International Politics (2025) 62:1070–1083
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00647-9

Trapped in the grey zone: NATO-CSDP relations in a new era of European security governance

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Accepted: 18 November 2024 / Published online: 3 December 2024

Abstract

This paper critically examines the complementarity of NATO and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), proposing a reassessment of their roles to explore potential reforms. It contributes to the forum on "*Organising European Security*" by tracing the historical origins of issues, such as "consensus escapism", that challenge European security governance. In addressing this issue, the paper explores three scenarios for institutional reform: abolishing the CSDP, integrating it into NATO, or pursuing European strategic autonomy. The analysis shows that while such reforms could reduce strategic ambiguities, they might also undermine crucial community maintenance functions, especially those fulfilled by the CSDP for the EU. Following the Ukraine invasion, the structural parameters of NATO/CSDP relations have remained largely unchanged; however, the analysis indicates an emerging dynamic of a "compartmentalised geographic approach" to strengthening European security. This approach, while not eliminating NATO-CSDP ambiguities, may allow for a viable balance of community maintenance and power projection in a changing security landscape.

Keywords NATO · European defence · Institutional overlap · Ukraine war

Introduction

This forum contribution focuses on the two central pillars that have historically upheld the European security architecture—the *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)* and the EU's *Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)*. As the primary institutions around which Euro-Atlantic security has been organised, they will likely form the foundation upon which future European security frameworks will be built. The analytical aim is to examine NATO and CSDP as overlapping security institutions by tracing their historical evolution and the way this enables and constrains

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institutional reforms. Utilising the security architecture framework outlined in this forum, the analysis will focus on the structural conditions that have historically allowed various architects, bricoleurs, and spoilers to shape the transatlantic security partnership while also identifying guiding parameters for future European security governance, considering NATO/CSDP relations since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The analytic focus will be on radical reform options that have been proposed to solve issues of strategic ambiguity and institutional duplication. These issues result from the fact that two defence institutions with a similar membership and institutional design share responsibility for European security. In response, three proposals have emerged in the scholarly debate: first, to abolish the CSDP; second, to progressively merge the CSDP into NATO; and third, to work towards strategic autonomy in Europe, potentially weakening NATO (Andersson et al. 2016; Howorth 2014b). I argue that such radical reforms of the transatlantic order are problematic due to the distinct material and ontological functions that the CSDP and NATO fulfil for the European and Euro-Atlantic communities. While these three options appear to improve efficiency, they would undermine important community building functions, leading to instability in the medium term, which poses a risk in an increasingly contested geopolitical environment. A key issue here is that diminishing the EU's own defence capacity, which, despite all efforts, remains a paper tiger, would likely undermine the EU's actorness and create a sense of disintegration and fragility. Additionally, changing the power balance within NATO to give Europeans a greater role seems to clash with underlying material realities and US status concerns. Consequently, it appears that constituents on both sides of the Atlantic are caught in a "grey zone" where two institutions with similar purposes, memberships, and resources need to live with the ambiguities that past architects have created.

Recent developments suggest that the existing Atlantic order will not be significantly altered by the changed security environment in Europe. Following the initial turmoil after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, architects on both sides of the Atlantic seem to have found a novel approach to rebuilding a European security architecture, within existing power parameters. This approach can be described as a *compartmentalised geographic approach to bolstering European security within a transatlantic framework*. What is notable about this approach is that it diminishes past institutional fault lines in foreign policy posturing. Instead, Western countries seek unity and cohesion in their common goal of countering Russia through innovative settings but within an overarching transatlantic framework. The approach consists of three multilateral layers or compartments, orchestrated to various extents to achieve internal stability in the Euro-Atlantic community while simultaneously binding countries further afield into an alliance to contain a common opponent. The first compartment focuses on the inner European dimension, the second involves the transatlantic dimension, and the third encompasses broader Eurasia, including countries that had previously little involvement in transatlantic security debates, now aligned by a shared interest in resisting Russia's aspirations to alter the political landscape. Figure 1 outlines this approach, which will be elaborated upon in the final section.

Interestingly, one cannot identify the same kind of cooperative tendency vis-à-vis China, where states' foreign policies are more fragmented and weakly embedded in transatlanticism. On the one hand, this compartmentalised geographic approach will

Compartment	Aims	Notable Developments
Inner European	Internal cohesion; maintaining/improving CSDP	☒ Revival of Weimar Triangle ☒ Effort for CSDP integration via Rapid Deployment Capacity, DG Defence etc.
Wider Transatlantic	Transatlantic cohesion; aligning Atlanticists and EU autonomists; improve burden-sharing	☒ UK joins PESCO ☒ Denmark joins CSDP ☒ Sweden/Norway join NATO ☒ Europeans take charge of NATO forward presence in the East
Broader Eurasian	Binding states who are not closely affiliated with EU/NATO; countering Russian soft and hard power in Eurasia	☒ EU candidate status to Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Albania ☒ European Political Community ☒ NATO Defence capacity building in Moldova

Fig. 1 Compartmentalised geographic approach to strengthening European security

not eliminate many of the ambiguities and paradoxes that have undergirded NATO/CSDP relations. As Howorth (2023) notes, even after the invasion of Ukraine, "it remains quite unclear how the EU and NATO will enhance their cooperation in the coming years—and with precisely what strategic objective" (Howorth 2023:p. 10).[1] This ambiguity is likely to persist. However, the layered approach to community maintenance and power projection can be purposeful, even if deeper strategic questions remain unresolved (Kunertova and Schmitt, this forum). What this will require is for Europeans and the US to accept the ambiguities created by NATO/CSDP institutional overlap, and work through differences when the partnership is caught again in the crossfire of European identity construction and geopolitics.

The remainder of the paper will proceed as follows. First, I reconceptualise the distinct nature of the NATO/CSDP relationship, highlighting how these institutions fulfil similar military purposes but different community functions. Second, I conduct a brief historical analysis and draw inferences about the implications of radical reforms in the NATO/CSDP relationship. Finally, I conclude by outlining how current trends reflect a compartmentalised geographic approach and how this may affect European security governance moving forward.

[1] To illustrate: 13 years after the Libya intervention, it remains unclear whether NATO, the CSDP, or both would handle a similar crisis, and how responsibilities would be distributed. Additionally, why are both the EU and NATO building rapid deployment capacities and investing separately in defence R&D when all major European defence players (except the UK now) are members of both?

Conceptualising transformations in the transatlantic security partnership

Taking a longer view of transatlantic security cooperation reveals a high level of constancy and robustness (see introduction). This is exemplified by NATO, the primary security institution that has underpinned European security for the past 75 years despite significant changes in the security environment (Ikenberry 2011; Lundestad 2003). Beneath this broader geostrategic level, the last 30 years have also seen a gradual move towards more European self-determination, epitomised by the establishment of an EU defence capacity in 1999. This allowed Europeans to engage in crisis response and defence-industrial cooperation independent of the US via the EU. Since then, two institutions have shared responsibility for European security, raising recurring questions about transatlantic decoupling, rivalry, or instead a new alignment across the Atlantic in the twenty-first century.

When the European defence capacity was first created in 1999, this raised crucial strategic questions that have gained renewed relevance in the context of the war in Ukraine. To explore potential new configurations of the NATO/CSDP relationship, it is essential to revisit the past drivers that have led Europeans to build an institution that mirrors NATO's mandate, replicates much of its structure, and shares a similar membership (Hofmann 2013:p.3). In their responses, scholars have often relied on choice-theoretic models that present CSDP as a rational adaptation to changes in the security environment. Explanations typically divide into framing the NATO/CSDP relationship in either competitive or cooperative terms. However, these approaches share the view that changes in this relationship result from the rational cost–benefit analysis of individual states, rather than social community effects, which will be highlighted here. Three main interpretations of CSDP and its relationship with NATO have broadly been advocated.

1. *Balancing the US*: The CSDP aims to balance against US hegemony as Europeans strive for strategic autonomy and multipolarity. This perspective is rooted in materialist accounts, most notably neo-realism (Art 2004; Posen 2006; Rosato 2011).
2. *Safeguarding NATO:* EU defence serves to strengthen NATO through improved burden-sharing in order to keep the US engaged in Europe. This opposite lens is typically found in approaches rooted in liberalism and constructivism. (Dover 2005; Howorth 2004)
3. *Forum-Shopping:* Europeans engage in a calculation about the utility of NATO, building alternative institutions to choose whichever venue best serves their national interests. This middle-ground perspective is mostly found in choice-theoretic accounts that emphasise transaction costs and forum shopping (Hofmann 2019; Weiss 2011; Schuette 2023).

These lenses have indeed been helpful in broadly describing how EU member states have responded to various security issues: with bricoleurs navigating a "collective muddling through," agnostics passing the buck, and spoilers blocking

cooperative efforts (Pouliot and Thérien, 2023:p. 2; Coticchia, this forum). However, most crucial for understanding institutional transformations are the architects and the conditions under which they put pen to paper to design new CSDP features. Historical analysis shows that existing accounts have overemphasised outcome-oriented thinking driven by an interest in maximising military utility. This focus has come at the expense of understanding how decisions are shaped by architects' broader vision of the European community and those outside it.

As I shall demonstrate, transformations in EU defence were initially motivated by an interest in completing the EU as an international actor and then progressed during times of internal crisis primarily as a means of community maintenance (Bickerton 2011). Over time, however, this has altered the transatlantic partnership, giving rise to duplications, strategic ambiguities, and fears of decoupling which continue to shape today's debate. This community-oriented perspective is critical to understanding why the CSDP remains a paper tiger and struggles to overcome that status even when Europe is faced with a direct military threat. Embracing this understanding of change in transatlantic security governance has important implications for what can be expected in the light of current security challenges. Most notably, it highlights that changes in the security environment do not necessarily lead to alterations in the institutional relations underpinning the Atlantic order and that institutional change is constrained by countries' visions of the European and Euro-Atlantic communities.

Past transformations of the Atlantic order and their architects

Reflecting on 25 years of NATO-CSDP relations, it is evident that integration in EU defence progressed notably during moments of EU internal crisis. In contrast, abrupt changes in the strategic environment in the European neighbourhood and beyond often did not trigger significant changes, or the subsequent changes barely addressed these security issues, suggesting that physical threat was not the primary driver of change.

A desire for identity construction has been central to EU defence integration since its early stages. During the Cold War, a communique by the *Western European Union* stated, "the construction of an integrated Europe will remain incomplete as long as it does not include security and defence".[2] This imperative was reiterated in later episodes, notably during the Balkan Wars, where the decision to establish a separate defence capacity came to fruition. An important structural condition for that was of course the end of the Cold War. When Europe was freed from the frost of superpower competition, this reinforced a desire to complete the actorness of the EU, i.e. to elevate it into "something more than a mere forum for policy coordination, but turn it into an actor in its own right" (Interview 1, 2023). Full actorness requires, first and foremost, the abolition of internal borders, a single currency, and a capacity for foreign/security action—as former EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier explained in a recent talk.[3] In the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the first point on *Common*

[2] See Western European Union (1987) "Platform on European Security Interests", p.2.

[3] Michel Barnier at the Oxford Union, on 7th June 2023.

Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) thus stated the EU needs to "assert its identity on the international scene".[4]

While there was agreement that such a capacity needed to formally exist, it was left for later to decide what it should do exactly when there was NATO. This continued into the 1990s when the CSDP was launched, originally as ESDP.[5] In her comprehensive analysis of the discourse at the time, Milzow highlights that "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:p. 146). Thus, from the start, the process of cooperation took precedence over narrow notions of military utility and having a defence capacity was more important than using it.

The three periods where EU defence made most significant progress were in the late 1990s, early 2000s, and late 2010s—each marked by internal crises and norm clashes with the USA. The pattern that emerges is one of ad-hoc CSDP institution building, followed by US outcries, and then European reassurances that EU defence strengthens NATO, ultimately leading to realignment.

- In 1998–1999, it took only six months from the initial St Malo declaration to the European Council meeting in Cologne, which established the ESDP—referred to by Americans as the "sins of Cologne".[6] During this time, European planners first modelled a European defence capacity based on NATO, which celebrated its 50th anniversary a month later. This is why the CSDP shares many of NATO's design features (Hofmann and Mérand 2020:p. 165).[7]
- From 2003–2004, clashes over Iraq led to the swift establishment of the *European Defence Agency (EDA)* and several other CSDP measures later included in the Lisbon Treaty. At the time, the European project was challenged by internal divisions over Iraq in the face of enlargement and the (failed) constitutional treaty (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2003; Grant 2003).
- Finally, from 2016 to 2017, *PESCO* and the *European Defence Fund (EDF)* were rapidly created after Brexit fundamentally called into question the notion of an "ever-closer union", while Donald Trump relentlessly undermined shared transatlantic norms (Besch 2016:p. 6).

In these transformative moments, member states cooperated swiftly, refraining from negotiating every detail in their favour, united in the spirit that in times of crisis, form needed to trump function. In contrast, changes in the threat environment, such as after the Arab Spring and President Obama's announcement of the US "pivot to Asia" only had a marginal effect on CSDP integration (Howorth 2014a).

[4] Treaty on European Union, (Maastricht, 7 February 1992), Title I, Common Provisions, Article B.

[5] Before the Lisbon Treaty the CSDP was called European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Here, unless specified CSDP refers generally to the EU's defence capacity since 1999.

[6] The National Archives of the UK: Prime Minister's Office 1999 (PREM 49-723): Defence and Security European Policy, Part 8: p.41.

[7] Based on an interview with a high-level British Defence Planner who was involved in both the drafting of the 1998 St Malo Declaration and NATO'S 1999 Strategic concept (Interview 2, 2023).

Similarly, almost three years into the biggest land war on European soil since WWII, EU defence has not seen disruptive institutional changes. Crucial elements necessary for large-scale EU military action, such as a military headquarters or flagship defence-industrial projects, are not on the horizon even as a second presidency of Donald Trump promises an uncertain future for NATO.

Predicting where this path may lead is challenging, given the rapid pace of current events and the populist encroachments in Europe and the USA, which could usher in unpredictable systemic change. Nonetheless, the analysis shows that 25 years of NATO/CSDP relations have been marked by a high degree of circularity, despite shifts in leadership and the external security environment. Today's evolving geopolitical dynamics present an opportunity to move beyond some of this historical baggage and recalibrate. However, radical reform options remain constrained not only by material limitations but by past decisions to build up two similar defence institutions for European security.

Obstacles to reform

To recalibrate the existing NATO/CSDP relationship, three radical options have been proposed. I shall briefly outline them and then highlight how recent developments do not align with these scenarios, and why this is not fundamentally problematic despite leaving many ambiguities unaddressed. One radical reform option imagined has been for the CSDP to cease to exist (Howorth 2014b:p. 44). This would result in the abandonment of the 25-year CSDP project, eliminating independent EU planning or crisis response capacity. NATO would become the sole institution for territorial defence and crisis response. Proponents of this solution argue that (a) the CSDP is dispensable as it has failed to address the security situations it was designed for, such as Libya (b) abolishing the CSDP would prevent increasing transatlantic decoupling; and (c) it would lead to a more efficient allocation of resources (ibid; Posen 2006). However, the analysis illustrates that such an option is hardly viable as it fundamentally undermines the EU's actorness—it would reduce it to being a mere forum and an incomplete international actor in the eyes of Europeans. In the context of Ukraine, it would deprive member states of the ability to voice a distinctly "European interest", reminiscent of the paralysis experienced in the 1990s over the Balkan wars.[8]

A slightly amended scenario would be to not fully abandon the CSDP but to merge it with NATO, with Europeans taking over key responsibilities within the alliance and eventually leadership. Jolyon Howorth considers this the most appropriate scenario, and numerous think-tank publications have echoed this view recently (Marrone 2024; Rizzo and Benhamou 2024; Schuette 2024). The argument is that in an era of austerity and retrenchment, the US would increasingly be prepared to hand

[8] Howorth (2014a, b) made a similar claim arguing that fully abandoning the CSDP is "an unseemly prospect for a Union which constantly repeats that it intends to be a subject rather than an object of history" (Howorth 2014b:p.44).

over responsibility to Europeans in NATO.[9] The problem with this scenario is that it also underestimates the community function attributed to the CSDP, which would be lost when integrated into a transatlantic alliance involving the USA, Turkey, and others who are not part of the distinct EU security community (Lindstrom and Tardy 2019:p. 24). This issue was a key reason why the 1996 *European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI)* failed. It aimed to formally establish a European sub-group within NATO, which made military sense at the time, just as it does now. However, it failed because it was predicated on the notion of US leadership and "European followership" (Howorth, 2014b:p. 40). Europeans felt this approach would not provide them with a completed EU. Americans, in turn, were hardly convinced to reform the NATO command structure and provide ill-prepared Europeans control over their high-tech assets (ibid.).

These dynamics remain evident 25 years later when reflecting on the role NATO has served for the US in the post-Cold War era. For the USA, NATO has arguably been more about political leadership and maintaining its status as a hegemon than about protecting its physical borders or economic security. After the Cold War, Russia lost much of its threat potential to Europe, let alone the USA, but NATO endured largely because it was instrumental for US influence in Europe and its hegemonic status (Forster and Wallace 2001; Lundestad 2003). Status is inherently a social concept and derived from status hierarchies. Who can be a hegemon if not the leader of the strongest military alliance in world history? Deriving such status from a role as co-leader is hardly conceivable. Relinquishing control over NATO would entail status costs for the USA, for which the freed-up material resources in the form of military hardware and personnel might not fully compensate. Moreover, it is hard to envision a military alliance co-led by Europeans when the most sophisticated hardware predominantly comes from the USA. Thus, merging the CSDP into NATO seems constrained by both material and psychological factors on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, on the other end of the spectrum, Europeans could make concerted efforts to build up strategic autonomy, moving resources away from NATO. This would be motivated by the increasing retrenchment of the USA, its domestic unpredictability, and its growing focus on the Indo-Pacific (Grgić, this forum). A first step in this direction would be to fully develop an EU headquarters out of what is currently the *Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)*, to take over the functions carried out by NATO's *Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE)*. Additionally, efforts could be made to build some version of a supranational Defence Union and a *European Army* in order consolidate disparate national structures. Nowadays, this scenario triggers apprehension even among many pro-European circles, as it is considered impracticable, risky, and distractive (Szewczyk 2024). The notion of a *European Army* often surfaces when security events in Europe dominate the news agenda. While there are different options that would not necessarily require

[9] Practically, this would require finding a solution for the four EU member countries that are not part of NATO. However, this should be manageable through creative political arrangements involving affiliated statuses, opt-outs, etc.

a full supranationalisation of armed forces, such decoupling poses severe risks and would require unprecedented resources and political will (Franke 2018).

The discussion highlights the immense challenge of transforming the NATO/CSDP relationship into something radically new. Due to material and psychological constraints, there is little alternative to the current setup, which has largely been shaped by Europeans navigating the balance between identity building and tangible security interests. However, the situation does not necessarily warrant pessimism. In some ways, this ambiguity can be viewed as a by-product of an otherwise highly robust and flexible partnership (Hofmann 2021). As an order, it has been able to endure not despite these ambiguities, but precisely because the institutional overlap has allowed for both the realisation of geopolitical interests and a space for identity construction and community maintenance. While this has come at the expense of consensus escapism, having both NATO and the CSDP seems to have been necessary for the Euro-Atlantic community to be both materially and ontologically secure. It appears that subverting this setup will likely affect the DNA of the Atlantic order, which could be a risky undertaking in the current geopolitical climate.

Where does this leave us in terms of concrete institutional opportunities? More than two years into the Ukraine war, trends emerged indicating that the grey zone is likely to persist. As Europe faces its greatest threat since the Cold War, countries are increasingly seizing the opportunity to rebuild the European security architecture, centred on a strengthened NATO/CSDP relationship, with a broader Eurasian extension on top.

European defence, the defence of Europe and beyond

Since late 2023, a trend has emerged towards a new security architecture built around a compartmentalised geographic approach. This approach introduces novel dynamics in the organisation of European security without fundamentally challenging existing power dynamics (Amadio Viceré and Sus, this forum). In a speech at the University of Oxford, the EU's *High Representative for Foreign/Security Policy*, Josep Borrell, suggested that strengthening the European pillar within NATO should take a geographic rather than an institutional approach.[10] This marks an important shift, as before the Ukraine crisis, the momentum was firmly towards EU strategic autonomy and the desire for more independent CSDP structures. The new mindset is also reflected at the level of member states. While Emmanuel Macron called for exclusive CSDP initiatives in his 2017 Sorbonne speech, his 2024 speech emphasised strengthening the European pillar within NATO. This geographic approach has seen three compartments, orchestrated to various degrees, to achieve aims of community cohesion, diplomatic influence, and improved military capacity.

First, the inner European compartment. It initially faced challenges after the start of the Ukraine war, as France and Germany often acted like misaligned planets. However, both countries underwent a transformation in their approach to countering

[10] See Josep Borell (2024) Dahrendorf Lecture, St Antony's College, University of Oxford: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-256530

Russia (Cadier, this forum). Germany shifted from providing helmets to sending heavy tanks and artillery, even permitting attacks on military targets inside Russia. France moved from advocating not to antagonise Russia to suggesting that NATO troops in Ukraine could be an option. These changes also reflect the strategic confusion that beset the EU in the face of the invasion, which shattered its post-heroic *Weltanschauung* (Helferich 2023). Confronted with such aggression, Europeans immediately resorted back to the alliance that had guaranteed their security for more than 70 years. On the day of the invasion, within a matter of hours, NATO activated its defence plans, deploying elements of its response force to the Eastern Flank and has since then led the effort to counter Russia.

The fact that EU members have taken so long to find their footing is remarkable, especially after the departure of the UK, often seen as the main spoiler of European defence. Furthermore, with the election of the most pro-European Polish parliament in decades, the Atlanticist faction has weakened as never before. Nevertheless, institutional progress within the CSDP has been modest (Fiott and Simón, 2023).This is partly due to the emergence of new spoilers, such as Hungary and Slovakia, who were previously agnostic or less obstructive towards defence initiatives. However, recent developments suggest that internal EU clashes have diminished, symbolised by the revival of the *Weimar Triangle*, which issued a substantial declaration on strengthening EU defence in May 2024.[11] Additionally, Poland's unprecedented active role in advocating for CSDP integration stands out. If alignment with Germany continues after Poland joins the German-led *European Sky Shield Initiative*, it could enhance the CSDP's effectiveness to some degree. Nevertheless, recent EU initiatives have struggled to move from community maintenance to robust power projection. Flagship programmes like PESCO have increasingly been neglected by member states, and new initiatives such as the *DG Defence* and *Rapid Deployment Capacity* are best seen as evolutionary rather than revolutionary, given the already existing frameworks in place through entities like the EDA, Battlegroups, Eurocorps, etc. (Howorth 2023:p. 10).

Arguably, the most significant progress has been observed within the transatlantic compartment, where states have managed to simultaneously engage in community building and enhance military capacity. Predominantly community-oriented behaviour is evident in the support for CSDP cooperation from transatlantically-oriented countries. Notably, the UK's accession to PESCO funds and Denmark's opt-in to CSDP highlight these traditionally Atlanticist countries' commitment to EU defence, despite yielding only modest military gains. Similarly, Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO underscores Europeans' commitment to the transatlantic alliance. On a more militarily impactful front, EU members have increased their defence budgets and assumed responsibility for *NATO Battlegroups* stationed in Central and Eastern Europe. This trend signifies a growing consensus that, despite unpredictable US foreign policy, enhancing military capabilities within NATO is the central goal. This approach aims to pre-empt potential US retrenchment by

[11] See France Diplomatie (2024) "A Weimar Agenda for a strong, geopolitical European Union". https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/the-weimar-triangle/article/a-weimar-agenda-for-a-strong-geopolitical-european-union-weimar-22-may-2024

improving burden-sharing while also beginning to prepare for such a scenario if it does arise.[12] Collectively, these developments serve to maintain and strengthen the Euro-Atlantic community while upholding the idea that NATO and CSDP are aligned in full synergy.[13] Yet it is true that these initiatives have not addressed deeper strategic questions such as how NATO and the CSDP will divide responsibilities in the future and with what strategic objectives.

Finally, the broader Eurasia dimension represents a distinctly new feature, reflecting an ambition to integrate neighbouring countries into the broader Western alliance in an unprecedentedly concerted way (Grgić, this forum). At the forefront of this effort is the *European Political Community (EPC)*, aimed at fostering "a new space for cooperation" with countries sharing European values.[14] It represents a pioneering attempt to include countries such as Azerbaijan, previously marginalised in transatlantic security discussions. While the future of the EPC remains uncertain, as a diplomatic initiative, it holds potential to enhance European security governance by empowering new stakeholders. Moreover, it has the potential to realign the E3 in a pragmatic approach moving past the shadows of Brexit. Importantly, this new form of outreach was complemented by both NATO and EU initiatives. For instance, NATO convened in Moldova to discuss defence capacity building, engaging countries such as Georgia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, all of which have also attained EU candidate status since 2022. This underscores the diminishing influence of previous institutional fault lines as Europe consolidates its efforts to confront the Russian threat within a broader Atlantic/Eurasian framework. Yet, the extent to which this strategy will be feasible under a second Trump presidency remains uncertain, especially given the weak institutionalisation of the compartmentalised geographic approach.

Conclusion

As Europe and the US united against a common threat, more space opened up to frame the CSDP and NATO as complementary instruments within a holistic approach to achieving a shared political goal. Previous concepts of "Strategic Autonomy" that divided the European and Euro-Atlantic communities thus receded into the background, along with deeper questions about strategic purposes. There seems to be no reason why this setup could not be used purposefully to maintain community cohesion and build up military capacity effectively, despite some inefficient redundancies and strategic ambiguities. While some initiatives may inadvertently increase duplication, these concerns may be overshadowed by a new narrative

[12] The project that best symbolises this new alignment is *Military Mobility* which NATO and the EU pursue jointly. It symbolises perfect synergies between NATO and the EU as both organisations require military equipment to be swiftly moved around Europe.

[13] See NATO "Relations with the European Union". https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49217.htm

[14] See Emmanuel Macron (2022), "Address by the President of the Republic at the Conference on the Future of Europe," Élysée, May 9, 2022, https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-19590-en.pdf.

emphasising European burden-sharing and leadership in Ukraine via defence-industrial initiatives. With NATO emerging as the consensus forum to counter Russia, there is potential to reduce consensus escapism in crisis response. Nonetheless, this issue remains a significant hurdle in the defence-industrial realm. Despite increasing defence budgets, the war in Ukraine has not halted the recent trend towards European "vassalisation" (Fiott 2024; Shapiro and Puglierin 2023). Data show that rather than strengthening the European industrial base, the urgency of current events has seen the vast majority of defence investments flowing to American suppliers (Maulny 2023).[15] Balancing these dynamics in the industrial domain is essential for Europe's ability to shape both the security architecture at home and broader international dynamics critical to facilitating a peaceful transition to a new world order.

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[15] Data on EU-US defence industry trade from 2000 to 2016 reveal that the EU exported an average of $5.5 billion per year to the USA. Conversely, the US exported around $69 billion per year to the EU. Moreover, since the onset of the war in Ukraine, nearly 80% of all defence investments by EU member states have been directed to non-EU suppliers (Fiott 2024; Maulny 2023).

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