolitik*) clashed with the US vision to create a ‘New World Order’ through global force projection assuming NATO’s borders had ‘enlarged’ (Nye 1992).¹⁹⁹ Germany’s reluctance to participate or even share responsibility for the First Gulf War coupled with peace demonstrations in Berlin were seen in Washington as a lack of solidarity and unappreciative of US support in the unification process (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010, 431).

To alleviate the tensions, Chancellor Kohl agreed to pay 18 bn Deutschmark for the first Gulf War and to engage in humanitarian missions in the region. In addition, the government initiated a domestic debate on Germany’s foreign/security posture in the new political environment. The process culminated in the 1994 constitutional court ruling on what constitutes legitimate out of area deployments for the Bundeswehr. In July 1994, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled that ‘out of area’ missions were constitutional – if the Bundestag gave its prior consent.²⁰⁰ Furthermore missions had to take place within the framework of systems of collective security ‘strictly bound to the preservation of peace’, which in technical terms included the UN, OSCE, WEU and NATO (ibid.). Despite the more permissive rule about out of area missions, dissonance with the US was not reduced but actually increased. Following the court decision, both Kohl and Schröder made every effort to tone down their commitment to military missions embracing policies focussed on civilian means and conflict prevention in the immediate neighbourhood.

The court ruling already constituted a significant step away from Germany’s pacific approach to foreign policy. However, just when Germans had enshrined their preparedness to act abroad militarily via multilateral institutions, Congress began to take an increasingly hostile stance on established forms of multilateralism, especially the UN and OSCE.²⁰¹ For Germany, however, both institutions remained crucial mandating bodies (Senior German Diplomat a, 2023)²⁰². Against this background, the Foreign Office held a secret conclave on transatlantic relations in January 2000. Like their British counterparts, German officials were not primarily concerned with US abandonment, entrapment, or NATO’s decay. Rather, the core issue lay in a fundamental difference in political ‘philosophy’ between the US and Europe.²⁰³ This included what they saw as

¹⁹⁹ Madeleine Albright spoke of ‘enlarged borders’ in the lead up to the NATO ministerial meeting on 8 December 1998 just after St Malo expressing a desire to turn NATO into a flexible framework without geographical limits. Madeleine Albright, “The Right Balance will Secure NATO’s Future”, Financial Times, December 7, 1998.

²⁰⁰ The so-called *Parlamentsvorbehalt* (parliamentary right to co-mandate Bundeswehr missions) was born, which was however only enshrined in law in 2005.

²⁰¹ Washington’s support for UN peacekeeping missions virtually collapsed after the debacle in Somalia in 1993 expressing itself also in reluctance to pay UN dues. Similarly, the OSCE was sidelined by the US for being too broad and weak to serve as a viable institution to pursue American interests (Rynning 2005, 44). A German brief refers to this new American approach as ‘Jacksonianism or *American Gaullism*’. PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 301.02, 2. Februar 2000, p8.

²⁰² German OSCE support was guided by the desire to capitalise on the benevolent climate for reconciliation with Russia. The UN instead represented the world community and with its “Agenda for Peace” the idea of a ‘neutral third’ which counteracted any perceived militarisation of German security policy (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010, 433).

²⁰³ PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 301.02, 2. Februar 2000, pp. 2ff.

Congress's Manichean worldview – one that divided the world into 'good states' and 'rogue states'. Yet rather than advocating separation, German officials concluded that these differences made a renewal of transatlantic cooperation paramount: 'to prevent the US, in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, from conjuring the very problems it would later be forced to resolve'. In sum, this reflects deep normative collisions and growing confusion about the US. as a trusted partner – one that, in the eyes of German officials, 'did not understand the essence of European integration' (Senior German Diplomat b, 2023). This, in turn, underscored European similarities and a shared community of values (*Wertegemeinschaft*).

By the time of the Kosovo intervention, the idea of "partnership in leadership" had become purely rhetorical. German governments found themselves increasingly marginalised when it came to peacekeeping in the Balkans.²⁰⁴ Like others, the country was side-lined by Richard Holbrooke's shuttle diplomacy and during the negotiations at Dayton. Also, at the decisive Rambouillet conference, it played a junior role, despite the challenge the issue posed for Germany's self-conception (Senior German Diplomat b, 2023). Overall, in both Bosnia and Kosovo, German policymakers developed a feeling that the US had given up too quickly on the diplomatic track before the war, overstepped their responsibility during the war, and contributed to an unnecessarily militarised environment after the war (e.g., by rejecting UN oversight and rearming the Bosnian army). Such a situation had been unprecedented and transgressed the existing rules on which the transatlantic relationship had been based for decades. Even more so than in France and the UK, it led to the impression that the US was prepared to depart from the humanist ideals that Europeans had just enshrined in the EU.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that these normative clashes occur at a latent level and tend to operate independently of strategic rationales. Throughout the ESDP process, Germany presented itself as a staunch supporter of NATO. It adopted a largely hands-off approach to ESDP while acting as an honest broker during the period when France and the UK were rebuilding confidence. Arguably, if the most powerful country in Europe had felt its core security interests were at stake, it would likely have taken a more active role in the policy process. Instead, Germany is content with constructing an institution primarily for symbolic purposes – one that allows both Europe and Germany to assert their identities internationally (Bunde 2021; Helferich 2023b).

7.1.4 Estrangement: Preliminary Conclusion

In sum, the tensions arising from differing European views on how to build a post-Cold War security architecture reminded Europeans of their shared communal values. The European core thus advocated for the maintenance of international order based, first, on a balance of means that favoured civilian over military instruments, and second, on a multilateral mandate that upheld the authority of institutions such as the UN and OSCE. These practices suggest a more post-heroic attitude in Europe, which at times stood in contrast to the more heroic-belligerent tendencies visible in the US approach, particularly within Congress. In line with SIT and OS, this collective estrangement incentivises deeper relations within the ingroup.

²⁰⁴ For example, Washington was not prepared to support German initiatives such as UN participation, the EU Action Plan and the Vance-Owen Peace Plan, and marginalised counterparts during important peace talks.

Nevertheless, estrangement remains a second-order psychological process, operating above more deeply rooted material interests. This is evident from the observation that interviewees perceived these factors as less significant than the overarching goal of preserving NATO's hard security guarantees. Figuratively speaking, divorce was never an option for any party, even as Europeans found comfort in having their own bed to share. As the discussion of the second transformation phase around PESCO will further illustrate, estrangement from the US appears to be a necessary condition for deep and comprehensive transformation in EU defence.

Figure 6: Variation in Transatlantic Norm Collisions Affecting Identity Differentiation

	France	Britain	Germany
Macro – norms related to maintenance of international order	<i>High</i> (Unilateralism; Malevolence in practices of Congress)	<i>Elevated</i> (Unilateralism; Malevolence in practices of Congress)	<i>High</i> (Unilateralism; Malevolence in practices of Congress)
Meso – norms related to transatlantic partnership	<i>High</i> (Lack of goodwill and appreciation)	<i>Medium</i> (Undermining of special relationship; problematic division of labour and risk)	<i>Elevated</i> (Pressure to take leadership and project force)
Micro – norms related to national practices in doing crisis response	<i>Elevated</i> (Lack of perspective taking; excessive use of force, lack of diplomatic/military synergies)	<i>Elevated</i> (Lack of perspective taking; excessive use of force, lack of diplomatic/military synergies)	<i>Medium</i> (Lack of prolonged diplomatic engagement, weapon proliferation)

8.0 Conclusion: ESDP as Response to Ontological Crisis

To conclude this case study, I will reflect on how the proposed theoretical framework compares with materialist and choice-theoretic explanations of ESDP. Building on the theoretical comparisons made during the analysis, the goal is to contrast the outlined psychological drivers with prevailing understandings and their conception of the nature of EU defence integration. Based on the previous analysis, it is misguided to portray the ESDP primarily as a response to hard security threats or as a means for individual states to maximise their military power vis-à-vis others. The analysis suggests that actors did not predominantly view the ESDP as a defence against immediate threats to EU state borders. Neither the US, Russia, nor Germany were seen as threats to European or national security during this period of liberal optimism.²⁰⁵

In fact, Russia's role – as a former adversary and overwhelmingly powerful state – is insightful when contrasting neo-realist explanations. It has received limited attention so far because the country played almost no role in E3 debates on the ESDP. When the Russian Federation was discussed, it was mostly in the context of its unstable internal situation rather than as a military threat.²⁰⁶ Military confrontations with Russia were considered a thing of the past and within NATO's remit anyway. Conversely, Europeans welcomed Yeltsin's desire to 'radically improve the relationship between the EU and Russia' by joining the WTO and OSCE.²⁰⁷ The archival records reveal a remarkable level of energy devoted to supporting Russia. In 1999, there was even consideration of funding personnel for Russia's space programme.²⁰⁸ Similarly, Russian elites mostly welcomed the EU defence initiative, as it promised a more inclusive approach to European security than US-dominated NATO.²⁰⁹

Another indicator that speaks against a materialist conception of ESDP is defence budgets. Despite the Balkan wars, the defence budgets of all E3 countries continue to decrease after the inception of ESDP, with only minor adjustments made for ESDP purposes. On that basis, a purely materialist view of the ESDP as a means to defend against overwhelmingly powerful states in neo-realist terms or as a counter to US abandonment/entrapment does not seem convincing.

²⁰⁵ In August 1999, A German Brief notes 'currently no existential military threat to the area of the EU visible'. PAAA, B 220 – ZA, 350.10/1, 25. August 1999, p. 3.

²⁰⁶ In one of his last Bundestag speeches, Genscher framed EU integration as inward-looking, while NATO was for external defence. 'Ladies and gentlemen, today we are not only taking a decision on monetary policy. We are making a decision that belongs in the historical dimension of European unification. This European unification was not, as some erroneously claim today, a response to the threat from the East. We gave that answer by establishing the Western alliance [NATO]. No, this European unification became a response to the European fratricidal wars, to the aberrations of German and European history. It is the lasting answer to two terrible world wars in this century'. Genscher, Bundestag speech, 23 April 1998.

²⁰⁷ TNA, PREM 49/79, Part 2, p. 93.

²⁰⁸ 'Russia's basic problem was that they had privatised property too quickly without putting any proper structures in place. The oligarchs had simply siphoned money out of the country. This problem had to be tackled but there was no way Russia could go back to the old system. ... The Americans were thinking of ways in which they might be able to help in the short term, for example, by helping Russians pay for their space programme staff'. TNA, PREM 49/572, Part 6, p. 116.

²⁰⁹ Yeltsin had little issue with the Baltic states joining the EU but was rather critical of their entry into NATO 'Yeltsin had repeated his opposition to NATO membership of Baltic States but equally reiterated that Baltic membership of the European Union was acceptable'. TNA, PREM 49/572, Part 6, p. 93. This period of rapprochement came to an end after the Kosovo intervention, however, by that time ESDP had been initiated.

Despite their shortcomings, materialist theories are valuable in highlighting zero-sum elements and the potential repercussions of a fully-fledged EU defence capability on the distribution of power across the Atlantic. The issue, however, is that theorists have mostly derived motivations from potential future outcomes without investigating what actually motivated policymakers at the time. The concept of estrangement seeks to offer a more nuanced perspective on transatlantic tensions than neorealist balancing arguments. It highlights how unprecedented norm collisions with the US lead to ingroup validation and outgroup devaluation, which can reinforce the integrative momentum. Relying instead on balancing logics as the prime motivator for the ESDP seems to misrepresent the nature of this policy and the wider transatlantic partnership.

The theoretical evaluation becomes more difficult when contrasting the proposed OS lens with choice-theoretic accounts. While it is obvious that cost-benefit calculations played a role in the development of ESDP, one can ask whether the pursuit of military utility or economic efficiency was the primary motivation in the initiation phase? Or, if actually cost-benefit analyses yielded to the pursuit of psychological harmony and ignorance of value trade-offs, in line with Bob Jervis's (2017) notion of 'irrational cognitive consistency' (Jervis 2017, 128). On the one hand, interviews did provide evidence of cost-benefit analyses concerning the military utility of a separate EU defence capability. Notably, the idea that such a capacity would enable Europeans to act in situations where NATO partners, particularly Turkey and the US, had no interest in engaging, for instance, in Africa. On the other hand, however, interviewees voiced no concerns about being abandoned by the US or the circumvention of NATO as central motivating factors. Moreover, Europeans did not take measures that would enable independent action outside of NATO in significant ways – not because of a lack of agreement (lowest common denominator) but due to a shared absence of political will. A case in point is the Berlin+ arrangement and the E3's inertia in pushing it forward so that the ESDP could access NATO assets. Without such an agreement, Europeans were limited to addressing the lowest level of Petersberg tasks, unable to engage in peacemaking or enforcement. However, there was no urgency to make the ESDP fully functional, as all actors were focused on long-term process-oriented rhetoric.

Framing the origins of the ESDP within a rationalist paradigm appears to overlook a fundamental aspect, namely that Europeans collectively shared a belief rooted in teleological thinking. It centred around the idea that the EU would remain incomplete if it could not speak on matters of defence. National elites thought that without a defence capacity, the EU would merely be a low politics forum but not an actor in its own right. This sentiment was not directly connected to the state of NATO or changes in the security environment. It was mostly internally driven and derived from the ethos of pursuing an ever-closer union. Such thinking embodies identity and community-oriented rationales, distinct from individualistic cost/benefit analysis aimed at maximising material utility. It is from this ontological driver that other motivators emanate resulting in irrational cognitive consistency. First, the belief that establishing a separate EU defence capacity was perfectly reconcilable with strengthening NATO without challenging the existing institutional setup. Initially, the inherent contradictions in creating an EU defence capacity at the exclusion of the US had been central in British thinking.²¹⁰ However, this thinking recedes into the background as social

²¹⁰ It was initially thought that an EU defence capability would result in NATO duplication and that NATO was functionally better equipped to handle defence. Moreover, the idea that the EU could be responsible for smaller problems was deemed impractical, as small crises could quickly escalate into larger ones that Europeans were unable to manage without NATO assets or a radical shift in defence posture, which no country was willing to undertake.

effects draw Blair into the community core, driven by fears of exclusion. Moreover, being entangled in a community dilemma enabled Britain and France to overcome trust issues in this domain, as both felt that their shared European identity – and moral authority – were being undermined by the EU's limited response to the Balkan wars. Consequently, the priority shifts from military efficiency to the aspiration of completing the political process for its intrinsic value.

When viewed solely from the perspective of individual national military utility, it becomes evident that creating a *de novo* defence institution was less efficient than strengthening the European pillar within NATO. Yet, this fundamental perspective was disregarded for reasons of psychological harmony, particularly the belief that a separate EU defence capacity would be beneficial to all parties on both sides of the Atlantic. However, E3 elites managed to sell the ESDP to American officials arguing that it would incentivise Europeans to increase their defence spending. From a common-sense perspective, however, it is doubtful why a state would hesitate to spend money on defence within one institution yet be willing to increase spending within a less significant one that was intended merely as a backup for the former.

Finally, the crucial role of ontological security is evidenced by a number of other features that characterised the political process. First, there is a notable element of **ad hoc policymaking and surprise moments**, which aligns more with psychological explanations than with rationalist ones. Remarkably, it took only six months from St. Malo in December 1998 to the official establishment of the ESDP in Cologne, and by December 1999, all 15 EU states had endorsed the Helsinki Headline Goals (HHG) outlining capability targets for the coming years. This rapid progression is seen as another indication that member states were willing to advance the defence initiative swiftly, prioritising momentum over exhaustive negotiations in their favour.

Second, archival sources reveal a minimal level of **manipulative communication** among the E3 and a notable **absence of side-payments**. Britain, in particular, took a cautious approach, ensuring that its new involvement in Europe would not challenge the special Franco-German relationship. Numerous diplomatic briefs emphasise the importance of strengthening ties with France and Germany while avoiding any disruption to their existing relationship.²¹¹ 'I very much hope that when European defence moves forward, we will all come closer together'.²¹² Such was Labour's sentiment, and community-oriented behaviour represents an important hoop test for a theory based on ontological security in this context.

²¹¹ 'We in the UK believe that we have a strong relationship with France and indeed this summit is proof of that. ... We also have excellent relations with Germany, and with other partners in Europe. When Europe is close, I believe that the totality of its relations should be looked at and not by trying to see divisions or saying that there are different types of relations here that will displace this other relationship. I don't think that's what it's about. I personally feel that a different, more committed, more constructive attitude from Britain will have a better impact for Europe as a whole. I am talking about British interests, but I also think it is in the interests of Europe'. French Government, "Conférence de presse conjointe à Saint-Malo", 4 December 1998.

²¹² The British approach is intriguing as Britain could have used their willingness to change course as bargaining power to obtain political concessions from France and Germany on other issues such as EMU and BSE (mad cow disease). Furthermore, Britain could have tried to boost Germany's commitment to the Eurofighter Typhoon by offering progress on defence integration (in 1998 the Bundestag was somewhat hesitant while the Brits were committed to expanding the project). Regarding, France ESDP could have been made dependent on France's reintegration into NATO's military command, yet this is consciously rejected. Confidential notes indicate a friendly attitude: 'Germany is the immovable first priority of French external policy. That relationship will survive blips like Lafontaine's resignation. Changing it is neither in our interests nor in our power'. TNA, PREM 49/810, Part 7, p.37.

Lastly, the presence of a high degree of **constructive ambiguity** and the **absence of red lines** relegates instrumental motivation to a secondary position. None of the E3 leaders publicly define the purpose or *besoin profonde* of ESDP. Even after St. Malo, arguments are based on the almost tautological reasoning that ‘Europe needed European defence in order to be stronger or to defend its (entirely unspecified) interests’ (Milzow 2012, 145).

Overall, it is remarkable how leaders postulated, rather than defined, their common defence policy and the purposes it should fulfil. However, such ambiguity was crucial to maintaining a sense of unity in countering the ontological challenge. Additionally, the ESDP was central to their vision of the EU as a whole as illustrated by the frequent links made between the ESDP and the broader integration process at the time. It was as if the creation and existence of a European defence policy could confirm the existence and continuity of the EU project itself (ibid.). This further underscores that defence integration served as a means to bolster a positive sense of self during ontological crises by conveying a sense of community progress. The forthcoming case studies will further evaluate the proposed theoretical framework by examining whether other phases of defence integration displayed a similar constellation of factors.

PART III

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY MAINTENANCE IN THE 21st CENTURY

9.0 The Long Intermezzo (2000–2005)

The establishment of the ESDP in June 1999 and the adoption of the Helsinki Headline Goals (HHG) in December that year marked the end of the first phase of institutional transformation in EU defence. In the eyes of European leaders, the ESDP represented an enlightened-Kantian conclusion to what had, in many ways, been a brutish-Hobbesian century.²¹³ The institutional idea of a European defence capacity had existed for years, but a specific set of crises was required for its activation. The emergence of the ESDP signalled a paradigm shift in EU integration and, more broadly, in international defence cooperation, as it marked the first, and to date only, instance of a post-sovereign international organisation engaging in defence policy. However, this policy area remained almost entirely intergovernmental, with no role for the European Commission or Parliament. Their participation, particularly that of the Commission, only became relevant with the CSDP transformation in 2016.

Before turning to this phase, it is worth highlighting important developments in the interim period. This period reflects an echo of the dynamics discussed earlier, offering valuable additional insights into the drivers of EU defence cooperation. Analytically, the goal is twofold: First, to examine the outcomes that the ESDP produced in terms of operational capacities and crisis response activities, comparing them with what was initially envisioned. Second, to further test and refine the theory by examining the role ontological security played during the divisions over the Iraq War and the Libya intervention – both important security events for the European community. Regarding the initial implementation of the ESDP, I find that the policy immediately fell short of ambitions and expectations. As for the case studies on Iraq and Libya and their impact on EU defence, both align with the outlined theory. Whereas in the case of Iraq, an acute ontological crisis led to renewed defence integration, in the case of Libya, the absence of such a crisis corresponded with a lack of integration.

The interim period between the origins of the ESDP and its reactivation in 2016 can be divided into three phases. The first is a **‘cool-down phase’** during which the initially agreed institutional structures were implemented and operationalised, lasting until 2003. At the end of this phase, a brief **‘sprint phase’** followed, as the ESDP temporarily gained momentum due to group anxieties stemming largely from divisions over the Iraq invasion. This crisis casted a shadow over the long-anticipated Eastern enlargement and the negotiation of the 2004 Constitutional Treaty. In response, the European Defence Agency (EDA) and the European Security Strategy (ESS) were created. While these developments do not constitute a paradigm shift, they mark a significant institutional evolution, and the outlined conceptual framework provides valuable insights into the driving forces behind this phase. Finally, this interim period transitioned into a prolonged **‘dormancy phase’** lasting over a decade, during which the institutional foundations of the CSDP remained largely unchanged. These cases further illustrate that lower levels of ontological crisis correspond with reduced defence integration or a lack of institutional modifications, despite significant shifts in the security landscape.

²¹³ See e.g. Gerhard Schröder’s statement on the Helsinki Summit, in the introductory paragraphs where the progress of the ESDP is embedded in the bloody past and the democratic future of a united Europe. Similar formulations can be found in statements by Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac as well as on the EU level. Gerhard Schröder, “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder zu den Ergebnissen des Europäischen Rates in Helsinki vom 10./11. Dezember 1999”.

9.1 Cool Down Phase: Faltering Institutional Implementation (2000–2003)

After the political sprint that led to the creation of the ESDP, a cooling-off phase began, during which the agreed institutional structures were implemented. This phase lasted until the spring of 2003, when it was interrupted by the community challenge posed mainly by the Iraq War, briefly reigniting cooperative spirits to overcome internal division. The Treaty of Nice marked the beginning of this cool-down phase, enshrining much of what had been debated throughout 1999 into treaty text. However, by the time the Nice Treaty was signed in 2001, defence had already become a sideshow, as institutional reforms to accommodate Eastern enlargement took centre stage. Nonetheless, the Nice Treaty sealed the creation of four institutions that would enable the EU to conduct security and defence policy. The institutions are as follows:

1. The **Political Security Committee (PSC)** made up of national ambassadors who would move to Brussels to permanently monitor the international situation and contribute to the definition of policies. Before the PSC such policy-coordination was more loosely organised.
2. The **EU Military Staff (EUMS)** comprised of senior officers to provide expertise especially during the conduct of EU-led military missions.
3. The **EU Military Committee (EUMC)** composed of the Chiefs of Defence Staff (CHOD) of member states and thus the highest EU military body. Its ultimate function is to deliver the unanimous advice of all 27 CHOD on all matters with a military dimension.
4. The **Committee for Civilian Crisis Management (CIVCOM)** is the civilian equivalent to the EUMC offering unanimous advice on questions of civilian missions (e.g. policing, rule of law, etc.).

This setup enabled the Union to launch crisis response missions and coordinate capability development. Hierarchically, the PSC is the highest body through which the advice and opinions of the other bodies feed into actual policy. What is remarkable about this time is that military personnel in uniforms entered the offices in Brussels, which was an unfamiliar image for an organisation that identified as predominantly a civilian entity. It is important to note though that these institutions are located within the Council of the EU – thus the representation of national governments – which means they are formally run on an intergovernmental basis, largely immune to voting of the European Parliament or the influence of the European Commission.

The year 2003 represented a significant milestone, as it marked the time when the ESDP became operational. As such, the 1999 Helsinki Headline Goals (HHG) on capability development were by then considered completed, and the EU launched the first two ESDP missions in the Republic of Macedonia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I will briefly analyse how the decisions of the 1999 political process became operationalised, as this allows for deductions about the motivations driving the initiation phase. Yet, a caveat is in order. One should be cautious in deducing motivations from outcomes – a critique previously raised about neo-realist analysis. While the implementation of the ESDP should not be used to determine its origins, it does provide further evidence to assess whether decision-making was primarily functionally motivated or not. In this regard, observing a highly efficient ESDP post-launch would undermine the argument that the ESDP served internal purposes of community maintenance and anxiety reduction.

Therefore, I will investigate the initial implementation phase, asking to what extent EU member states followed through on their earlier ambitions. Specifically, what became of the rhetoric about the EU assuming responsibility for the security of its neighbourhood and becoming a military-capable force for good on the global stage? A brief examination of capability development and the first CSDP missions reveals an emerging capability-expectation gap – not due to a lack of agreement, but primarily to a shared lack of political will (Hill 1993).

9.1.1 Efforts to Operationalise the ESDP – Capability Development and Crisis Response

With regards to capability development, it quickly became clear that the rapidly completed defence capacity would run into practical issues. The capability targets to operationalise the ESDP were enshrined in the 1999 HHG. They were essentially a force catalogue whose main elements were 60 000 troops, 400 aircraft, 100 ships deployable within 60 days and sustainable for up to one year, to be achieved by 2003. While some commentators took these figures literally, they were politically seen as a ‘statement of ambition’ which served ‘to galvanise political interest in the subject of force and capability development’ (Lee 2005 in Howorth 2014c). Practically the issue was how to transform the armed forces from Cold War alliance and territorial defence to crisis response abroad. While the main areas of strategic deficiency were quickly identified (e.g. strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling, combat search and rescue, headquarters etc.) the way of getting there remained elusive (ibid.).

According to Howorth (2014), such a collective overhaul required top-down leadership, with states collectively agreeing to drive the process forward towards set targets and individual specialisations. Yet the 2001 Capability Action Plan (CAP) took the opposite approach based on voluntary bottom-up commitment.²¹⁴ Indeed the issue was tied to questions of national sovereignty. More importantly, however, was the absence of collective will to invest in these resources. This manifested itself in a lack of debate about what the EU’s strategic vision even was for this new age. Howorth (2014) writes the ‘potentially biggest problem with the HHG process was the absence of any clear debate about the nature of the military operations the EU might expect (or even aim) to mount’ (Howorth 2014c, 80).

What military planners had in mind at St Malo and Cologne was the ability to handle a Kosovo style crisis. However, despite the Balkan conflicts and Russia’s second Chechnya war, the concept of a peace dividend continued to prevail, leading European governments to persist in downsizing military forces and defence budgets. Consequently, the implementation of the HHG can be described as ‘half-baked’ (Senior EEAS Official, 2025) While countries agreed to divide tasks in developing so-called ‘strategic enablers’ – with Germany focusing on strategic airlift, the UK on command and control, and Spain on air-to-air refuelling – many procurement targets remained unaddressed despite some successes in these projects (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2003; 2014; ibid).²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Council of the European Union, *Presidency Conclusions*, Laeken, 14–15 Dec. 2001, Annex II.

²¹⁵ An important step in this regard marked the procurement of the A400-M transport aircraft, despite the turbulences about (massive) cost overruns.

Remarkably, despite these shortcomings, member states increased their level of ambition in 2003 by introducing another Headline Goal for 2010. It expanded the scope of missions and shifted the focus from quantity to quality in military intervention (Howorth 2014c, 80–82). Thus, less focus on Kosovo-style scenarios and more concentration on rapidly deployable units for intensive warfighting in different terrains (ibid.). The new Headline goal included tasks such as disarmament operations, counterterrorism, post-conflict stabilisation – at a time when it remained questionable whether the initial 2003 HHG had even been reached. A key issue was the absence of agreed spending requirements, which were seen as infringing on states’ sovereign budgetary planning. Spending goals were first introduced in 2007 but remained entirely voluntary and without a timeline. Moreover, the four collective benchmarks agreed upon in this early period were reiterated as targets in the PESCO process of 2017 – somewhat omitting their history of neglect.²¹⁶

In 2009, ten years after the initiation of ESDP, the assessment of the first CEO of the EDA, Nick Witney (2008) was daunting: ‘procrastination, weak coordination and persistent absenteeism by some member states have hobbled the Union’s ability to tackle the real threats to its citizens’ security and to make a significant contribution to maintaining international peace’ (Witney 2008). Remarkably, this lack of capabilities and political will was even acknowledged by the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton at one point. In a speech in Budapest in February 2011, Ashton stressed that the EU ‘cannot deploy gunboats or bombers’ arguing that its strength ‘lies, paradoxically in its inability to throw its weight around’ (cited in Howorth 2013, 70). Critics were not particularly impressed by this statement, yet it encapsulates a deeper truth about the CSDP: EU defence has been hampered by what can be described as *post-heroic sclerosis*, reflecting a reluctance to engage in military solutions and a broader cultural shift towards non-military approaches, which has led to a stagnation in European states’ ability to project military power effectively.

Perhaps nowhere this is better illustrated than by the EU Battlegroups (BG) concept, envisioned in the context of the 2010 Headline Goal. BGs are rapid reaction forces of about 1500 troops, deployable within a period of five to 30 days, sustainable for a period of 30-120 days. In a Council note, they were defined as ‘the minimum militarily effective, credible, rapidly deployable, coherent force package capable of stand-alone operations, or for the initial phase of larger operations’.²¹⁷ BGs can be formed by a multinational coalition or a single framework nation; two BGs are always on standby for a six-month period. Upon their implementation, the initiative was celebrated as a great success as all EU states signed up except for Malta and Denmark.²¹⁸ Since then however post-heroic sclerosis has set in when it comes to their actual use. No BG has ever been deployed on a single mission, despite several regional crisis that called for their deployment (e.g. the DRC in 2008, Libya 2011, Mali 2013). Moreover, by 2013 there were increasing issues with usability and whether to even activate two Battlegroups each semester (Meyer, Van Osch, and Reykers 2024; Howorth 2014c, 84).

²¹⁶ In 2007, EU defence ministers agreed on four voluntary investment benchmarks: (1) 20% of total defence spending on equipment procurement; (2) 35% of total equipment spending on European collaborative procurement; (3) 2% of total defence spending on defence R&T; and (4) 20% of defence R&T spending on European collaborative projects.

²¹⁷ Council of the EU (2017), EU Battlegroups Concept.

<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10501-2004-REV-1-EXT-1/en/pdf>

See EEAS (2017) Battlegroup Factsheet:

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet_battlegroups.pdf

²¹⁸ In addition, Norway, Croatia, North Macedonia and Turkey have joined the Battlegroup concept.

Some have blamed the issue on funding (whoever leads the BG, also pays the biggest share) or a lack of agreement. However, an OS reading highlights how the BGs were never in the first place intended to be used. As such, they served to create practices in a field where the EU risked being able to become delegitimised as a security actor. Given that any defence policy without a rapid reaction capacity in the 21st century was perceived to be incomplete especially after 9/11 had ushered in the “war on terror”. Therefore, it did not matter that the BGs in many ways duplicated NATO’s Response Force (NRF) - which was being created in the same period - because the purpose was to have a BG rather than use it.²¹⁹ As an interviewee remarked: ‘Battlegroups: are the EU’s shiny Ferrari - you polish it every year but it never leaves the garage, so it cannot get scratched’ (Senior EEAS Official, 2025). Unlike the European BGs, the NRF have been highly maintained and functional, crucially benefitting from their own Headquarter which the EU (still) does not have.²²⁰ Moreover, they have been deployed on large-scale training exercises (Trident Juncture) as well as during the Afghanistan evacuation.

Against this background it is interesting that the BGs have not been dissolved, in the sense of “use it or lose it”. As this analysis reminds us, however, disintegration is a spectre that haunts the European security community. To avoid this, the Battlegroups have become another medium through which the ‘ever-closer union’ is expressed, emphasising long-term harmonisation effects and ‘deepening mutual knowledge of each other’s military capabilities and related political processes’.²²¹ Yet, the added-value of these efforts in military terms has been highly doubted by experts (Major and Mölling 2011). Notwithstanding, these inefficiencies the BG concept was recently expanded with the publication of the *Strategic Compass* in March 2022. Against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, EU leaders plan to modify the Battlegroups to include 5000 troops instead of 1500 in what should become the EU’s *Rapid Deployment Capacity*. The initiative has been led by HR/VP Josep Borell and received endorsement in October 2023 – when the EU carried out its ‘first ever live military exercise’ in Cádiz (Tidey 2023). Yet, in subsequent years, the initiative has struggled to gain momentum.

While it is difficult to identify military ambition and effectiveness based on capability development alone, overseas missions offer an additional standard for evaluation. Again, the question is what can be inferred about the motivations to establish the ESDP in the first place from the actual implementation of crisis response missions? In that regard, EU crisis response also confirms a rapidly opening gap between past rhetoric and actual activity in this new policy field. The first three operations the EU launched were (1) Concordia in North Macedonia (2) Artemis in the DRC and (3) Althea in Bosnia. The very first, Concordia, was limited in scope namely to ensure the safety of OSCE and EU observers monitoring the peace agreement between the Macedonian government and the Albanian ethnic minority. Despite its modest size (about 300 soldiers) it was carried out under the just concluded Berlin+ agreement, which allowed the EU to utilise NATO assets. The mission therefore became a central vehicle to dispel the lingering shadow that ESDP had cast on transatlantic relations.

²¹⁹ In 2014, NATO enhanced its NRF to create the *Very-High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)*.

²²⁰ In the wake of Brexit, EU member states created the Military Planning and Conduct Capability which can command non-executive missions. Yet, it is headed by a director not a general and only possesses limited staff which differentiates it from a typical operational headquarter (Reykers and Adriaensen 2023).

²²¹ EEAS, *EU Battlegroups: Factsheet*, 2020.

A central goal was to show “allied harmony” which tellingly was the name of the NATO mission that Concordia took over from – and which could have arguably continued without problems. That Concordia was more about symbolism than enhanced force projection is further evidenced by the fact that some member states only provided a single, symbolic individual to the mission. The central concern was to show that European countries could actually send troops under an EU flag and that NATO, and the EU could work together as reflected in their 2002 Joint Declaration on ESDP. This reflects earlier findings about the European community’s need to maintain stable transatlantic relations, particularly subsequent to EU defence fuelling perceptions of transatlantic decoupling.

Overall, though, the EU has remained a junior security provider to the US and NATO in its neighbourhood. It is true that Europeans took over NATO’s Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in Bosnia in 2004 with Operation Althea, assuming command and managing operations through NATO’s headquarters in Casteau, Belgium, known as Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). However, 80% of the 7,000 troops remained the same. Moreover, the much larger and arguably more dangerous peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, which had around 25,000 troops in 2003 (initially 40,000), remained under NATO, led by the US – and continues to be so to this day. In this core region, Europeans have fallen short of their central ambition, voiced during the ESDP process, to take primary responsibility for their own neighbourhood. As the ontological challenge diminished, so too did the desire to become a producer of European security.²²²

A similar capability-expectation gap emerges when it comes to ESDP missions beyond Europe, notably in Africa. In this regard, EU’s first-ever autonomous mission – Operation Artemis – launched in September 2003, stands out to some extent. The operation was unique in that it is the only deployment to date in which EU forces have been involved in sustained high-intensity combat (EDA Official, 2024). Its objective was to support the UN’s presence in the DRC which had seen violent clashes between Ugandan and Congolese armed forces. The mission was restricted to the area of Bunia, and it was only meant to last a short while until UN troops had gathered the necessary strength to keep the peace in this region (Howorth 2014c, 156–57; Dijkstra 2013) France provided around 1785 of the 2200 soldiers, leading commentators to say that ‘it was a clear case of France’s national interests being wrapped in a European flag’ (ibid.). Nonetheless, the mission was hailed by many as a success because it demonstrated the ability to deploy troops over a distance of more than 6000 kilometres (EDA Official, 2024). According to Howorth (2014), what helped Artemis was the fact that it was fuelled by the Franco-British momentum in Africa since the mid-1990s and was a way to heal wounds inflicted by disagreements over the Iraq war (ibid.).²²³ Nevertheless, Artemis is best regarded as a unique instance, as no similar mission of this type has been conducted to date.

²²² However, a division of work begins to emerge with the US and NATO providing most of the military muscle in handling the aftermath of the Yugoslav secession wars, while Europeans take on lead roles in humanitarian aid and civilian missions.

²²³ Following Operation Artemis, British support for ESDP missions declined. Overall, the UK’s personnel contributions to CSDP missions were relatively modest – despite the country’s key role in bringing the policy to life. In sum, UK contributions until Brexit accounted for only 2.3% of the total contributions by EU Member States and 4.3% in operations in which the UK directly participated. House of Lords, European Union Committee, *Brexit: Common Security and Defence Policy Missions and Operations*, 16th Report of Session 2017–19, HL Paper 132, 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldeucom/132/132.pdf>. European Parliament, *What Place for the UK in Europe’s Defence Labyrinth?*, authored by Tania Lațici, EP RS Briefing, PE 649.335, March 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649335/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)649335_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649335/EPRS_BRI(2020)649335_EN.pdf).

With few exceptions, nearly all CSDP missions over the past 25 years have had a very small military footprint.²²⁴ As such, CSDP missions have predominantly focused on capacity-building and peace monitoring rather than the deployment of significant combat forces. Additionally, there has been a marked inclination towards civilian missions, such as security sector reform or Advisory missions which constitute the majority of CSDP activities. As of February 2024, the EU has been engaged in 40 overseas operations, employing approximately 4,000 personnel. However, some of these missions have been staffed with fewer than 30 individuals (Coleman and Li 2022).²²⁵ Howorth, finds that ‘a clear majority of the analysts conclude that the effectiveness of the missions is limited at best, negligible at worst’ (Howorth 2014a, 136). This should not lead to a wholesale dismissal of the ESDP framework; however, it is clear that a substantial gap has emerged between the original ambitions and actual operationalisation. While part of this can be attributed to differing views on implementation, it ultimately reflects a broader lack of political will to allocate resources and position EU defence as a central instrument of European power projection.

9.1.2 ESDP Implementation: Preliminary Conclusion

The main point of this section is not that the CSDP has provided no added value to international security. Clearly, defence cooperation via the EU has shaped and, to some extent, positively influenced security dynamics abroad. Moreover, the EU’s civilian missions represent a novel form of European security cooperation. What is crucial, however, is that the ESDP immediately fell short of its initial ambitions. At no point was the CSDP a force for global power projection in a meaningful way. Even in its immediate neighbourhood, the EU did not become the central security provider, as it remained heavily dependent on US and NATO support in the Balkans. In both capabilities and institutional infrastructure, key shortcomings remained unaddressed. In light of earlier findings on the decision-making process, the outcomes examined here further suggest that member states were not primarily motivated by power projection or efficient resource allocation. This casts doubt on the explanatory power of materialist and choice-theoretic approaches, which would predict that EU defence cooperation should maximise European power or, at the very least, generate tangible gains in efficiency. When it comes to the two central pillars of the CSDP – capability development and crisis response – such gains, while not entirely absent, remain difficult to identify and often appear questionable.

An ontological security lens helps account for the divergence between capabilities and expectations. It highlights how the creation of this institution was internally motivated by self-identity needs, with material security functioning more as a by-product than as a structural driver of policy decisions. CSDP activity has thus served primarily to uphold the EU’s internal cohesion and its recognition as a distinct international actor, rather than to enhance collective military power. Within these constraints, EU defence has undergone notable institutional developments, but it has not significantly reduced the Union’s reliance on the US and NATO for European security over the past 25 years.

²²⁴ As exceptions might be counted Operation Atalanta (2008), aimed to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia, and Operation Aspides (2024) to counter Yemeni Houthis in the Red Sea.

²²⁵ EEAS, *Missions and Operations*, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en.

9.2 Brief Sprint Phase: The EDA, ESS and Community Stabilisation (2003–2005)

Towards the end of the cool-down phase, EU defence unexpectedly regained momentum in 2003. As the ESDP became operational and was fading from national policymakers' attention, the Iraq War reignited group anxieties. This constitutes an 'add-on' moment, bringing two ideas to the fore: first, the drafting of a European Security Strategy (ESS); second, the creation of a European Defence Agency (EDA). While the ESS was relatively novel, the idea of an armament agency had a longer history and was last proposed by France in 1998, but the UK dismissed it in favour of a more ambitious reform project. On the one hand, these developments did not alter the constitutional rules of EU defence to a degree that would render them revolutionary. On the other hand, they warrant attention to provide a more complete picture of the institutional infrastructure. I shall analyse this integration phase through the OS framework to assess its scope. Already, it is possible to foreshadow that the ESS/EDA development serves as a smaller-scale template for the behaviour member states would exhibit in the 2016 transformation. The pattern involves, first, EU institutions initiating a general strategy document, followed by ad hoc institutional innovation led by core member states as a means of collective anxiety reduction.

From the second half of 2003 until the end of 2004, there was a brief period of construction before the "construction site of CSDP" would be covered up for the next decade. This add-on moment to the first integration phase cannot be explained without reference to OS and SIT factors, such as fears of exclusion, community angst and outgroup estrangement. At the background of this integration moment were two concurrent internal challenges at the time. First, the severe division in Europe and across the Atlantic over the Iraq invasion; second, deadlock over the Constitutional Treaty which prepared the EU for its Eastern enlargement – the biggest in its history. To counter these challenges signs of fresh cooperation and institution-building were needed to build confidence among member states and regain credibility for the EU project. Compared to the initial transformation phases, however, OS factors were less strongly present, resulting in a lower intensity of institution building, as theorised.

Choice-theoretic readings of this period highlight the role of civil society and the defence industry as drivers behind the ESS and the EDA. Such analyses draw attention to the brainstorming exercise that went on at the start of the century in light of the *European Convention* to find ideas for the Constitutional Treaty that was being drafted. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on economic incentives to counter the rising costs in defence equipment to be able to compete with the US, which had already reorganised parts of its defence industry. While these factors are important background drivers, it appears that OS factors were critical to put the ESS and the EDA on the road.

The creation of the ESS is important because it sets the scene for the establishment of the EDA and the document is the precursor to the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), which is central to 2016 transformation phase. Furthermore, the ESS is the first time that member states produced a document centred around the security threats they were facing. It was thus perceived to be another step to overcome Europe's apparent 'politico-military non-existence' (EEAS Official, 2025). In charge of the document was, Javier Solana in his role as the first permanent High Representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (HR). This post had been created in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty to coordinate EU foreign-policy and to finally give Henry Kissinger a phone

number to call Europe. About the ESS Solana would say in 2004 that it ‘signals the arrival of strategy in our security thinking’ (Solana cited in Patten et al. 2004, 19) An interesting remark as it comes at a time when the ESDP had already been operational for more than a year. Moreover, while the 12-page document had the word ‘strategy’ in the title, this characterisation is somewhat misleading as the ESS does not define concrete aims or priorities and how to achieve them. Instead, the document contains a general description of the future threat environment and a ‘laundry list’ of policy implications (Patten et al. 2004, 30). Yet, no specific guidance is given to planners on how they should target their defence budgets, quite different to how such strategies work on a national level or in NATO ‘where every public document usually serves a strategic purpose’ (Senior EEAS Official, 2025).²²⁶

The nature of the ESS is easier to understand in the light of its particular genesis, which highlights that its main function was confidence building in times of ontological crisis. Solana was officially tasked with the ESS at the informal meeting of EU foreign ministers on the island of Rhodes on 2–3 May 2003. This was just two months after the Iraq invasion which had driven a wedge down the Atlantic and through Europe. Specifically, the Council tasked Solana to produce the first draft ready in just six weeks for the Thessaloniki Council meeting on 16 June 2003. To ensure rapid conclusion, the ESS was not drafted by national policy planners, but by a small group of academics and thinktankers close to Solana. The Council merely requested that ‘this strategy should *also* encapsulate Member States’ interests and citizens’ priorities and constitute a living document subject to public debate and to review as necessary’²²⁷.

What is most telling about the ESS is that it did not involve a shared threat analysis of member states – arguably indispensable for any strategy to link ways, means and ends in a purposeful way to maximise security. In fact, it would take until 2020 in the context of the *Strategic Compass* that member states conducted the first confidential threat analysis.²²⁸ In addition, the more complicated issue of CSDP-NATO relations was skilfully bracketed with just a generic paragraph emphasising mutual cooperation.²²⁹ As a largely non-negotiated document, the ESS had no legal vires to commission financial resources, however, politically, it achieved an important unifying purpose. It was broad enough for all member states to read their favoured agenda into it, including the US for which it was used as a tool to patch up relations in the 2003 EU-US summit (Bailes 2005, 15; EEAS Official, 2025) Thus policymakers adopted it without controversy in December 2003 – just seven months after Solana had received the task.

²²⁶ The nature of the ESS differs significantly from the US National Security Strategy (2002) and even NATO’s Strategic Concept (1999) which both outline concrete activities and doctrines. The American NSS represents the other end of the spectrum, containing a catalogue of measures and guidelines that extend to the tactical level (Bailes 2005, 14).

²²⁷ European Council, *Thessaloniki European Council, 19 and 20 June 2003: Presidency Conclusions*, 2003, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/DOC_03_3.

²²⁸ The 2020 threat analysis was predominantly based on the shared security priorities of national intelligence services.

²²⁹ In the ESS, ESDP and NATO cooperation is limited to one paragraph: ‘The EU-NATO permanent arrangements, in particular Berlin Plus, enhance the operational capability of the EU and provide the framework for the strategic partnership between the two organisations in crisis management. This reflects our common determination to tackle the challenges of the new century’. Council of the European Union. *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*. December 2003. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/resources/publications/european-security-strategy-secure-europe-better-world/>.

It is also within the ESS process that the idea of a European armament agency gains traction. The task to draw up a defence agency in quick steps was proposed at the June Council meeting in Thessaloniki – where Solana presented his first ESS draft. On the one hand, it is true that stakeholders had developed such an idea earlier in forums such as the “Working Group on Defence” within the European Convention. This particular working group within the Convention had been set up in 2002 largely driven by demands of the defence industry (Fiott 2019). However, as Christine Roger, former French Ambassador to the PSC would state, ‘Convention and the Council efforts on the matter were largely disconnected’.²³⁰ And indeed, the approach that the Council eventually took – to form a loose forum for voluntary capability development – was not what industry had in mind. Industry wanted ‘a European version of DARPA’, the US Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency, with significant resources to invest (Defence Industry Representative, 2024). However, we are getting ahead of the story...

9.2.1 The EDA as a Reflection of the Community Dilemma

The story of the EDA really begins with the US planning to take military action in Iraq and trying to rally Europeans for its cause. Particularly, France and the UK, the main engines behind CSDP, now found themselves leading opposing camps. The situation came to a head in October 2002 during an EU summit in Brussels. A dispute over agricultural policy further fuelled the Iraq issue, and Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac clashed in public in a way that had not been seen before. Chirac taunts Blair ‘how will you be able to look Leo [Blair’s son] in the face in 20 years’ time if you are the one who unleashes this war?’. Blair, apparently, was ‘beside himself with anger’, subsequently, accusing Chirac of ‘being responsible for the starvation of the world’s poor for failing to reform the Common Agricultural policy’ with Chirac replying, ‘no one has spoken to me like that’ and accusing Blair of being ‘badly raised’ (Kettle and Boltanski 2004).

The timing of this rift was particularly bad for the European community. Not only had the CSDP just been put to the test, but the eastward enlargement and the Constitutional Treaty, both of which were planned for 2004, were now called into question. In fact, the summit had also shown that the Constitutional Treaty was at an impasse, due to disagreements over new governance procedures, such as expansion of QMV (Grant 2003b). Observers were quick to place their finger in the wound questioning ‘whether a semi-supranational, legalistic and consent-based community like the EU could cope at all with the realities of power and responsibility in a world where the bad guys were so remote from and contemptuous of anything like European norms’ (Bailes 2005, 9). Others highlighted that ‘with such disagreement at 15, the EU could hardly be ready to become 25’ (Senior German Diplomat a, 2023). Especially since the Eastern enlargement would lead to more heterogeneity in terms of strategic culture, as the new member states were known to be hardcore Atlanticists for fear of a resurgent Russia.²³¹ Signs of the collapse of the CSDP emerged as its processes were undermined by decisions taken by those in favour or against the invasion, with HR Solana increasingly undercut (Bailes 2005). Such disruption of routines presented a threat to the community and decreased OS for core members. In combination these developments began to

²³⁰ EDA. *Thessaloniki and the Birth of EDA*, <https://eda.europa.eu/our-history/mb/birth-agency-2001-2004.html>.

²³¹ A major source of contention in this regard was the open “Letter of Eight” titled ‘Europe and America must stand united’ from January 2003. It was signed by members of the pro-invasion camp, including expected EU members from Eastern Europe, but ignored by France and Germany. It was followed by a similar “Vilnius Letter” signed by most Central and Eastern European Countries.

challenge one of the core principles enshrined in the EU's ethos, namely the idea of the "ever closer union", thus generating **community angst**.

Remarkably, however, the E3 started reconciling at the peak of this division in the spring of 2003 and European defence becomes the central vehicle for this reconciliation. First, Blair and Chirac meet on 5 February 2003 in Paris for a *tete-a-tete* dinner. It was the first bilateral meeting after the October fallout, and it was very much focussed on patching up relations. It was here that the two publicise plans for an armament agency. Blair would end the press conference in French stating '...there are many more things that unite us than divide us'.²³² The same message would then be repeated by Chirac at the start of the next joint press conference in Paris in June 2003 – the first after the invasion. Blair further declared 'whatever differences there are, we have both agreed that it is vitally important that we take European defence forward'. And Chirac amicably affirmed 'there is no Europe without defence, and no European defence without England' (*News24* 2003). Germany with Chancellor Schröder endorsed the plans and claimed ownership of the initiative; Schröder emphasised repeatedly that 'there hasn't been a bad word spoken' between him and Blair, who remained 'mein Freund Tony' (*The Guardian* 2003). Then, in Thessaloniki, EU leaders officially sanctioned the rapid establishment of a defence agency and security strategy, and subsequently worked to reassure Americans at the US-EU summit days later.²³³ Across the E3 and in the wider community, leaders now emphasised their determination to overcome divergences on European foreign policy and the Constitutional Treaty.

The renewed unity as a result of defence cooperation is reflected in several newspaper articles and also acknowledged in the academic literature, however, without deeper theoretical reflection why this dynamic developed, when strategic interests lay so far apart and emotional tensions were so high (Grant 2003a; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2003; 2014). In line with the community dilemma, however, this can be explained by a realisation that the situation was severely threatening the European security community which core state leaders needed to overcome by building defence institutions in an effort to reestablish a sense of stability and progress for the group and themselves. Therein, it also interesting that member states sought to complete the policy process as fast as possible without waiting for the final negotiation of the Constitutional Treaty (Defence Industry Representative, 2024). Rationalist accounts largely trace this urgency back to economic pressures from the rising costs of defence equipment (Howorth 2014c). Yet, this argument seems counterintuitive given that the EDA initially only possessed a tiny budget, and it was clear that it would take a longer time to have any meaningful effect on defence procurement. In fact, to this day all large defence projects continue to be handled outside the EU framework on a bilateral or mini-lateral basis. More convincing seems to be the perspective that successful cooperation in core identity domains was key to demonstrate group cohesion and European unity. This ontological need trumped any need for improved military/defence-industrial utility in the short or medium-term.

²³² 'If you will permit me a last reflection in French, if I may, it's that what I learned today is there are many more things that unite us than divide us. That's all, thank you' (Martin 2003).

²³³ A direct link between defence integration and the row over Iraq was established by Belgian foreign minister at the time, Guy Verhofstadt stating: 'The Iraq crisis has perhaps played the role of a catalyst, in the sense that it has once again shown that, if Europe is not coherent in defence and foreign policy matters, it will not play a large role'. United Press International. 2003. "Blair and Chirac Call for Stronger EU Foreign Policy". April 28, 2003. https://www.cap.uni-muenchen.de/aktuell/medien/2003/2003_04_28a.htm.

In sum, the level of community angst over Iraq and the Constitutional Treaty is comparable to that of the Kosovo period and later Brexit. In each case, the purpose of the Union and its credibility were pulled into question on the highest political level in emotional discourses. The difference perhaps is that in the case of Iraq member states tried to rhetorically shield the issue from the broader question of EU integration, whereas Kosovo and later Brexit had a more direct link to the EU's ethos. In the Iraq case, both the pro and anti-invasion camp quickly united rhetorically to work on common positions and maintain a semblance of a unified front on core principles (Bailes 2005, 9). At the same time, heads of state and government sought to dispel any perceived links between the Iraq conflict and the question of enlargement, although such links – and the broader challenge of fostering a harmonious European strategic culture – were clearly present (European Commission Official b, 2025)

In this integration phase, **fears of exclusion** also played an important role, and here too Britain under Blair took on the role of the prodigal son. By leading behind the US in Iraq, Blair became the target of the European public, notably in France and Germany where massive anti-Iraq protests took place. This not only caused him to fall from grace as the 'leader of Europe', but also threatened to jeopardise Britain's broader commitment to the EU. Especially, French trust had been hard won in the process of the ESDP and the situation now could propel Britain back into its traditional perception of being the brakeman. A concomitant issue was the continued British opt-out from EMU in 2003. After the completion of the so-called economic tests in Britain, Advisers had suggested the UK should not join.²³⁴ This came as a shock to Blair, who even attempted to challenge the advice by his lead economists. The information that Britain should not join EMU was passed to Blair in April 2003 at the height of the Iraq invasion. Ed Balls and Dave Ramsden who together with Gus O'Donnell [Treasury Permanent Secretary] signed the critical report, noted Blair's unease. According to Ramsden, 'there was just a kind of silence – it was a challenging moment. Blair then said "that's all very interesting, but I don't accept your conclusions"' (Rentoul 2016; Scott 2004). However, with Chancellor Gordon Brown firmly opposed to the Single Currency there was no way for Blair even with 'the City' on his side. After the Official statement is released in June 2003 a Guardian article reports that Blair hastily picked up the phone 'to assure European leaders that his government remains committed to joining the single currency' (Tempest 2003). It is reported that Blair spoke to at least nine world leaders about the Euro decision that day, most of which European counterparts inside EMU.²³⁵

This is arguably a key reason why Blair felt the need to reignite the ESDP once more by agreeing to institutions that Britain had previously vetoed, such as an armament agency and a mutual defence clause. Both trace their origins to the 1950s in the Treaty of the European Defence Community (EDC), which was ultimately not ratified. The notion of a mutual defence clause was straightforward but viewed critically by Atlanticists, who argued that duplicating such a clause could only raise doubts about NATO's Article 5. The original idea of an armament agency in the EDC Treaty was to fully harmonise – and thereby supranationalise – armament production, mirroring the integration achieved with coal and steel. After the EDC failed both ideas resurfaced at different historical moments but did not materialise due to either British or French vetoes (France fearing American intrusion, Britain US exclusion). Now however it was a perfect policy domain for Blair

²³⁴ TNA, PREM 49/730/1, Part 8, pp. 130ff.

²³⁵ The Guardian article details the leaders Blair called (Tempest 2003).

to show in-group commitment and remain inside the EU's centre of gravity (British Adviser to the PM, 2023). Thus, in February 2003, when tensions were at peak point, Britain agreed to reignite the ESDP via the EDA and thereby also revitalise Britain's commitment to Europe. Yet, the EDA would function on a purely intergovernmental logic with rather limited resources.

A final important OS trigger in this period is **outgroup estrangement** even though the situation appears to be more complex than in the 1999 Kosovo context. First, it is evident that the European core group was divided over the Iraq issue giving rise to two opposing factions. While the UK led the pro-invasion camp (including Spain, Italy, Denmark, Poland, the Netherlands and Portugal) France and Germany led the camp who opposed 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' (including e.g. Belgium and Sweden). Within the opposition camp, the clash of norms was serious, as the US not only excluded them from all plans and communication in an unprecedented way, but also exerted considerable pressure on states to fall into line (Ischinger 2018; Senior German Diplomat a, 2023).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that US unilateralism and its particularly hawkish foreign policy towards the Middle East did not mark the beginning of a new foreign-policy path but rather the strongest expression of a posture that Europeans had already experienced in the 1990s. As such, it can be seen as a continuation of an agenda largely driven by Congress to reorder the post-Cold War world. This was first evident in policies such as the aforementioned Libya Sanctions and Helms-Burton Acts, which had previously caused estrangement at the macro level over how to maintain international order. This time, however, it was pursued with massive military force in Iraq, leading to heightened estrangement at the micro level – particularly regarding norms related to the use of force. In addition, diplomatic sources suggest that the decision to invade Iraq was taken without informing France and Germany, an action widely seen as unprecedented (*ibid.*). Furthermore, several sources reported this as the 'lowest point in transatlantic relations', with some describing instances of severe diplomatic harassment and bullying at the UN in New York (Senior German diplomat, 2023). This suggests that, at the meso level of the partnership itself, these developments created a thus far unprecedented level of estrangement between the US and the anti-invasion group.

Especially for the Franco-German couple, this period served as a reminder of their special relationship and shared European value-base. Furthermore, the two were joined by several others, notably Belgium and Luxembourg, who also experienced substantial outgroup estrangement from the US. In fact, the level of dissonance was so strong that for a brief moment the opposing behaviour seemed to resemble neo-realist balancing dynamics – if defined as behaviour to actively repel US influence over European security. As such, a mini-summit took place among the 'coalition of the unwilling' in late-April 2003 where new ESDP tools were discussed on the invitation of Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt. The central point of debate was the establishment of an EU military headquarters, thus a duplication of NATO's SHAPE. This was something that Atlanticists and the US had fiercely opposed. Now it was briefly considered without the UK or the US at the table. Nonetheless, the summit should be much more seen as a sign to diplomatically express frustration to the pro-invasion camp. Already during the summit, Verhofstat took steam off the initiative highlighting that the meeting was not directed against NATO or Washington but was more about finding coherence.²³⁶ Also, Chirac and Schröder made every effort to downplay

²³⁶ United Press International. 2003. "Blair and Chirac Call for Stronger EU Foreign Policy". April 28, 2003.

its significance in light of the reconciliatory process that was going on. Therefore, the 2003 Brussels meeting can by no means be seen as a serious strategic effort to repel the US or NATO from being the prime security guarantor in Europe (Former German Minister, 2023). Much rather it is part of a performative act driven by in-group recognition due to outgroup estrangement.

In the pro-invasion camp, outgroup estrangement was arguably lower, however, the case is not clear cut, especially with regards to the UK. Here one should not forget that voting over Iraq was highly controversial and almost cost Blair his premiership. Sources report that over 200 MPs were against the invasion and intensive last-minute efforts to sway them (British Adviser to the PM, 2023). Resignations also followed, notably foreign Minister Robin Cook in a speech of immense rhetorical power.²³⁷ Also public backlash was fierce for most western European leaders who followed the US into Iraq, including in the UK, which experienced the largest protests ever recorded in London (Wintour 2003). In addition, the party of Spanish Prime Minister, Jose Maria Aznar, was ousted in 2004 and Berlusconi in Italy lost the election in 2006 largely because of their involvement in Iraq (Barbash 2006). The strong opposition among voters and elites in Europe therefore highlights a shared (yet contested) European value base which contributed to in-group recognition and outgroup estrangement.

9.2.2 The EDA and ESS: Preliminary Conclusion

This section has demonstrated the importance of SIT and OS factors in triggering an ad hoc moment of defence integration in response to an ontological crisis in 2003. While the notion of community angst was comparable to the previous transformation phase, British fears of exclusion appeared to be lower. On the one hand, Britain had begun to acclimatise to its EMU opt-out, and European sentiments had generally given way to a more traditional Atlanticist orientation. Measuring outgroup estrangement across the core is complicated by the fact that the core itself split into two factions over the Iraq War.

Nonetheless, like the European public, most elites were firmly opposed to the invasion. This again highlights a shared liberal group ethos, despite divergences in individual decision-makers' behaviour. Through the lens of the proposed theory, the creation of the ESS and the EDA appears as a rather different phenomenon. Rather than serving as tools for strategic and defence-industrial alignment, they emerge primarily as political practices aimed at community maintenance and overcoming ontological crisis. In other words, they function as anxiety-control mechanisms created to restore a positive sense of self and progress, thereby safeguarding the European ingroup – where military utility maximisation serves only as a secondary motivator.

²³⁷ Robin Cook, "Robin Cook's Resignation Speech", YouTube video, March 17, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9CqiiI2Irg>. In addition, Cabinet Minister Clare Short resigned from her post in May 2003 over the Iraq issue (*CNN International* 2003).

10.0 Dormancy Phase: CSDP Stagnation in a Changing Security Landscape (2005–2015)

After the cool-down phase, with its brief reacceleration in 2003, the ESDP entered a decade of dormancy. I will briefly outline the relevant developments during this period before segueing into a discussion of why the problematic Libya intervention failed to revitalise the CSDP. This discussion will serve as a test case to examine and refine the relationship between explanans and explanandum. Before proceeding, however, it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the resilience of the EU, for which the CSDP has arguably been crucial. At the turn of the century, divisions were numerous and severe. Yet clashes over Iraq, treaty reform, enlargement, EMU, and the CAP did not derail the project. Instead of disintegration, ten new members joined in 2004, and a revised legal basis was established with the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, which reformed the 2004 Constitutional Treaty after its rejection in the French and Dutch referenda. Quantifying the precise influence of defence cooperation as a unifying force among member states is difficult. Nonetheless, the preceding discussion suggests that the CSDP has played an important yet underappreciated role in community maintenance – an insight largely overlooked in both academic and policy circles (Bickerton 2011; Anderson 2008).

Arguably, the biggest challenge the EU had yet seen was only about to come though – it was the global financial crisis. Starting from 2009 – when Greece revealed the highest debt in history (300bn; 113% of GDP) – up to the mid-2010s when debtor states showed economic recovery, this issue took centre stage in European politics. Indeed, preoccupation with the financial crisis was a key factor in why CSDP did not further progress for a decade. Yet, this hardly suffices as an explanation. In fact, Europeans also struggled with massive economic challenges during the first transformation phase, resulting from global financial shocks, such as the Asian and Russian financial crisis and the burst of the dot-com bubble – at a time when Germany was referred to as the “sick man of Europe” (as was Italy). Yet, this did not prevent defence integration.

In line with this analysis, a key factor behind the long pause appears to have been the absence of ontological crisis. On the one hand, the financial crisis posed an immense challenge to European cohesion – particularly to the idea of an ever-closer union during the Grexit period when many lost faith in the European project.²³⁸ On the other hand, financial stability is not as central to the EU’s founding myth as the guarantee of peace in Europe. Moreover, other critical drivers were absent, including a lack of outgroup estrangement from the US under President Obama and limited fears of exclusion among core powers. Yet all three of these factors are necessary to catalyse EU defence integration. The argument that this interim period did not present ontological challenges of the same magnitude as the transformation phases will be further tested through the case of the Libya intervention. Before that, however, I provide a brief overview of the institutional developments of the Lisbon Treaty, which ushered in the period of dormancy and serves as a reference point for the third and final transformation phase of EU defence (2016–2018).

²³⁸ Pew Research Center. 2023. “EU Ratings Cool in Many Countries Following Record Highs” October 24, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/24/people-broadly-view-the-eu-favorably-both-in-member-states-and-elsewhere/>.

10.1 Lisbon's Bureaucratic Cosmetics and Sleeping Institutions

The period of dormancy fully sets in with the adoption of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, which replaces the failed 2004 Constitutional Treaty while incorporating most of its relevant elements. Thus, many of the changes introduced by Lisbon in EU foreign and security policy can be traced back to the turmoil of 2003. However, the majority of the Treaty's revisions pertain to the broader realm of EU foreign policy, which Lisbon rebrands as 'EU external action' (Juncos and Whitman 2009, 29). The amendments primarily focus on optimising governance procedures to ensure more coherent external representation. Few, however, address enhanced military capacity or 'defence proper'.²³⁹ Nonetheless, the Lisbon Treaty serves as an important reference point for the 2016 transformation phase.

In terms of external representation, the renaming of ESDP into Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) deserves mention. Similarly of legalistic nature was the decision to give the EU so-called 'legal personality'. It rendered the EU a legal entity in international law that could formerly sign treaties and join international bodies such as the IMF and WTO etc.²⁴⁰ The most important change regarding external representation was arguably the modification of the position of *High Representative* created at Amsterdam in 1997. With Lisbon, the HR also becomes *Vice President* of the Commission (now called HR/VP) – providing the post with a double hatting ('double-casquette') in two institutions – one supranational, the other intergovernmental. The new HR/VP was also equipped with a new institution the European External Action Service (EEAS) to manage diplomatic relations on behalf of the union in addition to the 28 national foreign offices. On the one hand, this measure sought to unify external representation in one-person that could speak on behalf of the European Council externally, while at the same time proposing EU legislation as VP of the Commission internally. On the other hand, the position was rather different from the notion of an 'EU Foreign Minister' that had initially been envisioned (Molina and Simón 2019). Its job description was too long to be remembered and included a portfolio that was too broad and vaguely defined to be managed.

Nowadays the HR/VP has to implement and coordinate the policies that come from the national governments via the Council (e.g. PSC) through two executive institutions the EEAS and the EDA. Indeed, it is a phone number that foreign leaders have little inclination to dial as the decisive aspects of EU external action in defence are still managed by national capitals (Letta and Maillard 2017). The issue was made worse by the fact that member states opted-against putting a political heavyweight in charge of that post when it was created. Ideas of giving the outgoing Tony Blair a role were quickly brushed aside, which speaks to the desire of leaders to avoid being undermined by one of their own (Howorth 2013, 67).²⁴¹ Instead, Catherine Ashton, an unknown British civil servant, was chosen, but struggled to deal with the burdens of this position, receiving mixed evaluations for her tenure (ibid.).

²³⁹ European Union, Treaty of Lisbon, signed 13 December 2007, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/lis/sign/eng>.

²⁴⁰ The EU could now also conclude trade and other agreements in a more streamlined legal process with less bureaucratic involvement of member state parliaments.

²⁴¹ Blair was initially considered for the new post of 'President of the European Council' which was also created in the Lisbon Treaty. The post replaced the rotating presidency held by member states and works to coordinate Council meetings while at the same time fulfilling representational duties in liaison with the HR/VP. The first holder became former Belgian Prime Minister Herman van Rompuy.

These and most other CFSP measures in the Lisbon Treaty served to create more streamlining in term of external representation, yet with obvious breakage points. The decision to create such institutions but at the same time put them under severe constraints increased the EU capability/expectations gap. This led the German press at the time to develop a new word for the EU's foreign/security game called 'Selbstverzwegung'. It refers to the voluntary ambition of remaining a dwarf (Howorth 2013, 52) In terms of actual defence policy, Lisbon had no immediate effect. While the Treaty expanded the range of tasks assigned to the CSDP in line with the previously agreed 2010 Headline Goal, it did not introduce concrete plans to enhance effectiveness or coherence in defence.

The key proposal pertaining to defence is Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO); however, it was only activated in 2017. What complicated PESCO at the time was its vague formulation in the Treaty text, which could be interpreted as either a moderate or a highly ambitious proposal. As such, the Lisbon Treaty states: 'Those Member States whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria, and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions shall establish permanent structured cooperation within the Union framework'. Some focussed on the voluntary nature and interpreted PESCO merely as a declaration of intent to continue working together in the future. Others focused on the terms "higher criteria" and "binding commitments" reading the formation of a supranational defence union into it. As PESCO was not activated, the Lisbon Treaty had no immediate effect on enhanced capability development or defence harmonisation. Its defence aspects primarily aimed to expand the promise of European solidarity in line with the Treaty's general spirit, ensuring that CSDP remained active and upheld the ideal of an 'ever closer union'.²⁴²

In this way, PESCO provided an important missing piece for the EU's completion as a security actor. It signalled that the EU was on the path towards a *defence union* – a term that became rhetorically linked to the PESCO initiative. This, in turn, evoked the notion of a unified entity committed to defending shared interests in a common future. However, in reality, the CSDP remained a paper tiger. With all major pieces in place, there emerged a collective hesitance to use these institutions beyond a minimum degree, which would undermine the EU's credibility in the medium term. In line with the notion of post-heroism, Europeans have been wary of invoking the mechanisms they set up, preferring the theoretical safety of their creation over the unpredictable dynamics of their actualisation. Therefore, it is in the period between the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 and 2016 that EU defence reaches its deep-sleep phase. Neither Russia's invasion of Georgia and Abkhazia (2008), nor several crises in sub-Saharan Africa, or the failed Libya (2011) intervention wake the CSDP from its slumber.²⁴³ The next section delves deeper into why this was the case by testing the outlined theoretical framework through the example of the Libya crisis – a notable security event in the European neighbourhood that did not trigger CSDP integration.

²⁴² The same symbolic logic applies to the mutual defence clause, which follows the article on PESCO in the Lisbon Treaty [Article 42(7) TEU]. Here again, the idea was to demonstrate community commitment in its most explicit form – mutual defence. Members reassured each other by stating that they have 'an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power to support any member that becomes a victim of armed aggression on its territory'. However, this promise was immediately reduced by the clarification that 'NATO remains the foundation of ... collective defence and the forum for its implementation' once again underscoring that defence remained, in reality, a NATO prerogative.

²⁴³ One notable institutional development that has received attention in this interim period is the launch of two defence-related directives aimed to harmonise legal rules for defence procurement in Europe as well as the transfer of defence equipment across countries (Blauberger and Weiss 2013; Fiott 2019).

10.2 Libya and the Deep Slumber of CSDP

About the Libya intervention, Jolyon Howorth (2014) wrote ‘the “fit” between the Libyan case and the ideal-type CSDP mission cannot be overstated. And yet, when the Libyan crisis broke out, the EU per se was nowhere to be seen and CSDP was not even mooted as a possible framework for the mission’ (Howorth 2014b, 405) Indeed, the very purpose of EU defence had been to promote peace and stability in the European neighbourhood, including North Africa where some believed that the US would not have much interest and Turkey might veto NATO engagement in Muslim-majority countries. Although on the surface the CSDP seemed to be designed to stop conflicts like Libya, Europeans did not consider acting through this framework, making the Libya case key to understanding the nature of EU defence and its relationship with NATO.

Most existing accounts of why the CSDP was not exercised rely on choice-theoretic logics and point to the usual differences in strategic culture and bargaining power across member states (Koppa 2022; Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021). In doing so, however, they fail to answer a deeper question, namely why a CSDP intervention was not even considered before strategic differences had even been discussed. And why were no changes made to the CSDP after the intervention, even though it revealed significant shortcomings and new threat potentials for European security? In this context, it is also important to bear in mind that NATO was equally divided on this issue given the large overlap in membership and, in particular, Turkey’s opposition. However, this did not prevent NATO from taking over the operation in the second week. I will take these questions as the starting point for analysis. The analytical objective is to explain why the Libya intervention did not serve as a wake-up call for EU defence integration, despite the many questions it raised about European security.

The proposed theoretical framework can elucidate why the EU did not take action in Libya via the CSDP and why no institutional changes followed. The primary reason is that Libya did not trigger an ontological crisis within the EU’s core group, thus the EU’s actorness remained stable allowing national prerogatives to dominate. The case underscores that the CSDP is not primarily regarded as a tool for effective power projection, which is why it was so absent from the minds of European decision-makers in this case. The absence of an OS crisis is due to the fact that the situation did not touch upon the EU’s core ethos in the same way as e.g. the Balkan wars because of Libya’s perceived geographic and cultural distance and also the lower perception of violence prior to the intervention. Therefore, there was comparatively limited responsibility and pressure for EU involvement especially with regards to making peace in that region by force. Consequently, the crisis produced less community angst to the point that CSDP action was hardly ever considered as an option and states approached the issue in their typical national framings absent notions such as the ‘European interest’. A leadership role for the EU was further prevented by the fact that there was little estrangement from the USA, that would remind Europeans of their shared community identity. As during the Obama administration, the US appeared much more like a ‘cousin’ again than a ‘stranger’. Finally, an ontological crisis was avoided by the fact that no EU core member felt significant fears of exclusion from the core during this period, thus no actor felt the need to evoke EU defence as way of re-aligning with the core group. Due to the absence of these three social identity factors, an ontological security crisis within the community core could not emerge, which prevented the stimulation of EU defence integration.

Before demonstrating this argument in more detail, I shall provide some context to understand the political challenge posed by Libya. To begin with, the Libyan conflict was very different from the Balkan wars. Bosnia had essentially been an ethnic civil war coupled with a struggle for independence. Kosovo was a war of secession in which a region within the sovereign territory of a nation state wanted to secede. Both situations were extremely complex in terms of what was legitimate, morally right and in the national interest. The Libya conflict was much more straightforward on all these levels. It typified a scenario common in the liberal narrative: on one side stood Muammar Gaddafi, a notorious despot and pariah, and on the other, an emerging young democratic movement aligned with Western values. This dynamic of overthrowing an oppressive *ancien régime* for civilisational progress echoes the broader revolutionary narrative of the “Arab Spring”. The EU had anticipated such a development, assuming it was only a matter of time before neighbouring regions would be drawn into the liberal fold, though without a specific end state envisioned. In the interim, the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and other instruments aimed to foster this transition by promoting democratisation and market liberalisation.²⁴⁴

With uprisings first in Tunisia, Egypt, and then Libya, it seemed that the Arab world was poised for a significant “leap forward”. The challenge for the EU became how to ‘help history’, in the words of Council President Van Rompuy²⁴⁵. In Libya, however, the situation escalated violently, necessitating a different set of tools beyond the EU’s typical diplomatic approach. The Gaddafi regime began a severe crackdown on armed protesters, with victim numbers rising. If Gaddafi managed to violently suppress the protests, it would signal to other dictators that relentless violence was the key to maintaining power. This appeared to be the lesson learned from President Mubarak’s downfall in Egypt, after he had used limited force on protesters and was subsequently ousted. Gaddafi’s rhetoric suggested that Libya could end in massive bloodshed. By calling the protesters ‘cockroaches’ and ‘rats’ who must be exterminated and threatening to send his troops ‘door to door’ to ‘cleanse’ society, he conjured images of genocide and ethnic cleansing reminiscent of Rwanda and Yugoslavia in the 1990s (*BBC News* 2011).

Concerned about repeating past mistakes and acting too late, particularly France and the UK, invoked the UN principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to legitimise military intervention. Adopted in 2005, R2P is an international principle that curtails state sovereignty by asserting that political leaders must protect citizens from mass harm and that the international community has the right to intervene if they fail to do so. In extreme cases, where leaders attack their own citizens, R2P can justify military intervention authorised by the UN Security Council (UNSC). For many, Libya appeared to be precisely the scenario R2P was designed for. Besides the humanitarian backdrop, there were other important factors that made Libya a seemingly ideal case for a liberal intervention.

²⁴⁴ As such the European Security Strategy states: ‘Our task is to promote a ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations’. This so-called ‘ring of friends’ has after 2011 been described as a ‘ring of fire’ (Bildt 2015).

²⁴⁵ See European Parliament. *Developments in Libya: An Overview of the EU’s Response*. April 2011. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/sede/dv/sede130411developmentslibya_/sede130411developmentslibya_en.pdf.

1. It was believed that the country could be subdued **without boots on the ground**.
2. There was **regional support** from the Arab League and, to some extent, the African Union, advocating for Gaddafi to step down.
3. Unlike the situations in Yugoslavia or Iraq, Libya **lacked complicated ethnic divisions** that could escalate the intervention into a severe ethnic conflict.
4. Gaddafi was widely viewed as a **pariah in the West**, where public memory of terror attacks during his regime in the 1980s lingered.
5. **Libya's wealth in oil** suggested that post-conflict reconstruction could be economically manageable, potentially offering economic incentives for intervening countries.²⁴⁶

This background helps to explain why, just 32 days after hostilities began in Libya, the UNSC authorised intervention, with bombing commencing just two days later. The initiative was primarily driven by French President Sarkozy, supported by Britain and to some extent the Arab League. Together, they secured US backing to lead an international coalition to implement a no-fly zone. Eight days after its inception, command of the operation was transferred to NATO under *Operation Unified Protector*.²⁴⁷ Within seven months, Gaddafi was overthrown and eventually executed by the rebels.

It is important to note that while the situation in Libya met all the criteria for an ideal CSDP mission, it did not pose a severe ontological threat to the EU. In other words, it did not significantly challenge the legitimacy of the EU's actorness or undermine core actors' sense of stability and progress associated with their community. Compared to Kosovo and Iraq, Libya presented a less significant challenge across the three theorised levels of ontological dread: the internal ethos dimension (community angst), the ingroup dimension (fear of exclusion), and the outgroup dimension (estrangement). This lack of perceived ontological angst appears to be a key reason why the CSDP was neither invoked prior to the intervention nor reignited afterwards, despite the many strategic deficiencies it revealed.

Before the intervention, it was striking how absent the notion of EU military action was across Europe. In the weeks prior to the intervention, EU ministers and heads of states met several times. Notably they convened an extraordinary session of the European Council on 11 March to discuss developments in Libya and the Southern Mediterranean. However, neither the Council declaration nor the communiqués by HR/VP Ashton before and after the summit mentioned any potential EU military intervention. Terms like 'European defence' or the acronym 'CSDP' were conspicuously absent (Vogel 2011).²⁴⁸ Contrarily, at the Ministerial meeting in Budapest, Ashton made concerted efforts to rule out EU military engagement (Howorth 2014b, 407).

²⁴⁶ Under Gaddafi, who had been in power since 1969, Libyan terrorists committed several terror attacks against EU members and the US, such as the Rome and Vienna Airport Attacks (1985), Berlin Discotheque Bombing (1986), Lockerbie Bombing (1988), U.T.A. Flight 772 Bombing (1989).

²⁴⁷ For a more detailed timeline regarding the Libya intervention see: Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2011. "Libya Revolt of 2011". <https://www.britannica.com/event/Libya-Revolt-of-2011/Libya-facts-and-figures#ref300036>.

²⁴⁸ European Council. "Declaration on the Situation in Libya". March 11, 2011. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/DOC_11_2.

The European Parliament was the only EU body to overtly consider military intervention under R2P. On 9 March, it passed a resolution (584 to 18) stating that 'Member States must stand ready for an UNSC decision on further measures, including the possibility of a no-fly zone aimed at preventing the regime from targeting the civilian population' (Stavridis 2014).

The absence of such language suggests that psychological processes took place at a deeper level than mere differences in states' strategic interests about which framework to choose. Indeed, focusing on internal divisions seems to miss the point, particularly when considering the general unity in opposing Gaddafi through timely calls for sanctions and even regime change (Stavridis 2014, 160). As such, the Council declaration from 11 March 2011 unequivocally stated 'Colonel Gaddafi must relinquish power immediately. His regime has lost all legitimacy and is no longer an interlocutor for the EU'.²⁴⁹ Agreement on such a statement was remarkable given the EU's usual adherence to principles of non-interference.

Nonetheless, CSDP action was not considered until 1 April 2011, after the intervention had already begun. To pro-European observers, it provided a brief moment of hope for CSDP resurrection. The Council decided on EUFOR Libya, an operation aimed at supporting UN-led relief efforts for refugees and displaced persons. However, the mission never deployed. Its small budget of €8 million and a mission statement that seemed to interfere with UN efforts rather than support them doomed it from the start. Given the date of the decision, some described it as an April fools' joke, a desperate attempt to shine a spotlight on the CSDP, which had been otherwise completely left in the shadows (Gowan 2011).

The proposed framework can help uncover deeper social identity processes to explain the curious paradox of a unified stance on the Gaddafi regime on one hand, while EU defence policy remained absent on the other – even though the CSDP was, in principle, a perfect match to tackle this crisis. It reveals that the Libyan crisis did not fundamentally disturb the EU's sense of self and progress, as the community's identity core and key social relationships necessary for maintaining stability were not critically disrupted in that period. Consequently, the CSDP was not triggered to reinforce community cohesion as had been the case in previous instances of EU defence transformations.

10.3 Ontological Crisis Averted in the Desert

One of the central reasons why Libya did not trigger an ontological crisis is that the situation did not fundamentally challenge the two central expectations of peaceful change that could trigger **community angst**: the prevention of mass violence in its heartland and the preservation of the 'ever-closer union'. Libya only posed a moderate challenge to the first expectation and even less to the second. It is important to note that Libya has not been perceived as part of the European heartland in the same way as, for instance, the Western Balkans, which limits the EU's perceived responsibility for this political space. This is not merely a factor of geography. Instead, the Mediterranean Sea has acted as a physical, cultural, and political boundary that separates the continents, notwithstanding historical colonial ties. As Nicolaïdis & Nicolaïdis (2007) note, 'the Mediterranean is both Europe's mirror and its extension, too close to ignore, too far to embrace... It is One with it and yet the Other – Arab, Muslim – at its doorstep' (Nicolaïdis and Nicolaïdis 2007, 162). Consequently, discourses about North African countries joining the EU are rare, whereas the integration of the Western Balkans has been seen as a natural progression. This perception limits how much regional crises in Africa can challenge the EU's actorness.

²⁴⁹ European Council, "Declaration on Libya" 2011.

Another crucial factor was the less intense perception of violence in Libya compared to e.g. Kosovo. A significant aspect here is timing. While Kosovo was a simmering conflict that allowed elites and citizens to form salient opinions, Libya was virtually off the radar until the sudden uprising, and already within a month, action had been taken. Before the intervention, it was challenging to obtain a clear picture of the situation on the ground due to restricted access to foreign media (*The Economist* 2011; Sherwood 2011). The so-called *CNN effect*, where televised images of war zones compel foreign leaders to act, was thus less pronounced in Libya (Nijenhuis 2014, 5). In contrast to Kosovo where televised images of events like the Racak massacre played a crucial role in highlighting perceptions of failed European leadership. This meant that the sense of inactivity in the face of mass atrocities close by was not as heavily pronounced, which removed an important catalyst for EU defence cooperation (ibid.; Bahador 2007).

Finally, the situation in Libya did not undermine the notion of an ‘ever-closer Union’, nor evoke the spectre of disintegration, which spurred CSDP progress over Iraq notably. While Europeans showed some incoherence, mainly regarding the prospects of armed intervention, the EU displayed remarkable unity in their posturing towards the Gaddafi regime (Stavridis 2014, 168). Unlike the divisions over Iraq, Libya did not polarise Europe into opposing camps, nor did it raise questions about the Union’s capacity to ensure stability and progress, partly because it was not linked to larger ongoing issues within the EU, such as the financial crisis. To be sure, in 1999, the EU’s failure to act in Kosovo through an own defence capacity became linked to concerns over the viability of a union based on a single currency. In 2003, divisions over Iraq raised questions about the viability of an enlarged EU to the East. In both instances the EU’s actorness and the prospect of an ever-closer union were severely challenged. In the Libya case, however, such issue linkage did not occur in significant ways. This may further explain why CSDP was so absent from the scene because an intense debate about EU military engagement risked generating additional vulnerabilities and divisions. That, however, is the exact opposite of the CSDP’s primary purpose which is to overcome internal crisis.

Indeed, the inference here seems paradoxical, but it is entirely plausible: In times of ontological crisis CSDP serves as an anxiety control mechanism signalling unity and progress. Yet when a physical threat arises where CSDP would have been a purposeful tool and it is not exercised, it does not automatically lead to ontological angst unless the event evokes severe disruptions on all three ontological security levels. On the level of community angst this challenge was not substantial in the Libya context. The same holds true for the second factor, fears of exclusion.

In the lead up to the Arab Spring, no candidate within the EU core experienced significant **fears of exclusion** in a way that would prompt them to resort to defence policy to signal their community commitment and belonging. For Britain, any fears of exclusion for their EMU opt-out had died down with the departure of Tony Blair. With the election of Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron in 2010, the UK moves out of the EU core group again. While not opposed to European integration, Cameron did not consider the UK a core member and signalled a highly self-interested approach. Notably Cameron sought to opt-out of the EU’s founding ambition to forge an ever-closer union in his 2016 reform deal (*BBC News* 2016). This marked the pinnacle of previous opt-out manoeuvres, such as on immigration, and represented a stark reversal from British EU sentiments under Blair. As a core member, Blair had feared exclusion from the group when Britain opted out of the €uro, leading him to advocate for closer integration via defence initiatives.

In contrast, for Cameron, British exclusion from discussions about Eurozone reform during the financial crisis served to reinforce a negative perception of the UK in the EU – as a laggard and fringe member. Being yet again on the sidelines of the main game in town, which lasted several years and eventually extended in-group solidarity, prompted a further move away from the EU core. This perception ultimately contributed to a referendum on EU membership and the decision to leave the union (Jokela 2013).²⁵⁰

Indeed, this behaviour is consistent with theories regarding how ontological security can contribute to the disintegration of security communities. As suggested by Greve (2018), group members can feel marginalised if community integration exceeds their desired level, thereby undermining their sense of self. Whether ontological fears lead to concerns about undermined sovereignty or fears of exclusion and intensified commitment to the community (as proposed here) largely depends on whether a state is a core member of a tightly knit security community. For Britain this has not very often been the case, however, whenever it did occur, the effects on European integration were remarkable (Wall 2020).

Given the UK's departure from the core at the time, France and Germany emerge as the primary candidates for potential fears of falling behind. However, it is notable that neither country experienced significant feelings of exclusion from shaping EU politics or diverging from core community norms. While Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy occasionally disagreed on major issues related to the financial crisis, their cooperation was generally robust, as evidenced by the term *Merkozy* that emerged during that era. The two successfully negotiated groundbreaking measures, including bailouts, which signalled a new level of EU solidarity, despite very painful delays. Germany, in particular, may be seen as a potential candidate for the role of the 'prodigal son' due to backlash over its austerity policy during the financial crisis and taking a backseat in the Libya intervention. Nevertheless, in both instances, this did not foster substantial fears of exclusion. On the issue of Libya, the majority of EU countries shared Germany's more post-heroic stance – 18 out of 27 EU states opposed intervention (Howorth 2014c; *The Guardian* 2011; Hanau Santini and Varvelli 2011). Thus, Germany's cautious approach was neither unexpected, nor did it open new cleavages within the EU core.

Britain and France also made efforts to eschew perceptions of division. For instance, when Germany abstained from the UNSC vote, Cameron said 'To be fair to the German chancellor ... she has been consistently sceptical about this issue'. Similarly, France voiced some discontent with Germany, however, without calling the country out explicitly. Newspapers framed the issue as if Merkel's Libya opt-out 'caused more upset at home than among Berlin's allies' (*Reuters* 2011). Nonetheless, even domestic pressure was not widespread and mostly limited to small circles around Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer. He stated that the German abstention threatened the EU if the relationship between France and Germany unravelled over Libya. In that way he sought to raise the spectre of disintegration that had captured his former government in 1999 when the ESDP emerged over the Kosovo war. Yet, these claims gained no traction 'as Fischer himself noted, neither the Social Democrats nor the Greens have loudly criticised the abstention' (Nethery 2011).

²⁵⁰ Additional motivators for calling the Brexit referendum were to settle the EU issue within the Conservative Party and take wind out of the sails of the UKIP party.

To further counter any perception of division, Germany contributed to humanitarian aid efforts in Libya and supported the NATO operation in non-combat roles, such as providing reconnaissance aircraft to help enforce the UN arms embargo. One should further note that during this period, Germany found itself in an unprecedented leadership role due to the Eurozone crisis. On the one hand, Chancellor Merkel's advocacy for austerity measures led to significant confrontations with debtor countries, particularly Greece. On the other hand, Germany was not isolated in its stance but was supported by several other core members; notably the so-called FRUGAL states have been historically averse to high EU expenditure.²⁵¹ Additionally, by spring 2011, Germany had already agreed to bailout instruments through the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism (EFSM), established in 2010. This reduced pressure and signalled the beginning of the phasing out of the austerity period. Consequently, German concerns about exclusion were moderate during this period and defence cooperation played no significant role in community management for any of the E3 countries in this case.

The Libya intervention occurred during a period when transatlantic relations were at their strongest in the 21st century, suggesting no significant dynamics of **estrangement**. Estrangement between groups typically arises from unprecedented norm collisions in managing international order. For European defence integration, this holds particular significance, as norm collisions with the US prompt Europeans to recognise their similarities, thereby providing a catalyst for reasserting group boundaries by building shared institutions.

To assess the level of estrangement, historical comparisons across a given era are crucial. A comparison of transatlantic relations during the Obama administration with its predecessors provides valuable insights. Starting from the end of the Cold War, one observes a trend toward increasing unilateral interventionism during America's peak power, which phases out with Obama's presidency. Post-Cold War unilateralism arguably commenced with the first Gulf War in 1990 and persisted under Clinton, with interventions in Somalia (1992-1994), Haiti (1994), Iraq (1996), and the Balkans, culminating in Bush Junior's 2003 Iraq invasion. The shift away from unilateralism occurred as Obama ushered in a normative change toward multilateralism and non-interventionism, prompted in part by failure of the previous approach to reorder the world. While constraints such as the Arab Spring and the rise of Daesh affected Obama's ability to fully implement this shift, the overall trend towards shared leadership led to greater normative alignment with increasingly post-heroic Europeans. An example provides the shift in the American approach to Iran, where after years of containment, Obama chose to support European engagement, resulting in the historic JCPOA nuclear deal. There are of course exceptions such as the NSA spy affair, which reduced Obama's approval in Germany, yet only by ten percentage points from 85 to 75 % approval rate – rather high considering that Donald Trump barely reached double digits.²⁵²

²⁵¹ The 'frugal four' of Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden refer to an informal grouping of fiscally conservative states within the EU.

²⁵² According to a 2023 PEW study the percentage who held a favourable view of Obama in 2009 were Germany (64%), UK (69%) and France (75%) indicating that Obama was overall more popular even than Biden. Pew Research Center. 2023. "International Views of Biden and U.S. Largely Positive". June 27, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/06/27/overall-opinion-of-the-u-s/>.
Pew Research Center. 2010. "Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home: Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit". June 17, 2010. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2010/06/17/obama-more-popular-abroad-than-at-home/>.

When Obama assumed office in 2008, he achieved a record popular vote, securing 69,498,516 votes in the presidential election (surpassed by Joe Biden in 2020). This resounding election victory also led to a reduction in the number of hawkish politicians in Congress who had previously advocated for a more assertive foreign policy stance. Importantly, this marked the first time in the post-Cold War era that there was a broad consensus to adopt a more restrained foreign policy approach in the US. This consensus was a central reason why the Obama administration enjoyed widespread approval in Europe, garnering the highest overall approval rates across the E3 countries in the entire period from 2000 to 2023.²⁵³ While Obama did not withdraw from the Middle East, he significantly reduced troop numbers and formally ended the Iraq mission in 2011. These policies were popular in Europe, and by the time the Libya conflict erupted, 75% of Europeans expressed confidence in Obama's ability 'to do the right thing regarding world affair' according to a PEW survey.²⁵⁴ Specifically with France, traditionally the least Atlanticist core member, relations were close following France's reintegration into NATO's military command in 2009, alongside the unprecedentedly high popularity of the US President in France.

Beyond broader dynamics of transatlantic realignment, the Libya crisis itself had limited potential for norm clashes. For a norm clash to occur, the US would have had to exhibit extreme behaviour, such as preventing Europeans from accessing NATO assets via Berlin+, which would have marked an unprecedented clash. Or the opposite scenario, involving a unilateral invasion of Libya with excessive brutality, which would have likely caused estrangement. Yet both of these policies were unlikely in this context, even under a hawkish Republican president, considering Libya's limited geostrategic importance for the US. What is remarkable, however, is that the position the US eventually decided to take perfectly aligned with European role expectations. While initially hesitant, Obama overcame reluctance to engage with the crisis, even though it meant a third US intervention in a distant Muslim country. The sudden change of heart was largely influenced by Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, with assistance from Sarkozy and Cameron. However, the US immediately signalled shared leadership, seeking regional and UN support, which was well in line with post-heroic norms. Most importantly though, the motto of the US "leading from behind" with Europeans in charge of the operation, resonated well across Europe. It allayed fears of continued heroic American interventionism by emphasising shared leadership and balanced burden-sharing. Nonetheless, "leading from behind" as a motto was misleading, as US support was indispensable throughout the intervention, taking on a predominant role in managing the operation in the initial stage. Military experts contend that European forces alone would have been incapable of intervening successfully without at least access to NATO assets – despite years of CSDP collaboration.

²⁵³ According to a 2023 PEW study the percentage who held a favourable view of Obama in 2009 were Germany (64%), UK (69%) and France (75%) indicating that Obama was overall more popular even than Biden. See: PEW Center (2023): Pew Research Center. 2023. "International Views of Biden and U.S. Largely Positive". June 27, 2023.

See also Pew (2010) Obama More Popular Abroad Than At Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit:

²⁵⁴ Pew Research Center. 2016. "As Obama Years Draw to Close, President and U.S. Seen Favorably in Europe and Asia". June 29, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/06/29/as-obama-years-draw-to-close-president-and-u-s-seen-favorably-in-europe-and-asia/>.

10.4 CSDP Dormancy: Preliminary Conclusion

Approaching the Libya intervention based on the argument that irreconcilable strategic interests explain the CSDP's continued slumber over the Arab uprisings does not seem to go deep enough. Although there were differences in strategic culture, NATO was equally split and all major EU states eventually aligned – Italy even engaged in the bombing campaign, while Germany closed ranks by providing non-combat support. Thus, Europeans could have easily built a coalition of the willing within the EU. In fact, the very idea behind PESCO in the Lisbon Treaty was that those willing to do more could push ahead, allowing an avant-garde to move forward without broader community support. Yet, this idea was entirely absent in this episode. Therefore, strategic differences and bargaining power alone do not seem to explain why the CSDP remained largely ignored by all actors before and after the intervention.

A different explanation is that no country really took the CSDP seriously as a tool for heavy-duty force projection. The CSDP had been in hibernation since the Lisbon Treaty. No mission had been launched since 2008 despite rising security challenges in the EU's hinterland, notably in the Caucasus, Caspian Basin and Sub-Saharan Africa. Tellingly, when France and the UK deepened their bilateral defence cooperation through the Lancaster House Treaty in 2010, the CSDP was only mentioned in passing, reflecting its marginal role in shaping the agreement. Thus, for France and Britain it was irrelevant to get the EU involved in peacemaking in almost complete ignorance of what they had agreed years prior. Such cognitive absence and the lack of debate over the issues seems to attest that the Libya issue simply did not touch upon the European community nerve enough to trigger a sustained debate about the EU as a security actor. Instead of an EU reference frame, Cameron and Sarkozy approached the crisis within national quests for 'post-imperial status-seeking' and a desire to maintain relevance in international crisis management (Hofmann and Mérand 2020, 165). Such idiosyncratic factors are especially relevant with regards to Sarkozy who first initiated the bombing of ground targets in the morning of 19 March (the UK and the US only joined later that day). Sarkozy's involvement in the Libya intervention, coupled with alleged illegal campaign finances from Gaddafi himself, will be the topic of his scheduled court trial in 2025 (Wickert 2017, 72).

In the end, the Libya intervention ends in shambles, exposing severe European capability shortfalls. It became evident that US support remained crucial for such campaigns in the near abroad – already due to a lack of ammunition, where the US had to step in early on (DeYoung and Jaffe 2011). Nonetheless, this episode did not lead to a wake-up call for the CSDP.²⁵⁵ This is particularly remarkable given that the US announced its strategic reorientation, known as the "pivot to Asia", in November 2011. Previously, in June that year, in a memorable speech, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates underscored that NATO's future was on the line if Europeans continued on their current path:

The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the US Congress – and in the American body politic writ large – to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defence...Indeed, if current trends in the decline of European defence capabilities are not halted and reversed, future US

²⁵⁵ It is true that the EU launched five new CSDP operations in Africa in 2012 – all of a limited size, however.

political leaders – those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me – may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost. What I’ve sketched out is the real possibility for a dim, if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance (Gates 2011).

However, no institutional amendments followed for EU defence. This challenges frameworks that explain CSDP developments primarily through rational strategic adaptation, raising the question of why none of the profound shifts in the security landscape – including a deteriorating neighbourhood and the US strategic reorientation – prompted deeper CSDP integration during this period. PESCO remained inactive, and initiatives such as shared ammunition procurement or the establishment of an EU headquarters stayed shelved.²⁵⁶ The only brief moment of hope came in September 2011, when the three ‘Weimar’ foreign ministers, joined by their Italian and Spanish counterparts, issued a letter calling for CSDP reform. The five foreign ministers wrote to HR/VP Ashton, encouraging her to ‘examine all institutional and legal options available to member states, including PESCO....’²⁵⁷ Yet the initiative quickly lost momentum, lacking political will – as reflected in the decision to channel it through an outgoing, largely powerless HR/VP and a vague, ill-defined process.

As a result, the CSDP remained dormant until 2016, with only a brief revival effort in 2013, when a Council summit on defence was held – a moment that, however, failed to deliver a genuine resurrection, as discussed briefly later. The next major phase of integration would only begin in 2016, when Brexit triggered a renewed sense of existential angst within the EU’s core. This, in turn, set the stage for a further transformation in EU security and defence policy, which serves as the final case study.

²⁵⁶ This suggests a sense of normative closeness to the Obama presidency led Europeans to overlook the weakening security guarantees from their superpower ally.

²⁵⁷ Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and Poland. 2011. “Letter to High Representative Ashton”. September 2, 2011.

11.0 Trump, Brexit and PESCO: The Community Who Lived (2016–2018)

The latest CSDP transformation occurred between 2016 and 2018, in the wake of Brexit and Donald Trump's first election as US President. Although unfolding in a different historical context, similar social-psychological factors underpinned this phase of integration. The British decision to exit the EU generated a strong sense of **community angst**, amplified by concurrent challenges – such as migration – that contributed to a broader 'polycrisis' within the Union. This enduring crisis condition posed an existential challenge to the European project, to which defence integration functioned as an ontological antidote. Additionally, unprecedented norm collisions with the US, driven by Donald Trump's actions on the international stage, reinforced states' motivation to strengthen ingroup relations, as growing US **estrangement** underscored their shared sense of belonging. While **fears of exclusion** in core member states were less prominent in this case, this variable remained an important intervening factor influencing the shape of the integration process. Whereas the UK had previously played the role of the prodigal son, during this integration phase, France began to drift away from the EU's centre of gravity, as internal dynamics pulled the Union eastward while domestic backlash distanced France from core EU norms. In sum, these factors gave rise to an ontological crisis, which reached its peak in late 2016 and triggered the reactivation of European defence efforts to preserve the community and restore a sense of stability and progress.

This analysis challenges dominant explanations of the 2016 integration period that are rooted in materialist and choice-theoretic accounts. The evidence suggests that arguments portraying these institutional developments as balancing/hedging behaviour against the US or as rational acts of security maximisation play only a secondary role (Baun and Marek 2019; Calcara 2019; Brögger 2024). Likewise, the role of institutional actors, such as Commission President Juncker – who has received much scholarly attention in this context – was influential but not the primary catalyst for renewed CSDP integration (Hakansson 2021; Haroche 2019; Sweeney and Winn 2020).

Before the analysis, a brief exposition provides context to this historical period and the institutional outcomes it produced. An important prelude to the 2016 transformation phase began in December 2013, when 'for the first time since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council held a thematic debate on defence', as noted in the Council Conclusions.²⁵⁸ EU defence had been missing in inaction since 2007, and by 2013, many in Europe's strategic community had started to believe that 'CSDP died in the sands of Libya' (Menon 2011, 76). The aftermath of the Arab Spring transformed the European neighbourhood from a 'ring of friends' into a 'ring of fire' as large-scale violence erupted in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel Zone (Bildt 2015). As an increasing number of refugees entered Europe, and Bashar Assad, with the help of Vladimir Putin, razed Syrian cities to the ground, the CSDP remained on the sidelines. While think tanks were preparing requiems for European defence, the December 2013 Council Summit began to offer renewed hope. However, this initiative largely came from the EU level, notably from European Council President Herman van Rompuy and Michel Barnier, then Commissioner for the Internal Market (EEAS Official, 2025).

²⁵⁸ European Council. 2013. *European Council Meeting: Conclusions, Brussels, 19–20 December 2013*. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-217-2013-INIT/en/pdf>.

In fact, member states' appetite for the CSDP was still rather low, given a phase of relative internal stability – the Eurozone crisis had entered a more stable phase, the refugee situation was still manageable, and transatlantic ties remained close (despite the NSA spy affair). For the December 2013 summit, this translated into a low level of ambition. In January 2014, an SWP paper concluded that 'the long-awaited conclusions of the "defence summit" amount to exactly... a political message that "defence matters"... but it falls short of achieving the fundamental reorientation that EU security and defence policy needs' (Von Ondarza and Overhaus 2014, 2).

Nonetheless, due to the long absence of CSDP and, perhaps, in an effort to appease the strategic community, a window of opportunity opened for EU officials to propose policy initiatives. As a result, the primary policies later launched in this integration phase can be traced back to 2013, most notably the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). In vague terms, the Council had invited the High Representative 'to assess the impact of changes in the global environment, and to report to the Council in the course of 2015 on the challenges and opportunities arising for the Union'.²⁵⁹ EU officials interpreted this as a mandate for a strategic reflection process, which eventually developed into the EUGS. Similarly, the EDF idea can be traced back to this meeting, as Commission officials managed to 'smuggle a preparatory action on CSDP-related research into the 2013 communication' (Hakansson 2021, 7). Once again, in ambiguous terms, this provided an opportunity to explore new forms of defence research at the EU level with potential involvement of the Commission, which had previously tried but mostly failed to gain competences in this domain. Yet, even after the December summit, substantial CSDP reform remained off the agenda, and the exploration of these ideas faded into the background.

Defence only began to capture member states' attention again in the summer of 2015, as ontological challenges to the European community were swiftly rising. The refugee crisis re-opened the North-South divide in the EU, just as Northern states had made significant efforts to mend tensions from the financial crisis. Germany's response to depart from the Dublin criteria then sent shock waves through Eastern Europe, additionally opening up an East-West divide. Adding to this volatility, the UK's Conservative Party, after securing a decisive election victory, pledged to renegotiate Britain's relationship with the EU. In November 2015, it opted out of the 'ever-closer Union' clause, further straining European unity. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Donald Trump's presidential campaign introduced a combative populist stance in American politics that Europeans had not witnessed before. Amidst this mounting instability, HR/VP Federica Mogherini was tasked with drafting a new EU strategy document to update the 2003 ESS.

Eventually, these dynamics came to a head in 2016, plunging the European community into a deep existential crisis. The process and timing of the CSDP's relaunch reflect patterns seen in previous cases, once again suggesting that community maintenance and the need to overcome existential dread acted as crucial drivers. To summarise briefly: the Brexit vote took place on 23 June 2016. Within 24 hours, France and Germany issued a joint communication titled "A Strong Europe in a World of Uncertainties". The document outlined all key institutional initiatives that would shape this period of integration. It proposed a European Security Compact aimed at 'recommitting to a shared vision of Europe as a security union, based on solidarity and mutual assistance' and

²⁵⁹ European Council. 2013. *European Council Meeting: Conclusions, Brussels, 19–20 December 2013*.

‘promoting a more coherent and assertive Europe on the world stage’.²⁶⁰ Then, just 48 hours after the Brexit vote, the HR/VP Mogherini unveiled the EUGS – three days ahead of its planned launch. Titled “Shared Vision, Common Action” the strategy’s primary goal was to ‘reinstil political unity’ in these challenging times, as explained by Nathalie Tocci (2017), who led the drafting process (Tocci 2017, 17). The European Council endorsed the strategy and other initiatives on 14 November 2016, one week after Donald Trump was elected President of the United States.

From June 2016, EU member states begin a period of intensified defence integration via the CSDP, lasting just over a year. Key milestones during this phase include the Implementation Plan on Security and Defence, published in November 2016 by the HR/VP to implement the EUGS. This is followed in May 2017 by a decision to launch a new review process in the EDA, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), to assess capability shortfalls. In June 2017, member states agree to establish both the EDF and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC). Finally, in December 2017, 25 member states sign and submit the PESCO Notification to the European Council, which formally adopts it on 7 December. Together, these initiatives and their various acronyms become known as the so-called Winter Defence Package, as detailed in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Key Defence Initiatives of the 2016 Winter Defence Package

Institution	Description	Level of Disruptiveness
PESCO <i>Permanent Structured Cooperation</i>	An EU framework for defence cooperation allowing (more) willing and capable member states to develop joint military projects. Focuses on enhancing defence capabilities and operational readiness.	Moderate – While advancing cooperation, PESCO remains non-binding for member states and has had limited impact on EU capability development.
CARD <i>Coordinated Annual Review on Defence</i>	An EU initiative aimed at fostering transparency and coordination of defence spending and capability development among member states, helping to identify opportunities for cooperation.	Low - CARD mainly serves to provide data and recommendations, with limited binding force, focusing on aligning national efforts rather than radically transforming the rules of cooperation.
EDF <i>European Defence Fund</i>	A funding instrument for defence research and development, aimed at strengthening Europe’s defence industrial base and fostering cross-border cooperation in the development of new defence technologies.	High - the EDF represented a new step in the Commission’s ability to directly fund defence research.
MPCC <i>Military Conduct and Planning Capability</i>	A small-scale EU military command cell responsible for the planning and conduct of non-executive military missions with a focus on training and Advisory roles.	Low - while the MPCC deepens cooperation on command and control, its resources are limited and its role constrained to non-executive missions.

²⁶⁰ Ayrault, Jean-Marc, and Frank-Walter Steinmeier. 2016. “A Strong Europe in a World of Uncertainties”. *Federal Foreign Office*, June 24, 2016. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/160624-bm-am-fra/281672>.

Given the host of initiatives, one might assume that Europeans had finally begun to rely on the CSDP to realise their own strategic security interests. However, this mischaracterises the motivations at the time, which were predominantly rooted in restoring ontological security through community building. Viewing the 2016 integration period through the lens of realist or liberal-institutionalist theories offers a rather different interpretation.

From a neo-realist perspective, the renewed CSDP effort was seen as the long-anticipated validation of European balancing ambitions (Blankenship 2023; Baun and Marek 2019). At first glance, the evidence appears to support this: (1) a US President threatening to withdraw from NATO while cooperating with Russia, along with increasing Chinese assertiveness that shifted US attention towards Asia, raising fears of abandonment. Additionally, (2) Donald Trump stepping away from historic arms control agreements and hostile containment strategies towards countries like Iran suggest fears of entrapment. To round it all off, realists focus on EU discourses of *strategic autonomy* to validate earlier claims that the CSDP serves to balance against US hegemony or at least hedging attempt (ibid.). The key challenge these explanations face, however, is the widespread critique that, beneath the mythologies, European states remained deeply committed to NATO, engaging in several new NATO-CSDP initiatives (Cladi 2022). Moreover, the new policies had no significant impact on the distribution of power, as they were not substantial enough to offset US security guarantees in any meaningful way.

Neoliberal accounts, while rejecting realist balancing or hedging logics, maintain that integration is primarily about efficiency gains. From this perspective, CSDP is seen in positive-sum terms aimed to complement NATO by addressing crucial European capability shortfalls (Calcara 2019; Hoeffler 2019). Important stimuli in this regard are seen to be the rise of terrorism, especially in light of the 2015 Paris attacks and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Undoubtedly these changes in the security environment played a role and put pressure on politicians to spend more and spend better on defence. However, the argument that military efficiency was the primary driver misses a crucial point. While leaders sought "to do more" in security and defence, an interest in effective outcomes was not the main driving force. Instead, the focus was heavily on the process of cooperation itself. Key evidence for this lies in the fact that the new EU instruments hardly addressed the changes in the security environment. Furthermore, the policy process was once again established in an ad hoc manner, without exhaustive negotiation and with significant ambiguity regarding how to align the CSDP with NATO.

Finally, the role of institutional actors, such as the Commission President, should not be overstated. This becomes evident from the sequence of events in which the policy process unfolded. Framing Juncker's State of the Union speech – as a decisive event in publicly pressuring states into this political process – overlooks the fact that it came after the crucial Franco-German papers on the matter (Haroche 2019; Hakansson 2021). His speech on 13 September 2016 followed one day after the second Franco-German paper had already called for these new CSDP instruments at the EU level. Thus, while Juncker and the Commission were instrumental in pushing the envelope and shaping the institutional outcomes in their role as honest broker, they were not the proximate cause of the winter defence package.

Therefore, the proposed argument that CSDP integration primarily reflects core EU member states' response to ontological security challenges finds validation in this case study. Here again the intrinsic value of cooperation was more important than the institutional outcomes as the policy-process emerged from distinct social-identity dynamics. The CSDP became the medium through which individual states sought to safeguard their role conception within the community (prodigal son) and enhance ingroup cooperation to counter an existential threat to the community norms (community angst), reinforced by a heightened sense of belonging due to unprecedented norm clashes with the group's significant other, the United States (estrangement).

11.1 France's Prodigal Role in an Eastward-Drifting EU

To understand the relaunch of CSDP in 2016, it is important to consider France's role as a core EU member that was experiencing a drift away from the centre of the European community. Evidence suggests that French governing elites were increasingly concerned about being excluded from influencing European policy in the way they had in the past, which shaped their desire to restart the CSDP. Key to this sentiment was a perception that the EU was shifting eastwards, largely due to how the financial crisis had shifted political dynamics toward Germany and Eastern Europe, at the expense of France and south-western Europe. The perceived eastward shift was further reinforced during the migration crisis and shaped both Francois Holland's and Emmanuel Macron's ambition for 'France to play a bigger part in Europe' (*The Economist* 2017). This psychological disposition significantly influenced French decision-making and pushed it towards more community-oriented behaviour during especially the PESCO process. Here, France encountered a renewed "community dilemma" comparable to the dynamics that influenced Tony Blair during the ESDP process. Similarly in this case, uncertainty about the country's standing within the ingroup was crucial for France to opt for an inclusive PESCO approach, despite initially advocating for a pragmatic, capability-driven approach. This was strongly shaped by French elites' perception of being an adrift core member which required relinquishing national prerogatives to show EU commitment.

While the "prodigal son factor" may have exerted less causal force in this case, than in previous cases, it constitutes an intervening variable shaping the revival of EU defence in this period. Applying an OS lens provides a crucial complement to explanations that focus on France's narrower security interests. To explain the drivers behind the 2016 integration phase, realist arguments have emphasised France's "intrinsic interest" to counter US influence via the EU thereby multiplying its national power. As such, it could be argued that the arrival of Donald Trump and Brexit were just the right moment for France to satisfy its somewhat hidden agenda. However, realist perspectives tend to neglect a closer engagement with the actual institutional outcomes and France's role in shaping them.

Liberal oriented scholars instead do consider the nature of the emerged institutions. In the given case they resort to two explanations to explain preference formation and why outcomes fell short of stated ambitions. The central liberal argument is that the institutions reflect the lowest-common denominator between an ambitious French approach and an inclusive German approach (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021; Calcara 2019). A second institutionalist variant is that EU officials

skilfully tricked member states to internationalise their defences in response to which states intervened in the process and ultimately created inefficient outcomes (Haroche 2019; Sweeney and Winn 2020). In each case, however, choice-theoretic explanations consider PESCO and other institutions to represent lowest common denominator outcomes. These perspectives are indeed important to explain key dynamics at the time. However, they overlook important shared sentiments among core group members. Furthermore, they tend to overstate political differences and notably France's will to invest resources into the CSDP thus missing a crucial point. Even for France CSDP integration was not a straightforward issue but strongly influenced by a sentiment of belonging to the core group which intervened in a self-interested rationalist approach. This is important because it demonstrates that efficiency gains were not the primary motivator but were secondary to the desire to strengthen relations within the in-group and signal core membership. I will proceed by outlining France's role perception at the time and how it led to fears of exclusion, before assessing alternative rationalist and materialist explanations.

There is no doubt about France's role as a core member of the EU. It was French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman who, with his 1950 Schuman Declaration, laid the groundwork for the ECSC – a moment now commemorated as 'Europe Day'. Following in Schuman's footsteps, other French architects played pivotal roles in shaping the European Community we see today. However, by the lead-up to 2016, France's role as an architect of European integration had become contested due to a convergence of internal and external developments. On the internal front, political events had cast doubt on the country's continued commitment to the European project. This began with the rejection of the 2005 Constitutional Treaty by the French public in a referendum and was further compounded during the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. Both presidents did little to reignite France's leadership role in Europe as they were perceived as playing second fiddle to Angela Merkel in European affairs. By 2013, a Pew Research Center poll revealed that positive perceptions of the EU were lower in France (41%) than in the UK (43%), and by 2014, this had given rise to entrenched anti-EU parties.²⁶¹ Meanwhile, President Hollande broke records by being the least popular president in French history, with a satisfaction rating as low as 4% in 2016 and the only president not to run for a second term (Chrisafis 2016).

Externally, France's status as a core EU member was challenged by changing geopolitical dynamics, notably Russian assertiveness which seemed to further shift the balance of influence towards Central and Eastern Europe as well as Germany, historically positioned to take the lead on the Eastern neighbourhood.²⁶² The arrival of Brexit spurred hopes among French pro-European elites for France's recommitment to the EU. But these hopes dependent strongly on Emmanuel Macron's victory in the 2017 election over anti-EU parties, notably Marine Le Pen's *Front National*. In this context, pro-European elites felt the need for France to reassert itself at the heart of the European project (French Policy Analyst, 2024).

²⁶¹ Pew Research Center. 2014. "A Fragile Rebound for EU Image on Eve of European Parliament Elections". May 12, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/05/12/a-fragile-rebound-for-eu-image-on-eve-of-european-parliament-elections/>.

²⁶² Central and Easter European Countries have historically held closer ties with Germany and have been on trajectory to economically outperform countries in Europe's southern periphery with closer ties to France. In addition, Brexit coupled with eastern countries' assertiveness over the migration crisis and the Russo-Ukrainian conflict have been said to contribute to an eastward shift of the EU away from the Euro-Atlantic/Euro-Mediterranean areas.

Nonetheless, initial French enthusiasm for the CSDP should not be overstated. Since 2007, France had adopted a more pragmatic stance on EU defence, partly due to frustration within French military circles over the lack of progress and due to close transatlantic ties during the Obama era (De France 2019, 2). Nicolas Sarkozy famously rejoined NATO's integrated military command in 2009, and there was close cooperation with the US on Libya, Afghanistan, and the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA)²⁶³. Therefore, as in previous instances, caution is needed when portraying France's commitment to the CSDP as some 'god-given, quasi-teleological' mission, as EU defence is often internally contested within France as well (ibid.). Furthermore, François Hollande had no strong personal inclination towards defence policy (with the exceptions of the 2013 interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic (European Commission Official a, 2025) However, due to his own weakness, which reflected France's secondary role in Europe, he saw an opportunity to re-activate the CSDP, as signalling leadership was key to shifting the perception of France within the EU, and the EU within France. This dynamic is crucial to understanding why the Franco-German tandem was able to achieve a quick start on the issue, rapidly advancing the process in the second half of 2016.

With the arrival of Emmanuel Macron and his party, *La République En Marche*, the stage was set for a major revival of the CSDP. The dynamics unfolding under Macron can be compared to Tony Blair's role in the birth of EU defence. Both leaders sought to rejuvenate European defence cooperation to reassert their countries at the centre of the European community. Both were young Europhiles who succeeded weak predecessors and were under pressure in foreign policy, but faced experienced European counterparts, and, most importantly, encountered significant internal contestation of the EU. For each, crossing the European Rubicon came with risks, making it essential to demonstrate leadership when reintegrating into the core of the Community (Howorth 2004). Macron's desire to "go to Europe" in a way not seen in years, was evident when he used the "Ode to Joy" during his victory march on 7 May 2017. His commitment to ignite the French European spirit via CSDP was clear when he established a "Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs" appointing Jean-Yves Le Drian, former Defence Minister under Hollande, to the role.

When President Macron took office, the general trajectory toward CSDP integration had already been set. However, the most crucial question remained undecided – namely, the level of ambition, which would be determined by the shape of PESCO, the flagship initiative at the time. By 2017, cleavages between France and Germany had opened, as the German government favoured an inclusive, modular approach, while France advocated for an exclusive, binding approach in terms of participation criteria and commitments. This is where France's role as the 'prodigal son' feeds into a community dilemma. When faced with opposition to its interests, France had the choice of drawing red lines or walking away from the deal thus risking community disintegration. However, French executives instead opted for community-oriented behaviour, choosing to safeguard the country's role as a core member within the in-group, while overlooking the way in which outcomes would concretely enhance the country's national security.

²⁶³ The joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) had been in negotiation since 2003. The deal to halt Iran's nuclear programme was finally agreed in 2015 with the support of the Obama administration but dissolved by President Trump in 2018 (Helferich 2023a).

11.1.1 French Ambivalence in European Intervention Initiatives

To assess how French fears of exclusion affected its stance on CSDP integration, it is important to consider broader developments within the transatlantic partnership and NATO at the time. Examining PESCO in isolation is likely to lead to mischaracterisations, as it overlooks that PESCO was influenced by a series of similar policy proposals outside the EU, which impacted the overall process. In this context, two initiatives require attention – one preceding and one following the adoption of PESCO. First, the Framework Nations Concept (FNC), adopted by NATO in 2014 on a German initiative. Second, the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), launched in 2018 outside any IO framework on a French initiative. Considering their origins together reveals the intricate interplay of French strategic and community-oriented behaviour. At the most basic level, there is little difference between PESCO, the FNC and EI2. In essence, all involve European states agreeing to form smaller groupings to harmonise their capability development and strategic culture organised around a leading state or group (Sweeney and Winn 2020). What differentiates them are mainly varying memberships and institutional embeddedness: PESCO within the EU, FNC within NATO, and EI2 outside any formal IO framework.

Examining the roots of these initiatives highlights the complex balance between French strategic priorities and community-focused actions stemming from various executive branches. While the process leading to the EI2 can largely be traced to strategic motivations within MoD circles, the PESCO process was dominated by community-oriented considerations in the President's office. The two are linked because EI2 was, in part, a way for the President to appease nationalist military circles who took issue with Macron's readiness to push CSDP integration for community-oriented reasons.

French fears of falling behind in European defence really began with the German-led FNC initiative in NATO in 2013. Interviews reveal that the FNC came as a complete surprise to officials in the French MoD, who had not expected Germany to take the lead on strategic matters in Europe (European Commission Official a, 2025, French Policy Analyst, 2024). For a certain circle of French elites, this provided the impetus to devise a similar French-led initiative, which eventually became the EI2. This initiative stemmed largely from fears of losing ground to Germany on defence matters in Europe. This sentiment was reinforced by the German white paper in 2016 in which Germany pledged 'to accept responsibility, and to assume leadership' in security matters.²⁶⁴ French military circles were not only taken aback by these developments – having not emerged from a joint Franco-German initiative – but also feared that Germany could unite Poland and other states behind it to the detriment of French industry (Senior EEAS Official, 2025).²⁶⁵

This somewhat anti-European posture, especially in French military circles was a key motivation for Emmanuel Macron to activate PESCO as part of a broader ambition to instil a 'European reflex' within French MoD (De France 2019, 2). More European-minded governing elites feared little from the German FNC effort, recognising that it was not directed against France but rather

²⁶⁴ Federal Ministry of Defence. 2016. *White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr*. Berlin: <https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/security-policy-documents-an-overview-5490932>.

²⁶⁵ 'For France, Poland and Eastern Europe had largely remained off the radar, reflecting historical challenges in building ties with the region. In this context, the German FNC initiative was perceived in French military circles as an unexpected shift towards an eastward orientation' (French Policy Analyst, 2024; European Parliament Adviser, 2025).

aimed at diverting criticism of freeriding within NATO, which had resurfaced after Germany's hesitance during the Libya intervention. This is why the FNC was conceived before the 2014 Wales Summit, where Germany positioned itself as a lead nation to guide capability development for a cluster of countries, serving as a model for others. The FNC idea was not new, having been preceded by the UK's Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) from 2012, which suggested a similar arrangement, though focused more on crisis response than shared capability development. Ultimately, the FNC was warmly welcomed, and the British-led JEF integrated into it, alongside German-led and Italian-led projects. France, however, remained on the sidelines and only engaged with the FNC much later, in 2022, as a framework nation for Romania as part of NATO's deterrence effort against Russia.

The FNC experience was key for the French MoD in pushing the idea of EI2, which eventually came to life in 2018. For the Elysée, it served in no small part to satisfy a particular military circle in the administration, besides demonstrating French leadership in Europe. Importantly, however, it would be incorrect to assume that EI2 was France's second-best option after accepting Germany's watered-down version of PESCO, as has often been claimed. Nor was the primary objective to repair ties with the UK – this only emerged as a goal after Brexit. This is already evident from the fact that thinking on EI2 had begun before PESCO was rediscovered (Major and Mölling 2019, 12). Moreover, such a view mischaracterises French motivations at the time as purely strategic rather than community oriented in order to enhance its role within the European ingroup.

The evidence largely suggests that France's motivation to develop PESCO was not primarily driven by economic concerns or the maximisation of national security. While the country did favour a more pragmatic and outcome-oriented approach, this perspective was ultimately subservient to social goals. This is evident from the political process, which, as in previous cases, lacked major red lines and displayed a high level of ambiguity. PESCO was strongly shaped by the "Eurolateralist" wing within the French administration, sidelining those with Gaullist ambitions. The latter had envisioned PESCO as a spearhead initiative, exclusive to an elite circle of capable European countries, thus excluding EU member states with weaker defence capabilities and notably everyone outside the EU. Yet, this initial view receded, and this was not merely due to cunning German negotiation tactics (Blockmans and Crosson 2021, 87). Amid growing anti-EU sentiment in France, a key concern for Macron was to instil pro-European thinking within the administration, 'with a view to making Europe less of a strategic afterthought and more of a structuring principle of national strategy' (De France 2019, 7). As Macron himself stated in his Sorbonne speech, 'our European ambition must not only be reasserted but, more importantly, renewed'.²⁶⁶ Thus, while Germany's drive for inclusiveness played an important role, it was only possible because of Macron's belief that successful CSDP cooperation was crucial to maintaining France's status as a core member state. Arguably, this was only achievable by acting as an archetypal core member willing to unite rather than divide the group.

²⁶⁶ This was also reflected in France's strategic defence review from October 2017 where French security is tied to European security and challenges to the EU itself take centre stage in Part A. French Ministry of the Armed Forces. 2017. *Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017*. Paris. <https://docslib.org/doc/13574223/defence-and-national-security-strategic-review-2017>. Macron, Emmanuel. 2017. "Initiative for Europe" (*Sorbonne Speech*). Élysée, September 26, 2017. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>.

Further evidence for France's lack of a strategic endgoal is its limited commitment to PESCO. While the initiative's open-door policy technically still allowed for ambitious projects, it soon became clear that PESCO would focus on the lower end of the capability spectrum, with many projects simply repackaging existing efforts under the initiative's umbrella. As Olivier De France (2019) put it, 'the first batch projects put under the PESCO umbrella were either cooperative projects which would have existed without PESCO, or an array of national-minded initiatives which may result in more duplication than European rationalisation' (De France 2019, 10). This outcome was not just the result of lowest common denominator politics but much rather reflects a shared lack of political will to actually invest in capability development. In this context, France too lacked the desire to invest significant resources, which is evident from the fact that France contributed very little to the initial wave of PESCO projects. Nonetheless, PESCO was hailed as a grand leap forward in the Élysée's pro-European circles, tracing it back to Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech.

Materialist arguments, which emphasise France's pursuit of strategic advantage, struggle to explain PESCO's low performance, as they would expect France to push for more robust outcomes aligned with its national interests or walk away. Similarly, rationalist arguments, which focus on France's strategic calculations and cost-benefit analysis, fail to account for why France would accept a lowest common denominator outcome – specifically why it would choose to internationalise its defence and settle for an inefficient arrangement. In this context, the "prodigal son variable" offers a plausible explanation, suggesting that France's desire to reaffirm its core role within the EU was a key driver of the process and contributed to its swift and relatively frictionless completion. One might question whether a similar process and outcome would be conceivable in a non-EU context, particularly in the field of defence. However, the unique dynamics of a 'community dilemma' unfolding within the EU suggest that core states, whose identities are closely intertwined with the community, prioritise the intrinsic value of cooperation over efficiency to restore ontological security.

11.2 United in Existential Crisis: The EU Global Strategy

So far, this thesis has shown that European defence has twice been catalysed by severe ontological security threats to the European community. As such, the origins of the CSDP are inseparable from the Balkan war experience, where paralysis in the face of ethno-nationalist violence challenged the EU's promise of peace and progress at the turn of the 21st century, undermining its actorness. Similarly, CSDP integration in the early 2000s was shaped by the Iraq war, which created deep internal divisions, disrupting the vision of an enlarging and deepening union. In both instances, perceptions of existential crisis cast a shadow over the EU's future, severely destabilising this security community. Each time, cooperation in EU defence successfully rallied core members, restoring a sense of reform and progress through renewed institution-building, albeit with limited added value to states' military capabilities.

In 2016, the European community faced the most direct and imminent existential threat to date due to a polycrisis resulting primarily from Brexit and the migration challenge. In a familiar reflex, CSDP integration was once again activated to manage anxieties, restore stability, and enable a sense of community progress.

In some ways, the EU had been in crisis mode since the 2008 Eurozone crisis. However, the dust began to settle in 2012 with the establishment of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which put the European monetary union on a more stable footing. Yet, just as Greece received its last bailout package from the ESM in 2015, the migration crisis began to threaten core notions of solidarity upon which the community rests. While the Eurozone crisis had perpetuated a North-South divide between “creditor” and “debtor” countries, the refugee crisis added a growing East-West divide between those willing to host refugees and those opposed. For the union, this meant that one of its core principles, the free movement of EU citizens, was under threat as some states considered stepping away from the Schengen Agreement to protect their borders. In a major act of community safeguarding, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stepped in by offering to take the vast majority of those arriving in 2015. Yet, as the project was living on borrowed time, Brexit struck at the heart of the already destabilised union.

Brexit challenged the European security community in ways that can hardly be underestimated. The shockwave it sent reverberated because a country leaving the EU was just not meant to happen; ‘it ran fundamentally counter to the notion of the ever-closer union which assumed that integration was irreversible’ (European Commission Official a, 2025). In fact, Article 50, which regulates the departure of a member state, had only been established with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. Prior to that, in a sort of “Hotel California spirit”, it was inconceivable that any member state would want to check out and leave. Brexit represented a surprise hit with a sledgehammer, suggesting that the European project had been damaged and lost its appeal. After all, the EU’s greatest promise for progress historically stemmed from the desire of neighbouring states to join. This trend had already begun to ebb by 2015, when Iceland dropped its accession bid (now highly committed to joining following Trump 2.0). However, the exit of a core member state was on a different scale altogether. In hindsight, complete EU disintegration may now seem unlikely, but at the time, it was far from certain. Ultimately, the EU survived largely due to skilled community maintenance, in which CSDP cooperation played a critical role – along with a dose of luck, given that no major EU elections occurred in 2015–2016, helping avert a wider populist uprising.

Amid this unprecedented turmoil, the CSDP served as a vital platform to foster unity and stability, facilitating cooperation and shifting focus away from the deep divisions threatening the Union. In some ways, it was remarkable how the EU-27 united around the CSDP to provide Band-Aid to the European community. Yet, strong rhetorical doses were needed to revive the community spirit. This gave rise to credos of ‘strategic autonomy’ and ‘European sovereignty’ (Fiott 2018; Mola 2023). Some observers interpreted these terms as the heroic embrace of balancing behaviour against the US and Russia, thereby vindicating realist arguments about the CSDP (Baun and Marek 2019). Liberally inclined scholars, however, saw them as a wake-up call heeded by European leaders to finally address critical capability gaps in Europe to put the transatlantic alliance on a more stable footing (Blockmans and Crosson 2021; Biermann 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, the question arises whether the *autonomy/sovereignty discourse* reflects a genuine European interest in assuming responsibility for European security. Does it imply a commitment to investing resources and creating institutional structures to end reliance on the US in a neorealist sense? Or alternatively, in a liberal sense, is this discourse not so much about rivalling the hegemon but still driven by cost-benefit calculations on improving national security to achieve targeted strategic goals in support of NATO?

The evidence largely suggests that both of these views miss a crucial point: They overlook the mythological character of this discourse and how the autonomy/sovereignty narrative was primarily internally focused on community (re)building rather than on altering the existing Atlantic order or maximising national security. Firstly, it is true that these terms were not entirely new, as versions of them had appeared in earlier policy documents. In fact, the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ had been part of academic debates on European security since at least 1986 (Williams and Williams 1986, 3). As a policy goal, it evolved from the notion of ‘decision-making autonomy’ at St Malo (1998) and the ESS (2003) to the European Global Strategy (EUGS) (2016), where ‘strategic autonomy’ was first pushed as a foreign-policy objective.²⁶⁷ Yet, in the EUGS – and up to today – the term has not been officially defined regarding ambition, timeline, or strategic end goal.

In this regard, the drafting process of the EUGS is noteworthy. Rather than being a member state-driven document aimed at aligning national interests to reach specific objectives, it included chief drafter Nathalie Tocci, an academic who, on behalf of the HR/VP Mogherini, engaged a variety of civil society actors to ‘brainstorm ideas’ about the EU’s challenges. In her book on the drafting process, Tocci (2017) notes that member states agreed to put security and defence at the forefront of the EUGS (Tocci 2017, 65). However, beyond this consensus, they adopted a largely hands-off approach, making it a bottom-up process that extended as far as student essay competitions. Given the short timeframe, the document represents a significant achievement (EU Policy Analyst, 2025). Tocci (2017) reflects that ‘some member states felt the process had been somewhat rushed. But all recognised that the time to demonstrate unity and ambition on this dossier was then’ (Tocci 2017, 96). This focus on demonstrating unity also explains the last-minute title change after the Brexit vote. Initially, the EUGS was titled ‘A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World’ in reference to the 2003 ESS title *A Secure Europe in a Better World*. Yet this title was changed after Brexit to *Shared Vision, Common Action: A stronger Europe* to emphasise unity and actionable progress (Tocci 2017, 59).

The EUGS arguably epitomises the EU’s post-heroic ethos especially with its focus on ‘resilience’. The term takes centre stage in the document emphasising ‘the EU will foster the resilience of its democracies’ and those around it.²⁶⁸ As Wagner and Anholt (2016) suggest, resilience provides ‘a middle ground between over-ambitious [heroic] liberal peacebuilding and under-ambitious stability’ (cited in Tocci 2017, 71), grounding it in a post-heroic world view. Thus, resilience emerges as an inward-looking foreign policy principle, focused on protection, adaptability, and maintaining internal stability over assertiveness to enforce change. Unlike traditional heroic concepts of national security that entail sacrifice, active engagement, or power projection, resilience prioritises the EU’s capacity to absorb shocks and recover from disruptions without necessarily acting as a shaping force. Its aim is not to assert dominance but to ensure the EU endures challenges while preserving the existing order.

²⁶⁷ In addition, the 25–26 November 2013 Council conclusions also mentioned the term strategic autonomy. ‘...a more integrated, sustainable, innovative and competitive European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) remains crucial for developing and sustaining Europe’s military capabilities. This can also enhance [Europe’s] strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners’. European Council. 2013. *European Council Meeting: Conclusions*, Brussels, 19–20 December 2013.

²⁶⁸ EEAS. *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*. June 2016. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

Therefore, rather than viewing the autonomy/sovereignty narrative as a policy doctrine to reach strategic goals, a more useful entry point is to regard it as an act of community maintenance and self-identity preservation (Mälksoo 2016). In OSS terms, the EUGS served to impose order on the world and offer stability to an ‘anxious community’ (Mitzen 2018). Federica Mogherini (HR/VP) captured this function succinctly, calling the strategy ‘a collective vision [that] can help our Union to re-discover its identity, its soul’.²⁶⁹ Her statement underscores the notion of the EUGS as an instrument of anxiety control, aimed at establishing community-affirming practices that reassure the Union about its place in a changing world order.

Similarly, in SIT terms, the autonomy/sovereignty discourse serves as a narrative to positively delineate the ingroup from the outgroup. The term ‘strategic’ positions the ingroup as competing with external actors, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity. The notion of ‘autonomy’ then captures the idea that Europeans are united by occupying a shared geographical space which requires a commitment to collective achievement, that is distinct from other groups. This framing amplifies similarities within the ingroup, reinforcing group boundaries and fostering positive distinctiveness. The ability to act autonomously, of course, assumes power and recognition by others in the international arena. In this way, the narrative functions as a rallying myth, and since this rhetoric comes at a relatively low material cost, ‘it provides prestige on the cheap’ (Anderson 2008, 58). However, considering the weak institutional backing, it is evident that the autonomy/sovereignty discourse only expanded the existing capability-expectations gap, but did little to alter the overall post-heroic orientation of EU foreign/security policy.

11.2.1 Acronyms for Progress, Ambitions for Later: PESCO, EDF, MPCC

Beyond the wider discourse, the policy documents that emerge in this integration period offer important insights into the nature of this political process. Scholars who emphasise rationales of efficient power projection have highlighted how this integration phase broke several taboos. They typically point to three innovative dynamics, suggesting they reflect a paradigm shift in member states’ approach to EU defence:

- A. PESCO was seen as a shift from voluntary defence-industrial cooperation through the EDA, where member states could withdraw from projects at no cost to binding commitments. Thus, PESCO represented a new ambition due to a **new level of accountability**.
- B. The involvement of the European Commission in defence matters – especially through awarding EDF projects – was thought to introduce a top-down management structure. By awarding funds based on competitive criteria, this was seen to break with the traditional “just-retour principle”, where states demand perfect returns on investment, leading to inefficient outcomes. The EDF thus represented an **unprecedented move toward defence consolidation through supranational governance**.
- C. Lastly, the establishment of the MPCC suggested that the EU would finally achieve a unified command and control structure, reducing reliance on national headquarters or NATO’s SHAPE for military crisis interventions. The MPCC, therefore, was expected to generate a previously **unseen level of operational autonomy**.

²⁶⁹ Federica Mogherini, *Speech by HR/VP at the EUISS Annual Conference “Towards an EU Global Strategy—The Final Stage”*, Paris, 22 April 2016. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/activities/event/2016-euiss-annual-conference-towards-eu-global-strategy-final-stage>.

In reality, the one disruptive feature of this integration phase was the Commission's new role in defence research. Notions of increased accountability and operational autonomy, however, have been overstated as cooperation largely continued on existing voluntary parameters. Had these institutional objectives truly been realised in this phase, it might have been described as an efficiency-oriented approach to integration. Yet, the analysis shows all initiatives remained below their stated ambition, and that this was not merely a lowest common denominator result but largely reflected a shared lack of political will among core member states. As such, core EU countries were ultimately prepared to favour process over outcome in order to swiftly build institutions that signalled community stability and progress.

Both France and Germany were hit by the shockwave of the Brexit referendum, 'an outcome they had not really anticipated but had nevertheless prepared for' (EDA Official, 2024). Once the referendum's result was clear, the Franco-German motor swiftly switched into gear to drive forward the CSDP. All interviewees, therefore, drew a strong link between the Brexit vote and the revival of CSDP, with notably fewer references to motivators derived from changes in the external threat environment (EDA Official, 2024; EEAS Official, 2024, Polish Diplomat, 2025). This is further reflected in the documents underpinning the political process.

All major initiatives from this integration phase can be traced to the Franco-German paper *A Strong Europe in a World of Uncertainties*, published just one day after the Brexit referendum. The document opens with 'the decision of the British people marks a watershed moment in the history of Europe' followed by a second paragraph 'the British case is unique. But we must also acknowledge that support and passion for our common project has faded over the last decade in parts of our societies'.²⁷⁰ Given that the central motivation in these initial papers is explicitly linked to an internal EU issue, any subsequent justifications ultimately seem to appear less relevant. Because only after their discourse on Brexit, the two ministers highlighted changes in the security landscape. It is in the second part of the documents that they thematised the EU's essential role in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment, aiming to 'promote a more coherent and a more assertive Europe on the world stage'. Interestingly though even this framing is not exactly a heroic call for Europe to defend itself. Against the background of the previous section, it must be predominantly seen as a performative move to distinguish in-group from out-group for the purpose of raising ingroup solidarity. Then, in an almost Kafkaesque turn, the paragraph which introduces the threatening changes in the international environment ends with internal reform proposals, such as boosting the economy, managing migration, and completing the monetary union. Perhaps most tellingly, the document omits any mention of NATO, the US, or Russia, despite their undeniable influence on European security. Nonetheless, on paper, the document held the promise of a CSDP overhaul, proposing a *European Security Compact* encompassing the entire crisis response chain – from shared intelligence gathering and unified command and control to joint R&D and procurement.

²⁷⁰ Ayrault, Jean-Marc, and Frank-Walter Steinmeier. 2016. "A Strong Europe in a World of Uncertainties". *Federal Foreign Office*, June 24, 2016. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/160624-bm-am-fra/281672>.

Similar aims were reiterated in a second Franco-German paper on 12 September 2016, which opened with threats in the international environment rather than Brexit.²⁷¹ However, the credibility of this appeal for Europe to step up its defence game was again undermined by the need to stress, in the very first paragraph, that ‘the military and non-military threats to EU citizens and the EU territory are real’ – a point underlined in the document. Having to emphasise the reality of threats hints at a lack of conviction, somewhat recalling Jacques Chirac’s repeated calls for drawing up a ‘real’ defence in 1999. Also somewhat tellingly, the document is titled *Renewal of the CSDP: Towards a Comprehensive, Realistic and Credible Defence in the EU*, subtly implying that previous attempts lacked credibility – without, however, addressing how this integration approach would be different.²⁷²

What the two franco-German papers foreshadowed in 2016 would be confirmed by the implementation of this new defence package in 2017. In March 2017, the Council of the EU launched CARD allegedly allowing the EDA to assess ‘the EU defence landscape and facilitate cooperation by identifying collaborative opportunities’.²⁷³ In the first Franco-German paper, this idea had been termed the ‘European semester on defence capabilities’ drawing a parallel to a similar economic process established during the financial crisis, where the Commission was tasked with monitoring member states’ economic and fiscal policies to prevent fiscal irresponsibility. However, CARD’s ambition was much lower, remaining a voluntary process whereby member states could share defence data as they saw fit. Consequently, it provided no real change to the previous workings of the EDA which had initially been created for this very purpose. The voluntary nature of CARD is repeatedly stressed even on the dedicated EDA website stating, ‘no MS is exposed’.²⁷⁴ The lack of strategic rationale behind CARD is further underscored by its failure to clarify how it should align with NATO’s *Defence Planning Process*, given the institutions’ overlap in membership and purpose. Without a mandatory monitoring process, by spring 2017, signs were already emerging that this defence package would not constitute a paradigm shift.²⁷⁵

These signals grew stronger with the establishment of the MPCC on 8 June 2017. Pro-European observers had hoped the time had come for an actual EU Operational Headquarters. The second Franco-German paper had affirmed this aspiration, stating, ‘we reaffirm that a permanent EU HQ for military and civilian CSDP missions and operations ... remains our medium-term goal’²⁷⁶ Yet these observers were disappointed as the MPCC fell short of establishing a truly unified command and control structure. Most notably, the MPCC’s scope was limited to non-executive missions – such as advising, training, and monitoring – lacking authority for actual EU military deployments with enforcement mandates. Given its low staff numbers, any more ambitious missions would

²⁷¹ Federal Foreign Office and French Ministry of Defence. 2016. *Renewal of the CSDP: Towards a Comprehensive, Realistic and Credible Defence in the EU*. September 9, 2016.

https://augengeradeaus.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/20160909_DEU_FRA_EU-Verteidigung.pdf

²⁷² The effect of Brexit on the community ethos is also represented in the Bratislava declaration from 16 September 2016. It draws a link between Brexit and the EU’s future as a project to ensure peace and progress, which is then linked to the CSDP integration effort. European Council. 2016. *Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap*. September 16, 2016. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21250/160916-bratislava-declaration-and-roadmapen16.pdf>.

²⁷³ See EDA. 2025. “Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD)”..

[https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/coordinated-annual-review-on-defence-\(card\)](https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/coordinated-annual-review-on-defence-(card))

²⁷⁴ EDA. 2025. “Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD)”.

²⁷⁵ Interviews suggested NATO’s defence planning is driven more by operational ambitions whereas the EDA’s capability development plan is very broad and basically states ‘everything we need without prioritisation’ (Senior EEAS Official, formerly NATO, 2024).

²⁷⁶ Federal Foreign Office and French Ministry of Defence. 2016. *Renewal of the CSDP: Towards a Comprehensive, Realistic and Credible Defence in the EU*. September 9, 2016.

continue to be managed by national headquarters or SHAPE. After Brexit, demonstrating progress on this matter became important, as Britain had historically been framed as the crucial obstacle on achieving an EU HQ. However, the limited advances since Brexit suggest that rather than divergent national visions for the CSDP, a shared lack of ambition is at play (European Commission official, 2025). This ongoing lack was further illustrated in this phase with the EU's new flagship CSDP mission, the EU Advisory Mission in support of Security Sector Reform in Iraq (*EUAM Iraq*). With just 36 EU experts and a budget of €14 million, it seemed misaligned with the image of immediate threat painted in documents advocating for renewed CSDP integration.

Finally, the publication of the PESCO notification on 13 November 2017 provided crucial evidence that, like previous efforts, this integration phase was process-oriented and only secondarily concerned with military/strategic goals. In public discourse, EU leaders celebrated the notification as a historic breakthrough. In contrast, Nick Whitney, former Head of the EDA, began his assessment with a Chinese proverb: 'Big noise on stairs, nobody coming down' (Whitney 2017). He and other analysts quickly pointed to the fact that PESCO was first and foremost a 'pledging machine' having been 'watered down so as to become virtually meaningless' (ibid; Billon-Galland and Quencez 2017). When reading the initial Franco-German papers on the threatening changes in the geopolitical landscape alongside the PESCO notification, a large gap emerges between rhetoric and action. Commenting on the diluted commitments and membership criteria, Whitney (2017) observed:

'Who knew that almost all the member states had military capabilities which, in the Treaty's words, "fulfil higher criteria"? And how astonishing that all but a couple are now prepared to make "more binding commitments" to one another with a "view to the most demanding missions". The concept of the advance-guard has been replaced with that of the convoy'²⁷⁷

This is most evident in the so-called binding commitments laid out in PESCO, where the language is ambiguous and process-oriented, lacking clear definitions of outcomes. Note, for instance, phrases like 'commitment to considering the joint use of existing capabilities' and 'commitment to ensure increasing efforts'. Even in the few instances where figures on defence spending appear, they merely repeat targets agreed upon more than a decade ago but never realised (ibid.). For example, the goal of raising defence investment expenditure to 20% of total defence spending and allocating 2% to R&D can be traced back to agreements via the EDA from 2007 (Fiott 2024).²⁷⁸ Notably, the notification lacks any sanction mechanism for failing to meet targets while emphasising that 'participation in PESCO is voluntary and leaves national sovereignty untouched'.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Inclusivity extended not only to member states but also to EU institutions, several of which were integrated into the PESCO process, albeit with questionable added value. Through the PESCO secretariat, member states created a complex bureaucratic structure involving 'the whole alphabet soup' of CSDP, including the EDA, EEAS, and EUMS, while the PSC, EEAS, EUMC, and others also play roles in the process. Overall, it is difficult to envision a more inclusive, community-oriented approach for what was rhetorically framed as the most avant-garde effort toward European strategic autonomy (Whitney 2017).

²⁷⁸ In 2007, ministers agreed on four collective benchmarks for defence investment: allocating 20% of total defence spending to equipment procurement (including R&D and R&T); directing 35% of equipment spending to European collaborative procurement; dedicating 2% of total defence spending to defence R&T; and ensuring 20% of defence R&T spending is for European collaborative projects. However, these benchmarks lacked specific timelines and remained entirely voluntary.

²⁷⁹ Council of the European Union, *PESCO Notification to the Council and the HR/VP*, 13 November 2017.

Whitney (2017) thus concludes critically: ‘There is no value-added in any of this – nothing which member states should not already be doing in either the EDA or the wider CSDP context’.²⁸⁰ Today, however, member states continue to emphasise the centrality of PESCO despite delivering few notable capability outcomes. The 2024 PESCO strategic review stated that ‘PESCO remains an ambitious, binding, and inclusive EU legal framework’ only to then acknowledge severe reporting issues and a lack of ‘strategic and political, concrete and streamlined’ commitments.²⁸¹

In sum, this process-oriented and inclusive approach appears more aligned with pursuing ontological security needs through performative action than with power projection. Its goal is to establish cooperative practices that restore confidence in the European project among both officials and the public. As an interviewee put it ‘there was a psychological factor – we needed a success moment very badly’ (Senior EEAS Official, 2025). Although the initiative’s efficiency was undoubtedly affected by disagreements among member states, the absence of firm red lines from core members and the rhetorical elevation of the initiative strongly suggest that the process of cooperation was prioritised over tangible outcomes. This is most evident in the almost exclusively positive rhetoric surrounding the initiative. Particularly prominent in the discourse on PESCO is the frequent reference to ‘historical progress’, with leaders in both France and Germany describing it as a ‘historical step’ forward or ‘breakthrough’. Rhetorically, this works well to evoke a contrast to Brexit, viewed as a historical setback. In this way defence cooperation fostered a sense of renewal, seemingly transforming a crisis into an opportunity for unprecedented advancements toward a previously unattainable goal.

11.3 Deep Dissonance and Transatlantic Antagonism

The analysis thus far has demonstrated that community angst in the wake of Brexit was a primary driver of the 2016–2018 integration phase, with French fears of exclusion acting as an additional catalyst. This integration phase, however, cannot be comprehensively understood without considering the sources of ontological instability arising from transatlantic norm clashes and the resulting estrangement during the first Trump presidency. As in previous cases, transatlantic dissonance acted as a crucial intervening dynamic shaping the policy process, becoming increasingly salient from Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016 through his first year in office. This period marked an abrupt shift from the Obama era, during which Americans were largely perceived as “close cousins” to a perception of the US as a “stranger” at times verging on outright antagonism (Patten 2006; Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021). Estrangement emerged as an important dynamic, reinforcing ingroup relations within the EU. By fostering a shared sense of identity differentiation from the US, it encouraged France and Germany to engage in community building, rhetorically rallying around the notion that, in times of uncertainty, Europeans needed to ‘take their fate into their own hands’.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ An interviewee’s criticism was equally strong arguing that ‘most PESCO projects are not very relevant and some only seem to exist on paper’. That said projects such as military mobility and the French-led helicopter project have provide added value, yet they arguably did not require a PESCO frame (Senior EEAS Official, 2025)

²⁸¹ Council of the European Union. 2024. *Council Conclusions on the PESCO Strategic Review*. November 18, 2024. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14375-2024-INIT/en/pdf>.

²⁸² The statement is associated with Angel Merkel’s 2017 beer tent speech (Adler 2017).

As in previous cases, the analysis offers little support for materialist arguments suggesting that the Trump presidency fundamentally altered European states' strategic calculus (Baun and Marek 2019, 29; Simón 2010, 110). Beyond the lack of substance in the winter defence package, two additional factors undermine materialist arguments. First, states remained committed to NATO, as demonstrated by EU leaders' deliberate efforts to avoid lasting antagonism with the US by advancing CSDP/NATO joint initiatives. The second factor concerns the timeline of events. The analysis reveals that Trump's most severe strategic threats – such as his threat to withdraw from NATO – occurred in 2018, after CSDP institutions had already been agreed upon. Notably, Trump's disruptive foreign/security policies from 2018 onwards neither rekindled CSDP integration nor prompted disruptive additional investments in European military capabilities. This provides further evidence that the CSDP should not be interpreted as an act of balancing against the hegemon, nor as being primarily driven by fears of abandonment or entanglement as proposed by neoclassical realism.

As previous case studies have indicated, norm collisions between Europe and the US have fluctuated over time but reached high points at the start of the 21st century. Donald Trump's presidency, however, extended beyond previous norm clashes over how to maintain international order. His presidency introduced new cleavages, not only through dissonance over US actions on the international stage but also via the political values that he appeared to embody. Theoretically, this analysis has thus far focused on cleavages arising from international norms, deliberately excluding the broader personal value systems of US presidents to maintain theoretical parsimony. This avoids the complexities of comparing different presidents' ethics across issues (e.g. gender and religion) and evaluating the dissonance these created with EU governing elites. However, incorporating broader norm clashes can add nuance and is consistent with the theoretical frame of SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Mitzen 2006b). What matters is merely whether interactions between the European core group and the US generated norms clashes that produced ingroup/outgroup dynamics. In the case of Donald Trump, it is evident that both his personal values and many of his actions on the international stage were antithetical to the liberal values shared within the EU core. Expanding the analytical scope thus allows for a more nuanced understanding of estrangement levels at specific points in the integration process.

The argument is as follows: The level of estrangement between Europeans and the US reaches a crescendo from Donald Trump's presidential campaign through his initial period in office, as his morally controversial statements first emerge, and his election itself leads Europeans to perceive the US as a 'stranger'. This sense of estrangement is particularly pronounced in 2017, when CSDP integration moves forward, acting as a source of ontological insecurity to reinforce the community building process. However, despite these norm clashes, the first Trump presidency did not fundamentally alter European commitment to NATO or reliance on US security guarantees. Interestingly, the level of strategic uncertainty surrounding US commitment peaked during the latter half of Trump's presidency. While Trump had criticised NATO during his presidential campaign, his focus shifted away from defence matters in 2017, only to resurface with full force in 2018, when he threatened to withdraw from NATO during the Brussels summit and exited several arms control treaties. By this stage, however, CSDP integration had largely been concluded and did not receive a boost from these strategic clashes. This suggests that, temporally, CSDP integration correlates more with elevated normative estrangement and less with heightened strategic uncertainty.

To illustrate this, notions of estrangement can be traced back to Donald Trump's confirmation as the Republican Party's presidential candidate. Unlike previous instances where American candidates were selected whose characteristics or behaviours might have sparked perceptions of otherness in European circles, Donald Trump represented a deeper and more multifaceted normative clash. His populist approach to politics and his contentious relationship with democratic principles, created an unprecedented sense of alienation with the European community. This estrangement was starkly reflected in European's lack of confidence in Trump. In mid-2016, confidence levels were particularly low, scoring in the single digits – the lowest ever recorded for any US presidential candidate in history.²⁸³ Considering the timing of normative clashes with the Trump administration, an interesting picture emerges that casts doubt on arguments framing CSDP integration as a strategic response to US NATO policy. From a rational/materialist point of view, one might argue that CSDP integration served as insurance against possible US retrenchment under Trump, especially given his questioning of NATO's Article V, making collective defence conditional on allies spending 2% of GDP on defence (Blankenship 2023, 5; Snyder 1990, 113).

However, a closer examination of key French and German documents from the launch period reveals that the US and NATO played an almost negligible role.²⁸⁴ Instead, the focus was strongly on internal challenges and vague discussions of international threats, indicating that CSDP integration was not primarily conceived as a hedging strategy. CSDP integration gained momentum in the second half of 2016, following the Brexit vote. While strategic clashes with the US were simmering in 2016/2017, normative estrangement had already reached a boiling point. Arguably, estrangement began to peak in mid-2016 as Donald Trump became increasingly known to European elites and the public. Notable examples included the October 2016 leak of his controversial comments about women, and statements suggesting he might refuse to accept electoral defeat (Bullock 2016). Together, these incidents marked an unprecedented shift, transcending the perception of encountering an unfamiliar side of an otherwise familiar American identity. I argue that these normative clashes provided a social identity impetus for European defence integration.

However, strategic interests in the US alliance remained robust, particularly as strategic threats from the Trump administration only peaked from 2018 onwards. When Donald Trump took office in 2017, his focus was not strongly on security policy but rather on economic affairs in the context of the G7 and G20 summits. While he began to scale back multilateralism, his actions largely targeted areas not directly relevant to European security. Examples from 2017 include the withdrawal from the *Trans-Pacific Partnership* in January, stepping away from the *Paris Climate Agreement* in June, and leaving UNESCO in October. These attacks on multilateralism created estrangement among Europeans, whose 'EU membership embodies a fundamentally different set of international

²⁸³ In spring 2016, views of Donald Trump in Europe were overwhelmingly negative. Only a median of 9% trusted him to handle world affairs appropriately, while 85% expressed a lack of confidence. In contrast, trust in Hillary Clinton was higher, though not overwhelmingly positive, with a median of 59% expressing confidence in her. Pew Research Center. 2016. "As Obama Years Draw to Close, President and U.S. Seen Favorably in Europe and Asia".; Pew Research Center. 2020. "How People Around the World See the U.S. and Donald Trump in 10 Charts". <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/01/08/how-people-around-the-world-see-the-u-s-and-donald-trump-in-10-charts/>.

²⁸⁴ See e.g. the first two Franco-German documents from June and September 2016, which, in their justifications of CSDP paid little attention to the US or NATO.

norms' (European Commission Official b, 2025). However, at this stage, his efforts did not pose a direct threat to European security, as Trump had yet to target NATO. Although his criticism of NATO burden-sharing, which had featured prominently in his presidential campaign, did not disappear, it became less dominant in 2017. As such, strategic uncertainty only reached a peak from 2018 onwards, particularly during the 11–12 July NATO Brussels summit (Schnauffer 2021).

According to his Adviser, John Bolton, even Trump's inner circle could not be certain that he would refrain from exiting NATO during these weeks (Garrity 2024).²⁸⁵ The credibility of such threats was further bolstered by Trump's withdrawal from historic arms control agreements that year, including the *INF Treaty*, the *Open Skies Treaty*, and the *JCPOA* with Iran (McCracken and Downman 2019, 277). Notably, his decision to quit the *JCPOA* in May 2018 set back EU-US-Iran relations by years, undoing progress made since 2003 and heightening the risk of war in the region (Helferich 2023a). In the meantime, US tensions with NATO reached a high point during the summer of 2018. Immediately after the NATO summit, Trump met Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, where he referred to the EU as one of America's 'foes' while calling Putin a 'friend' (Roth et al. 2018). Theoretically, these episodes can be said to have heightened both European fears of abandonment and entanglement making renewed EU defence efforts most likely in this period. Yet empirically this is not reflected in policy changes, which is why psychological lenses focussed on implicit social identity dynamics seem more insightful to explain the relationship between Trump's foreign-policy and CSDP integration.

Rather than his presidency disrupting EU countries' calculus about their national security, Trump's leadership style and rhetorical antagonism towards Europe reinforced a sense of identity differentiation that implicitly drove the integration process. Much like many of his personal values, his approach to maintaining international order clashed with European perspectives, however, nuances matter. On the *macro level*, regarding norm clashes about international order, Trump's 'America First' approach is comparable to that of George W. Bush. In particular, Bush's discourse on the US being 'unbound' where 'the mission would determine the coalition' and his Manichean tendencies that divided countries into those either with or against the US, epitomised by his "axis of evil speech" (Böller 2020, 302)²⁸⁶ As such, Trump's approach to maintaining international order, including his violations of liberal norms of multilateralism and non-interventionism was broadly consistent with earlier US policies in its potential to create dissonance with EU allies, despite his altered rhetoric.²⁸⁷ On the *micro level*, norms clashes over the use of force did not escalate significantly during his presidency, as no major military conflicts arose for NATO. Therefore, the primary source of estrangement lay on the *meso level*, in normative clashes about the transatlantic relationship itself. Trump's rhetorical attacks on NATO and his reversal of friend-foe roles

²⁸⁵ See WELT. *Fünf Präsidenten und ein Zar – Putin vs. USA*. 2022. Documentary. Accessed December 9, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFVWMFrRtgY>.

²⁸⁶ An important event in this regard was Trump's controversial targeted killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. The killing of a high-ranking official of another country with whom the United States was not formally at war fundamentally undermined liberal international norms of non-intervention. While differing in casualty rate, it is comparable to the Iraq invasion in terms of the liberal international norms it challenged – norms upon which institutions like NATO were arguably founded.

²⁸⁷ Notable examples of the US's ambivalent stance on multilateralism included the refusal to ratify (1) the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines and (2) the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty under Clinton; (3) the Kyoto Protocol and (4) the International Criminal Court, as well as the launch of the Iraq invasion, all under Bush Jr.; the withdrawal of funding from UNESCO in 2011 (after previously leaving in 1985); and the NSA spying scandal under Obama.

represented a profound challenge to liberal norms and combined with his personal values, created an unprecedented sense of estrangement.

However, statements by EU leaders Merkel, Hollande, and Macron were not meant to signal a strategic shift away from the transatlantic alliance. Rather, they aimed to rally the European ingroup and create a sense of confidence in times of uncertainty. In her famous beer tent rally in 2017, Angela Merkel stated, ‘the era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent’ echoing a previous comment in January that year: ‘there are no unlimited guarantees for close cooperation with us Europeans. That’s why I’m convinced that Europe and the EU will have to learn to take more responsibility in the future’ (Adler 2017; Karnitschnig 2017). While some observers interpreted these comments as indicating a tectonic shift away from the US, it was already notable at the time that this was not the intent. Instead, the remarks served as a rallying cry for Europeans (and also the CDU/CSU, following their fallout over migration) to unite and be a force for stability and rationality in uncertain times. While positioning the UK and the US outside the European ingroup in her beer tent rally, Merkel repeatedly emphasised the importance of maintaining friendship and the significance of NATO. As one observer noted, ‘were Merkel to signal a German pivot away from the US, she would hardly choose a Bavarian beer party as the venue’ (Karnitschnig 2017).

François Hollande’s statements during the same period reflect a similar rationale. In October 2016, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Jacques Delors Institute, he remarked: ‘The USA is no longer in the same mindset of protection and defence, while remaining our ally within NATO. This question is not raised, but Europeans must be aware that when they are the leading global economic power – and they are – they must also be a political power with defence capabilities’.²⁸⁸ What stands out is again the notion that US commitment to NATO is not fundamentally questioned while CSDP is justified by the EU’s actorness as an economic giant. Moreover, it is remarkable how this entire discussion on CSDP is featured under the subtitle ‘European identity’ in the document. This framing counters any notions of *realpolitik* by suggesting that EU defence is rooted in identity assertion. As Hollande stated, ‘European identity is not simply about defending ourselves. It is about defending values and bringing a message to the world’. This aligns with the typical post-heroic discourse on CSDP, which emphasises value-based identity signalling rather than power maximisation. The Franco-German call to “take our fate into our own hands” thus represented another iteration of the autonomy/sovereignty discourse – internally focused, with no deeper intent to disrupt existing power relations in security and defence (De Hoop Scheffer and Quencez 2017; Paravicini 2017).

Against this background, it is not surprising that Europeans sought to safeguard NATO during the integration process to avoid a lasting wedge in the Atlantic partnership. Notably, prior to the launch of CSDP integration, NATO relations were at a high point. In 2016, NATO members, under the leadership of Secretary General (SG) Jens Stoltenberg, worked towards a new joint declaration,

²⁸⁸François Hollande. “*20 ans d’Europe!*” Speech delivered at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Institut Jacques Delors, Collège des Bernardins, Paris, October 6, 2016. President Macron later used similar rhetoric, declaring, ‘It is up to us today to take our responsibilities and guarantee our own security, and thus have European sovereignty’ (Vandoorne 2018).

published on 8 July 2016 (Schuette 2023, 436). Subsequently, Stoltenberg invoked that ‘cooperation is now the norm, not the exception’.²⁸⁹

However, plans for CSDP integration did not feature prominently in the NATO process and came as a surprise to non-EU NATO countries (NATO Official, 2025; Mehta 2018a). The CSDP revelations were thus followed by threats from Washington – delivered in two letters to the European Commission – warning against the exclusion of NATO states from EU defence-industrial initiatives (Mehta 2018b; Peel and Chazan 2019). This pattern is reminiscent of 1999, when, following NATO’s Washington Summit and 50th anniversary celebrations, Europeans launched the ESDP at the Cologne Summit with limited prior consultation with the US (#SinsOfCologne). To mitigate backlash, Europeans sought to strengthen NATO/EU relations through efforts such as the Berlin+ process and consultations culminating in the 2002 EU-NATO declaration on ESDP. The 2016 phase mirrored that process to some extent. Following the 2016 joint declaration, five progress reports were issued, incorporating 74 proposals for enhancing cooperation and culminating in a second joint declaration in July 2018.²⁹⁰ However, observers predominantly highlighted the cosmetic value of these initiatives (NATO Official, 2025; Howorth 2023, 10).²⁹¹

With this in mind, the analysis casts doubt on arguments suggesting that this integration primarily aimed to either balance or hedge against the US. That said, comparing this phase to the integration period of 1999 reveals a subtle shift in how CSDP was presented to the United States. In 1999, discourse on ‘decision-making autonomy’ – which initially raised American concerns – quickly subsided as Europeans hastened to frame ESDP as a means to strengthen NATO. By contrast, between 2016 and 2018, the *sovereignty/autonomy discourse* remained prominent for longer, only gradually giving way to less controversial terms like ‘technological sovereignty’ and ‘open strategic autonomy’ (Mola 2023; Fiott 2018; Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022). Moreover, the CSDP institutions created during this time were less inclusive of the US, exemplified by the delayed and restricted agreement on third-country access to PESCO and EDF funds, which was only finalised in 2020 (Lawrenson and Sabatino 2024).²⁹² During this period, Europeans were prepared to adopt more exclusive rhetoric and withstand US pressures. Arguably, this stronger in-group focus was shaped, to no small extent, by heightened US estrangement during this period. In strategic terms, however, these measures had little effect on transatlantic power balances or Europe’s capacity to offset US security guarantees.

In sum, this integration period aligns with the argument that CSDP has been driven by the EU core group’s need to rally the community amid ontological crises. That said, alternative motivations – such as improving NATO burden-sharing (a liberal argument) or offsetting US influence in European security (neoclassical-realist or rationalist arguments) – were not entirely absent. The

²⁸⁹ NATO. *NATO Secretary General’s Remarks at the European Parliament Subcommittee on Security and Defence*. May 3, 2017. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_143400.htm?selectedLocale=en.

²⁹⁰ Several interviewees highlighted the challenges of NATO/CSDP meetings today, describing them as ‘formalised, forced get-togethers that people feel they need to have’ (NATO Official, 2025; Senior EEAS Official, 2024). While officials often emphasise close cooperation, these meetings tend to be formalistic, as NATO documents are usually classified and cannot be shared with the EU due to the Turkey/Cyprus issue (Council of the EU, Official, 2025).

²⁹¹ Notable novelties included the Helsinki-based Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and cooperation on military mobility. However, in core areas justifying both institutions’ existence – crisis response and deterrence – key questions on their division of labour for European security remain unresolved (Helferich 2024; Kello 2017, 247).

²⁹² Council of the European Union. 2020. *EU Defence Cooperation: Council Sets Conditions for Third-State Participation in PESCO Projects*. November 5, 2020.

increased defence budgets and new EU defence initiatives also reflected responses to a deteriorating defence-industrial base in Europe and an increasingly contested geopolitical environment.²⁹³ After EU defence spending reached its lowest point in 2014, there was clearly a need to spend more and spend better in light of Russia's annexation of Crimea. However, given the institutional outcomes and the discourse at the time, strategic rationales to reduce physical threat were not the dominant driver. Instead, psychological explanations – emphasising the need for self-affirming cooperation to safeguard the in-group and restore a positive sense of self during a period of self-identity disruption – appear crucial. The final empirical section further examines this theoretical argument by testing a specific mechanism of the theory: that core states drive the integration process based on community-oriented rationales, while non-core members pursue narrower, interest-based goals with the CSDP. To explore this, Poland's motivations for supporting the 2016 integration period will be assessed.

11.4 Poland and the Role of Non-Core Actors in CSDP integration

Poland is often characterised as an EU member state with a strong transatlantic orientation, deeply rooted in its historical experience of the World Wars. After gaining independence from Soviet domination in 1991, Poland – along with other former Soviet bloc states – made significant efforts to join NATO, seeking security through US-led guarantees. Poland's accession to NATO in 1999 marked a turning point, positioning the country as a key element of the alliance's eastern flank and an important strategic partner for Washington. In 2004, Poland joined the EU as part of the “big bang” enlargement. Economically, it has made substantial progress, emerging as one of the fastest-growing economies in Europe (Coman, Schmidt, and Crespy 2020, 338). In security and defence, Poland has consistently aligned with the Atlanticist faction within the EU, often expressing scepticism about CSDP integration due to concerns they might undermine NATO.

This orientation is partly rooted in Poland's historical narrative. It highlights the role of the US in liberating the country from Nazi and Soviet domination, contrasted with France and the UK's perceived failure to honour their treaty obligations during the 1939 invasion of Poland. That said, Poland's stance on CSDP is often mischaracterised as generally critical and even hostile towards CSDP. Instead, Polish leaders have for the most part regarded EU defence as an ‘additional security mechanism for Poland, complementing the national defence capacity, membership in NATO and strategic partnership with the US’ (Terlikowski 2018, 2). Despite its tendency for scepticism, Poland's contributions to the CSDP have been assessed as relatively high given its size. The country has participated in all major CSDP missions, and several EU Battlegroups have been established with Poland as the lead nation (ibid.).

However, Poland has also proven to be a challenging partner within the EU, often taking contentious stances on certain commitments. Its historical experience of subjugation under external powers has instilled a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, which has occasionally led to comparisons between the centralised authority of Moscow during the Soviet era and the influence of EU institutions (Filčák 2021).

²⁹³ Germany's defence budget rose by approximately €10 billion from 2017 to 2020, and France's by about €5 billion – non-negligible sums, though still modest relative to NATO's broader framework. Nevertheless, Germany remained significantly below the 2% target (1.57% of GDP defence expenditure by 2020), along with 13 out of 21 other EU states in NATO. NATO. *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013–2020)*. October 21, 2020.

Due to its late accession to the EU, its size, and its distinct historical trajectory, Poland does not classify as a core member. Poland has lacked the power and normative alignment necessary to shape the integration process or foster a sense of collective ‘we-feeling’ which has been characteristic of France, Germany, and, at times, the UK (Deutsch 2015, 38). To test this theory’s assumptions about core-periphery relations in EU defence integration, I examine Poland’s motivations for supporting the 2016 defence package. Specifically, I analyse Poland’s involvement in the decision-making process and the rhetorical positioning of Polish leaders towards the proposed CSDP institutions. My argument is that Poland pursued narrower national interests by joining PESCO and the EDF. This is reflected in elite discourse, for instance, which differed markedly from the kind of ingroup rallying rhetoric employed by France and Germany, particularly regarding the EU autonomy/sovereignty discourse. Poland’s goal was more rationalist in nature – balancing its relationship with European partners and the US in a way that would strengthen its position within NATO without undermining its standing in the EU (Polish Diplomat, 2025; NATO Official, 2025). In line with this theoretical framework, the case reflects a distinct set of motivations driving CSDP support among countries that are not core community members.

Following the UK’s departure, Poland assumed a leading role in the Atlanticist camp within the EU. Unlike France and Germany, Poland focused its attention on the non-strategic ambiguities in NATO-CSDP relations, which the 2016 defence package risked reinforcing. Rather than advancing the integration effort, Poland consistently called for clearer explanations of the institutions’ objectives and their added value. Some of Poland’s concerns were genuine, particularly regarding the potential implications of the autonomy/sovereignty discourse for NATO, especially given the election of NATO critic Donald Trump. From the perspective of Polish elites, NATO had been on a positive trajectory, with Poland achieving a key strategic goal during the 2016 Warsaw Summit. The summit marked a significant milestone in NATO’s adaptation to the Russian threat (Council of the EU Official, 2025; NATO Official, 2025). Notably, the fact that it took place in Poland – rather than Brussels or the Washington as is usually the case – was itself a major success for Poland. Both the summit and the subsequent decision to reinforce NATO’s eastern flank by deploying battlegroups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland (*Enhanced Forward Presence*) were celebrated as a historic achievement by Poland and the Baltic states (EEAS Official a, 2025; Terlikowski 2018). Additionally, the joint declaration on EU-NATO cooperation, which emerged from the summit, appeared to offer a viable balance in the transatlantic partnership, united in facing Russia.

The new EU defence initiatives risked destabilising this balance. Poland positioned itself as a sceptic of the new defence package, questioning the purpose of PESCO and cautioning against pro-European rhetoric that could undermine NATO unity. This stance was echoed by other Visegrad Group (V4) states, which feared that CSDP initiatives would shift focus from the eastern flank to the South (Gotkowska 2017, 6). One of the first initiatives of the defence package, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) drew Polish criticism. Polish leaders resisted engaging with CARD merely for performative purposes, insisting it must not conflict with NATO’s planning process or propose divergent capability targets. Additionally, Poland opposed any rhetoric suggesting that participation in CARD was mandatory. Sources indicate that Poland played a key role in advocating for language that reaffirmed NATO’s pre-eminence and emphasised the voluntary nature of CARD (EEAS Official a, 2025, Polish Diplomat 2025).

As noted, even France and Germany, showed limited enthusiasm for enforcing transparency in the CARD process. Nonetheless, they tended to downplay its limitations to maintain the appearance of unity and progress. While Polish elites recognised the need to demonstrate unity in light of the EU's internal divisions, they were far less willing to engage in inefficient defence cooperation for the sake of fostering a sense of community progress (Gotkowska 2018).

A similar dynamic emerged around concerns that the defence package could create a two-speed Europe in defence. The Polish Prime Minister and Foreign Office emphasised the risks of deeper cooperation, not only on technical grounds but also as a way to reinforce their country's leadership role within the eastern periphery and counterbalance Franco-German dominance (EEAS Official a, 2025). As such they strongly advocated for an inclusive PESCO approach. However, instead of publicly aligning with Germany – which also prioritised inclusivity – they positioned Poland as the leader of the periphery group, cautioning against proposals originating from the EU centre (Muti 2018, 2). This rhetorical strategy persisted late into the policy process, even after PESCO's modular structure and reduced ambition and bindingness had been agreed upon. In this way, Polish elites acted as guardians of their country's sovereignty, alleviating fears that Poland's industry and military would be forced to follow a Franco-German agenda. Simultaneously, this approach enabled Poland to position itself as the leader of smaller Baltic and Black Sea states concerned about exclusion.

Unlike the Franco-German discourse, which utilised CSDP integration to rally the ingroup and address an ontological crisis, Poland's approach was shaped by narrower, utility-driven calculations. In the Polish case, there was a distinct effort to balance European and transatlantic interests throughout the policy process. To counter perceptions among non-EU NATO members that the autonomy/sovereignty discourse undermined the alliance, Poland wanted to ensure that PESCO remained a technical instrument rather than a 'political vehicle' (Terlikowski 2018, 6). A key method employed by Polish elites was publicly advocating for third-party access to PESCO and the EDF. At one point, the PiS government even described Poland's role in PESCO as a 'Trojan horse' intended to prevent the initiative from progressing in the wrong direction (Polish Diplomat, 2025). However, interviews confirm that this was primarily a rhetorical strategy aimed at strengthening Poland's position vis-à-vis NATO and the US. In doing so, Poland sought to assume the transatlantic bridging role previously symbolised by the UK (Council of the EU Official, 2025). The Polish government kept its support for PESCO deliberately ambiguous for an extended period, ultimately signing the PESCO notification on 10 November 2016 – only three days before the Council summit officially launched the initiative.

The timing offers further insights into the Polish calculus. On the one hand, delaying its decision symbolised Poland's critical stance on EU defence, reflecting a watchdog role that resonated with Washington. On the other hand, by ultimately deciding to join PESCO from the outset, Poland avoided undermining the EU core's effort to demonstrate unity by advancing CSDP initiatives in a coordinated manner. Opting out could have incurred additional reputational costs and exacerbated existing rifts with France and Germany over migration issues. On the day Poland joined, Secretary of State for European Affairs Konrad Szymański emphasised Poland's role in shaping the process, suggesting that it agreed to PESCO because the principles of non-duplication

and non-competition with NATO had been upheld.²⁹⁴ Technically, however, the details of third-party membership – on which Poland had made its participation conditional – had not yet been finalised when the Council formally adopted the PESCO regulation in December 2017. This issue was only settled on 5 November 2020 in a subsequent Council decision.²⁹⁵ Overall, Poland saw no reason to block proposals that could enhance EU defence capabilities – or at least identify capability gaps – as long as NATO was not undermined. As such, its position was not markedly different from those of France or Germany. Polish civil servants report that this stance has remained surprisingly consistent despite the political sea changes the country has recently experienced (EEAS Official a, 2025, NATO Official, 2025, Polish Diplomat, 2025).

While the timing and support for PESCO do not align neatly with regional or country-size patterns, it is evident that momentum originated from the core, with non-core countries joining later. Following the Franco-German proposals in the summer of 2016, Italy and Spain quickly expressed support for renewed CSDP integration.²⁹⁶ In September 2017, French Defence Minister Florence Parly suggested that the EU core was playing a pivotal role in driving the defence effort, joined by Belgium, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic.²⁹⁷ This came after the Ministers of Defence of France, Germany, Italy, and Spain sent the HR/VP Mogherini a joint letter with common proposals for PESCO in July 2017. In contrast, most smaller countries, especially in the East, joined the process later, without exerting significant influence on the political agenda (European Commission Official a, 2025, EEAS Official b, 2025). Romania stood out as more critical towards EU defence, while the Czech Republic acted as a staunch supporter, as reflected in an article co-authored by Czech Prime Minister Sobotka and Commission President Juncker titled *Europe must take defence into its own hands* (Sobotka and Juncker 2017; Gotkowska 2017, 6). A final group includes countries that identify as neutral, notably Sweden, Ireland, Austria, and Malta. All of these countries played a more passive role in the process, with Malta being the only state not part of PESCO today.²⁹⁸

To conclude, this test case supports the argument that CSDP integration has been heavily driven by community-oriented motivations in core EU states, while non-core members initially adopt a more passive role, pursuing narrower, utility-oriented motives. Since Poland's 2023 election, which brought former European Council President Donald Tusk back to power and saw former MEP Radosław Sikorski appointed as Foreign Minister, the country has experienced a pro-European shift. With the highest defence spending as a share of GDP in Europe, Poland is on the path to becoming a key player in shaping EU–NATO relations. That said, even previous governments have often pursued a more anti-EU rhetoric in public that did not always align with actual policy.

²⁹⁴ Defence24. “Polska wyrazi gotowość udziału w PESCO” [Poland Will Express Its Readiness to Participate in PESCO].. <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/szymanski-polska-wyrazi-gotowosc-udzialu-w-pesco>.

²⁹⁵ Council of the European Union. 2020. *EU Defence Cooperation: Council Sets Conditions for Third-State Participation in PESCO Projects*. November 5, 2020.

²⁹⁶ In an op-ed published in *La Repubblica* and *Le Monde*, the Italian Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence called for “relaunching common defence”. Shortly after, Spain became increasingly involved in the inner circle (Wesel 2016). *La Repubblica* and *Le Monde*. “Establishing a Schengen-like Defence Agreement to Respond to Terrorism”. August 10, 2016.

²⁹⁷ Agence Europe. “EU/DEFENCE: Europe's Defence as Seen by Florence Parly”. September 7, 2017.

²⁹⁸ Austria expressed support only in the summer of 2017, while Ireland joined late on 7 December 2017, alongside Portugal, partly due to domestic governance issues. I am grateful for exchanges with Anna Savolainen about research on the timing of PESCO support. See Anna Savolainen (2022) *The Path to PESCO*. Unpublished manuscript presented at EGPP seminar hosted by the European University Institute on 3 March 2022.

12.0 Conclusion: European Security Governance in the 21st Century

Looking back at 25 years of EU defence cooperation, there is considerable evidence to suggest that today's institutional setup is not the result of rational institutional design alone. The purpose of this study has been to contribute to a research agenda that unveils the deep-seated social-psychological drivers behind the CSDP and its relationship with NATO. It has argued that EU defence integration has primarily progressed during moments of ontological insecurity, when the normative self-conception and significant social relationships of core member states were undermined. In such moments defence integration has functioned as a means to safeguard the community by engaging in self-affirming cooperation driven by a desire to protect a collective that has become constitutive of elites' sense of self. In the initial decision-making phase, the state of NATO and the shape of the threat environment have played a remarkably minor role. Accordingly, CSDP integration has not been motivated by a desire to fundamentally shift the power dynamics that have underpinned the transatlantic partnership for the past 75 years. It has neither been primarily driven by an inherent intention to rival US power, nor by a goal to encourage better burden-sharing and keep the US engaged in Europe. This study has shown that dominant explanations crucially overlook the extent to which cooperation has been driven by psychological needs and community reflexes, rather than by a rational imperative to maximise physical security vis-à-vis external others. That said, in the absence of ontological crisis, member states tend to pursue narrower national interests, as seen in the Libya case study.

Empirically, the analysis has shown that, in the late 1990s, EU defence integration was vital for consolidating the EU's actorness – particularly after the paralysis over the Yugoslav wars undermined the normative self-image of the European community and its post-Maastricht progress. Similarly, defence integration during the 2003 Iraq crisis helped restore cohesion among core member states, enabling both EU enlargement and progress on a new founding treaty. Finally, following Brexit, CSDP integration helped reframe the historical setback into a narrative of progress, symbolised by the creation of a 'defence union' with a distinctive normative role in times of unravelling. In each case, the integration process was performative in nature and predominantly sparked by internal community challenges (*community angst*) rather than changes in the external threat environment. Furthermore, this ontological driver was reinforced by additional social identity dynamics, such as fears of exclusion by core states (*the prodigal son*) and a sense of identity differentiation from the US as an outgroup member (*estrangement*).

Theoretically, two core conceptual innovations emerge from this study of security communities and defence cooperation: the *community dilemma*, and the classification of the EU as a *post-heroic* actor. The community dilemma is perhaps the most distinctive contribution, departing from the conventional structure/agency understanding in IR. While both realist and liberal theories assume that anarchy limits cooperation in high politics, constructivist scholarship on security communities has shown that sustained integration can erode the logic of self-help. This can give rise to diffuse reciprocity and an almost state-like sense of 'we-feeling' across states. Building on this, the present study explores the structural consequences of community itself and arrives at a peculiar insight: in densely knit security communities, ontological crises can compel states to cooperate in defence, not out of strategic necessity, but to safeguard their community and restore a sense of self and progress. In such moments, states may set aside national prerogatives and, to some extent, sovereignty concerns in order to stabilise ingroup relations. Yet because this process unfolds ad

hoc and on ambiguous terms to avoid dissensus, it can lead to outcomes that states might not have individually pursued under normal circumstances. Whether the EU is unique in fostering such a dynamic requires further testing. Nevertheless, the concept of the community dilemma expands the range of behaviours that can be conceived internationally and thus broadens researchers' conceptual toolbox.

Classifying the EU as a post-heroic international actor is a direct complement to the community dilemma concept. While the community dilemma addresses the internal nature of EU cooperation, post-heroism pertains to European perceptions of actors beyond the community boundary. Arguably, any explanation of the CSDP makes implicit assumptions about the nature of the EU as an agent in international politics. My choice has been to make these assumptions explicit. This inevitably invites criticism, as the classification of an organisation composed of 27 member states, which have evolved over time, is highly reductive. However, choosing a broad unit of analysis (the broadest in IR often being civilisations) can be insightful, depending on the purpose of the analysis and the insights one seeks to gain. Yet, as Max Weber (2005) reminds us, with normative ideal types, it is important to embrace the constructed nature of knowledge, refraining from reification and essentialisation (Weber 2005, 33). Thus, adopting the lens of post-heroism was an analytical rather than an ontological choice.

In many ways, the notion of a post-heroic EU simply builds on earlier classifications of the EU as an international actor. This began with François Duchêne's (1972) classification of the EU as a 'civilian power' later rebutted by Hedley Bull (1982) arguing the EU could not be considered an actor without foreign and security capabilities (Duchêne 1972; Bull 1982, 151). With the advent of ESDP, the idea of the EU as a 'military power' briefly emerged but quickly faded as Ian Manners (2002) popularised the term 'normative power' highlighting the EU's ideational influence (Manners 2002b). The post-heroic label cuts across these definitions. Like Manners (2002) it treats the EU as a *sui generis* actor unconcerned with statehood *per se*. Yet unlike Manners (2002), this study adopts a more critical perspective, closer to Bull's (1982) concerns, by underscoring the normative and psychological constraints of this collective (Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013). This perspective also invites scholars to engage more deeply with the balance between heroic and post-heroic norms that liberal actors must navigate to remain resilient in a contested geopolitical environment. In recent years, the EU's ability to define what is 'normal' has been increasingly challenged, both within and beyond its borders. These developments underscore the need to revisit this research agenda, not merely as a philosophical debate, but as a means of understanding the EU's evolving role and power in international politics.

Europe today is arguably more dependent on US security guarantees than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Decades of defence disinvestment and military downsizing have eroded European capabilities and weakened its defence industrial base. Does this mean two decades of CSDP integration were wasted? This study answers with an emphatic no. Despite duplications and ambiguities in NATO-CSDP relations, the EU has made positive contributions to international security. Though small and imperfectly executed, various missions have given Europe a distinct voice on the international stage. That this voice may seem weak to some does not mean alternatives would have delivered better outcomes. Moreover, one must keep in mind the unique experiment that the European project represents to transcend national and cultural boundaries peacefully. The CSDP has crucially supported this – not primarily by enhancing physical security, but by reinforcing

the EU's community-building function. Contrary to sceptics who see the CSDP as divisive or redundant, this analysis argues that it has added flexibility to transatlantic ties. It has allowed Europeans to temporarily distance themselves from the US when needed and later use the same framework to rebuild relations (a kind of 'safety valve' in the broader relationship). Though impossible to test through counterfactual analysis, it would be shortsighted to dismiss the CSDP as a mere *Potemkin village*.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine marks a new era in European security governance and has compelled EU states to reorient the CSDP. However, breaking with past practices has proven difficult (Fiott and Simón 2023; Fiott 2025).²⁹⁹ In their response, European governments largely sidestepped institutional questions, leaving the future alignment of NATO and CSDP unaddressed. On the one hand, there may be no need to resolve existing ambiguities as the future of European security depends first and foremost on funding decisions rather than institutional arrangements (Helferich 2024). On the other hand, it is striking that the highest political bodies in both institutions – the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) – have yet to meet, three years into the war (NATO Official, 2025). Current plans to rearm Europe through a European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) hold the promise of a “finally serious” step towards greater European defence autonomy.³⁰⁰ However, hard choices lie ahead on that path – three structural challenges in particular:

- **First, NATO:** European states have only one set of forces, and pooling and sharing arrangements can only go so far when both NATO and the EU draw on the same limited resources. With constrained defence budgets and overstretched personnel, it is difficult to sustain two fully-fledged defence organisations in parallel.
- **Second, diverging military capacity and strategic cultures:** Only a few EU member states have strong defence industries and well-developed armed forces. Even among these, cooperation has often stalled. Recent flagship initiatives, such as the development of a sixth-generation fighter jet, illustrate internal divisions – resulting in two competing projects.³⁰¹ Managing major defence programmes at the EU level would not only require new governance tools but a fundamental shift in defence-industrial organisation – entailing both sovereignty trade-offs and unequal distributional effects.
- **Third, Brexit:** The UK's departure removed a key military power. As a result, current EU initiatives are increasingly overshadowed by rhetoric about 'coalitions of the willing' formed beyond the EU (Liboreiro 2025). Yet for such a coalition to be resilient and substitute US power, it would require institutionalisation – effectively introducing another competitor to the CSDP within an already over-institutionalised European security architecture.

In sum, these constraints complicate any radical move away from existing paradigms. Yet remaining on the current path risks further European marginalisation in global security affairs.

²⁹⁹ Initiatives since 2022, such as the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), have proven useful but not transformative.

³⁰⁰ European Commission. *Press Statement by President von der Leyen on the Defence Package*. March 4, 2025; European Commission. *Introducing the White Paper for European Defence and the Rearm Europe Plan – Readiness 2030*. March 19, 2025,

³⁰¹ There are currently two sixth-generation fighter jet programmes in Europe: one led by France, Germany, and Spain; the other by the UK, Italy, and Japan.

Looking further ahead, this study suggests that European states will continue to confront the ‘Westphalian iron-law of sovereignty’ in their semi-conscious effort to transcend traditional statehood (Howorth 2014c, 1). While there is no reason to believe such transcendence is impossible – after all, ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ – 25 years of CSDP cooperation have not changed the fact that states retain the monopoly on the use of force in the EU (Wendt 1992). Against this backdrop, the analysis challenges the notion that CSDP integration will proceed in a linear, quasi-automatic process, as in the neo-functionalist sense. Responding to an ontological security crisis differs fundamentally from theories focused on technical pressures for integration based on prior decisions (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021). Thus, while EU defence may be seen as the last bastion of sovereignty, this bastion is unlikely to be dismantled gradually. Much rather, it will be shaped by large shocks, where previous integration efforts are neither prerequisites nor significant intervening factors for the formation of a fully integrated defence union, or, instead, for the unravelling of the CSDP.

The nuanced appreciation of CSDP offered in this thesis – as a tool for anxiety control and the preservation of communal bonds – may not fully satisfy either the pro-European observer or the critical Atlanticist. To further engage scholars committed to rationalist frameworks, this research agenda requires sustained attention and effort. As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, there is vast untapped potential in exploring the semi-conscious drivers that shape European security affairs. A promising direction for future research would be to examine more closely the structural effects of *community* – a concept integral to other social science disciplines but still under-theorised in International Relations. Furthermore, research that brings *Ontological Security Studies* and *Social Identity Theory* into closer dialogue seems crucial, given the shared premises of these frameworks and the potential for mutual enrichment (Hymans 2002; Mitzen and Larson 2017).³⁰²

Similarly, future research could consider how the framework advanced in this study might be applied to other key moments in European defence history. While this thesis has argued that ontological security theory offers the most explanatory traction in the post-Cold War environment – when material threats receded and diffuse reciprocity within the EU was deeply institutionalised – it is worth reflecting on its potential relevance for both earlier and more recent episodes. The failed attempt to establish a European Defence Community in the early 1950s, for instance, occurred in a radically different context, marked by acute material threats and weak supranational identity structures. Applying ontological security theory to this period would require closer analysis of whether European elites experienced sufficient community angst, or whether strategic logics prevailed. By contrast, developments since 2022 – including renewed debates about strategic autonomy and the EU’s response to the war in Ukraine – may be more directly interpretable through the lens developed here. In these cases, ontological insecurity stemming from both internal fractures (e.g., renewed border controls) and external shocks (e.g., revived normative clashes under Trump 2.0) may again be driving symbolic and performative responses. While this thesis does not make empirical claims about these episodes, such reflections illustrate how the framework could be adapted and tested beyond the scope of this study.

³⁰² A particularly interesting conundrum in this regard may be the exploration of how *overconfidence* matters in the context of self-identity needs and in shaping cooperative or conflictual behaviour. Both OSS and SIT tend to focus on negative psychological dispositions that require rectification and may thus benefit from considering an opposite starting point (Johnson and Fowler 2011; Friedrichs 2016).

In a similar vein, future work could examine more closely the evolving relationship between Europe and the United States – not just as allies, but as occasionally competing centres of *liberal power* (Lebow and Norman 2022; Ikenberry 2024; Risse 2024). While the methodological challenges of such macro perspectives are significant, the scale and complexity of current transformations in international politics demand a rethinking of familiar truths within the IR discipline and a deeper appreciation of evidence-based, interdisciplinary inquiry.

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List of Interviews

No	Date	Position
1	15.03.2024	Polish Diplomat, 2025
2	05.03.2020	NATO Official, 2025
3	05.03.2025	EEAS Official a, 2025
4	28.02.2025	European Parliament Adviser, 2025
5	27.02.2025	Council of the EU Official, 2025
6	21.02.2025	European Commission Official a, 2025
7	14.01.2025	EU Policy Analyst, 2025
8	13.01.2025	European Commission Official b, 2025
9	13.01.2025	EEAS Official b, 2025
10	20.12.2024	Senior EEAS Official, 2024
11	19.12.2024	EDA Official, 2024
12	11.12.2024	European Parliament Adviser, 2024
13	10.10.2024	French Policy Analyst, 2024
14	11.07.2024	Defence Industry Representative, 2024
15	08.09.2023	Senior German Diplomat a, 2023
16	21.08.2023	Former German Minister, 2023
17	16.08.2023	Former French Minister, 2023
18	14.08.2023	French MoD Official, 2023
19	10.08.2023	British Diplomat, 2023
20	07.08.2023	Senior German Diplomat b, 2023
21	16.06.2023	Senior British Diplomat a, 2023
22	08.06.2023	Senior British Diplomat b, 2023
23	16.05.2023	Senior British Diplomat c, 2023
24	16.05.2023	Former Special Adviser to PM, 2023
25	10.05.2023	British MoD Official, 2023

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