

France and the Pursuit of European Strategic Autonomy A Realist Perspective of EU Security and Defense Policy

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(فرنسا والسعي نحو الاستقلالية الاستراتيجية الأوروبية: قراءة واقعية في سياسة الأمن والدفاع للاتحاد الأوروبي)

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المستخلص

يسعى هذا البحث إلى تحليل مسار تطوّر سياسة الأمن والدفاع في الاتحاد الأوروبي من خلال إطار "الاستقلالية الاستراتيجية"، وهو المفهوم الذي تبنته فرنسا بوصفه ركيزة مركزية في رؤيتها للأمن الأوروبي. ويعتمد التحليل على فرضيات المدرسة الواقعية، ولا سيما مبدأ الاعتماد على الذات وتوازن التهديد، لفهم التحولات البنوية التي طرأت على الاتحاد الأوروبي في سياق الأزمات العالمية المتعاقبة. فقد مثل الغزو الروسي لأوكرانيا، وانتخاب دونالد ترامب، وجائحة كوفيد-19 لحظات مفصلية دفعت الاتحاد الأوروبي إلى إعادة تعريف فاعليته الدولية، والانتقال من موقع "القوة المعيارية" إلى موقع فاعل دولي يتبنى مقاربة أكثر واقعية في إدارة التهديدات. ويجادل البحث بأن فرنسا نجحت في إعادة توجيه الاتحاد الأوروبي نحو هدفها التاريخي المتمثل في تقليص الاعتماد الاستراتيجي على الولايات المتحدة، غير أن الانقسامات الداخلية بين التيار "الأوروبي" الداعي إلى تعزيز الاستقلالية، والتيار "الأطلسي" المتمسك بالارتباط الوثيق بالولايات المتحدة، ما تزال تشكل عائقاً أمام بلورة سياسة أمنية ودفاعية أوروبية موحدة.

Abstract

This article explores the evolution of the European Union's (EU) security and defense policy through the lens of strategic autonomy, a concept championed primarily by France. By applying realist assumptions of self-help and the balance of threat, this research examines how the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the election of Donald Trump, and the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated the EU's transition from a "normative power" to a more realist global actor. The study argues that France has successfully steered the EU toward its long-held goal of reduced dependence on the United States, though significant internal divisions between "Europeanists" and "Atlanticists" remain. **Keywords:** Strategic Autonomy, France, Realism, EU Defense, Ukraine War, NATO.

Introduction

In 2016, the EU launched a global strategy for a more cohesive and effective security and defense policy. Yet, increasingly, member states had engaged in defense and security with mixed success. The idea was that instead of the member states alone engaging in defense and security policy, the EU must have a more coordinated collective security structure. The EU's attempt to initiate a collective and cohesive security policy coincided with President Trump's election. In his campaign and eventually his administration, Trump had argued against the United States' commitment to the EU and asked for more EU contributions to funding NATO. This research paper studies France's role in developing the strategic autonomy concept for the European Union in its White Paper National Security documents, and it argues that France, particularly after the end of the Cold War, has increasingly advocated for a more autonomous EU security and defense policy. This push for autonomy suggests a desire for the EU to become less reliant on the transatlantic partnership with the United States, which has historically played a dominant role in European security matters. More recently, the EU member states have progressively aligned with France's calls for strategic autonomy, particularly in response to significant global

events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Donald Trump's election as President of the United States in 2016. These events have prompted a reevaluation of defense strategies within the EU, leading to a greater emphasis on self-sufficiency and regional security (Varma, 2024, p. 73). As a result, in 2016, the EU formally adopted the French concept of strategic autonomy into its broader Global Strategy. This strategic framework aims to enhance the EU's capacity to maintain peace internally and manage security challenges from beyond its borders. The push for strategic autonomy is reinforced by a belief that a more self-reliant EU can act more decisively on the global stage (Michaels & Sus, 2024, p. 390). While this framework promotes a more self-reliant EU globally, it has raised concerns about transatlantic relations. France's push for reduced U.S. dependence has created tensions, especially with Central and Eastern European states advocating for greater U.S. involvement in their defense. These countries argue that the EU cannot ensure their security without U.S. commitments, raising vulnerabilities, particularly regarding Russia. These differing views underscore the EU's challenges in pursuing a unified approach to strategic autonomy while balancing member-state interests (Varma, 2024, p. 74).

Literature review

Two prominent schools of thought explain states' behavior in the international system: realism and liberalism. Realism focuses on interstate rivalry in an anarchic world system. At the same time, liberal theory argues that many opportunities for cooperation and all policy areas can be brought into the equation. The origins of the liberal approach date back to the idealist philosophy that emerged from World War One; it suffered reduced credibility in the years leading up to World War Two and was subsequently replaced by realism. Liberalism emphasizes the importance of international organizations in understanding and driving relations among states and points to the lessons of democratic peace theory, which suggests that democracies are unlikely to go to war with one another. Neoliberalism extends this argument by suggesting that international institutions can influence the behavior of states by encouraging rules-based behavior or shared values (Heywood & Whitham, 2021, p. 229). There has always been an element of self-interest within the EU, but there has always been a strong tradition of cooperation. Until February 2022, there was an ongoing philosophical debate on what kind of power the EU represented. The question was whether the EU was a military power in traditional realist thinking, which requires a grand strategy and integrated military and defense industry, or a moral power in a normative human security perspective that empowers individuals and communities and guarantees security through rights by setting norms and principles. Normative power manifests via norms, values, and ideas instead of military might or economic demands. For the last few decades, the EU has been practicing the principles of human security in its foreign and security policies. It was a normative power based on the rule of law and presented a model for other countries to follow. It stayed away and did not pursue military power (McCormick, 2020, p. 430). After the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the European Union is moving towards a realist policy. The self-help and balance of threat assumptions of realism will be applied to the case of the European Union defense policy after the Russia-Ukraine war to answer the main research question of this study: whether the EU is following France's strategic autonomy policy.

Theoretical framework

In this research paper, the self-help and balance of threat assumptions of realism are applied to the case of the European Union defense policy after the Russia-Ukraine war to answer the main research question of this study: whether the EU is following France's strategic autonomy policy. The balance of threat theory predicts that states will balance against threats. According to the balance of threat theory, threats are driven by overall military and economic potential, geographic proximity, and perceptions of aggressive intentions (Heywood & Whitham, 2021, p. 312). Self-help relies on a state's capacities and resources rather than external support to ensure security and survival (Heywood & Whitham, 2021, p. 213).

Research hypothesis

The war between Russia and Ukraine has prompted the European Union to adopt France's longstanding strategic autonomy policy, reshaping the EU's security and defense policy from a liberal and normative approach to a more realist military balance and self-help approach. The threat from Russia and heavy dependence on the United States has led the EU to follow France's strategic autonomy policy by increasing its military spending, forming a more unified front against Russia, and balancing its threat.

Methodology

I have chosen the EU's strategic autonomy policy after the Russia-Ukraine war and France's position towards this EU initiative as a case study in this research. I have chosen France as the case because it remained the

leading military power within the EU after Brexit. In its national security strategy documents, France had long advocated for a more autonomous and Europeanist security and defense policy and argued for less dependence on the United States. The war between Russia and Ukraine has prompted the European Union to adopt France's longstanding strategic autonomy policy, reshaping the EU's security and defense policy from a liberal and normative approach to a more realist military balance and self-help approach. The EU has increased its military budget substantially, put sanctions on Russia, and reduced its reliance on Russian oil. Moreover, the EU has taken being overly dependent on the United States to provide security seriously. It has taken initiatives to boost its military industry and provide Ukraine with ammunition and weapons to fight the Russians. This paper analyzed qualitative data to answer the research question and test the hypothesis. It has used the content analysis approach to analyze textual data from secondary sources. Historical methods and process tracing have been used to study the case from the past and explore its historical development. The evolution of EU strategic autonomy is examined by looking into the significant events that have made the EU security and defense policy more coherent.

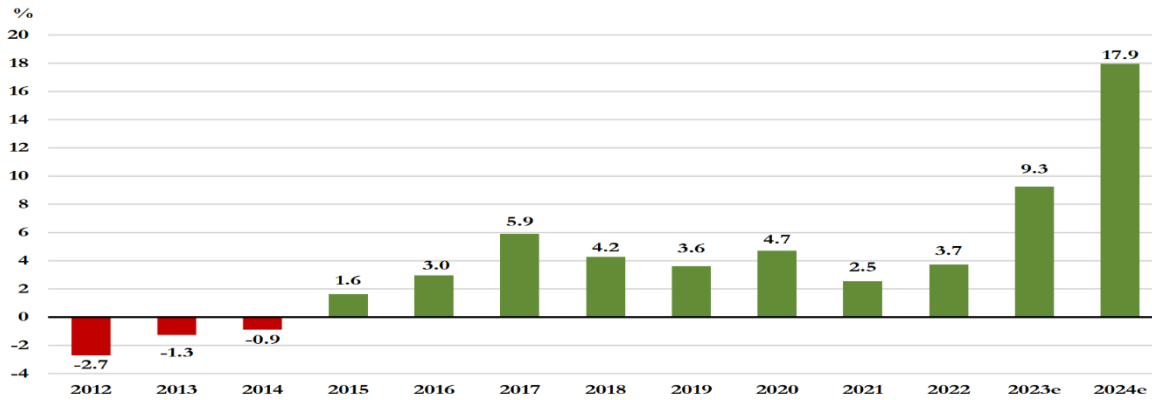
Findings and discussion

After the conclusion of the Second World War, European nations recognized the pressing need to enhance their collective defense and security policy as a proactive measure to address a series of emerging regional security challenges. A significant stimulus for this reevaluation was the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, which forced EU member states to reassess their security and defense agendas to address the instability in the region. In the early 2000s, this discourse culminated in the launch of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), driven by the strategic initiatives of the UK and France, solidified by the Saint-Malo Declaration in 1998, emphasizing the necessity for a robust European defense mechanism. The ESDP underwent a formal transformation by adopting the Lisbon Treaty in 2008, when it was rebranded as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), marking a significant milestone in European defense integration. Since the inception of its first missions in 2003, the EU has actively engaged in nearly forty military and civilian crisis management operations across more than twenty countries. These missions have varied widely in scope and complexity, ranging from small-scale monitoring activities in Georgia and the Palestinian Territories to ambitious training programs in several African nations, alongside comprehensive rule-of-law missions in Kosovo. Additionally, the EU has conducted maritime operations in the Mediterranean and along the Somali coastline to counter piracy and ensure regional security (Keukeleire 2022, 185-186). In its early years, European integration emphasized economic cooperation and was inward-looking. In the 1950s and 1960s, the focus was on rebuilding economies instead of militaries. The West relied on the U.S. for military protection, while the East depended on the Soviets, limiting Europe's military initiative to NATO and the Warsaw Pact. As the reach of integration expanded in the 1960s, however, the European Economic Community took a modest first step in 1970 to actively engage in global politics by forming the European Political Cooperation Agreement, an informal process that brought Community foreign ministers together at regular meetings to discuss international issues. Later, with the Single European Act, member states were committed to jointly formulating and implementing a European foreign policy. Under the Maastricht treaty, the EU agreed to formulate a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It was an attempt made under the Maastricht treaty to develop common foreign policy principles and positions among EU members. The CFSP created organizational tools: Member states have common strategies regarding their vital interests with Russia, Ukraine, Syria, and the Mediterranean. Joint actions unite states on issues like supporting the Middle East Peace process, observing elections in Russia and South Africa, and sending naval forces to combat piracy in Somalia. Agreed positions include the Balkans, Middle East, Myanmar, Zimbabwe, the ICC, and policy issues like arms exports, biological weapons, and terrorism. Unfortunately, there remains a lack of policy focus and leadership, and the member states differ in opinion. Some have national agendas; for example, France has a special interest in former colonies, while Austria and Ireland remain neutral. There has been a fundamental strategic division between Europeanists and Atlanticists. Europeanists are those states such as France and Germany who favor greater EU policy independence. Atlanticists are those European states, including Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal, and several eastern European states, who promote continuous support and close foreign and security ties with the United States (McCormick, 2020, pp. 431-432). The Treaty of Lisbon, which came into effect in 2009, marked a significant step in the evolution of the European Union's (EU) approach to security and foreign policy. This pivotal treaty enhanced the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's external actions by strengthening institutional frameworks and decision-making processes. The Lisbon Treaty attempted to forge coherence in EU foreign and security policy. Nonetheless, it created no less than three

different 'external' policy roles: Council president, Commission president, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP). Key among the changes was the adaptation of the role of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, whose responsibilities were broadened to facilitate a more unified and cohesive foreign policy across member states. This role is specifically designed to integrate and coordinate the EU's foreign affairs and security policy, thereby combining diplomatic representation with the capacity to influence policy discourse at both domestic and international levels. The Lisbon Treaty amalgamated the positions of High Representative (HR) and external relations commissioner into a single High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Under the Lisbon Treaty, the HR/VP is authorized to conduct the Common Foreign and Security Policy and to ensure consistency in EU foreign policy. The HR/VP operates under a dual mandate that seeks to align the diverse interests of EU member states while upholding the strategic objectives of the European Union. The officeholder presides over the Foreign Affairs Council and concurrently serves as a vice president of the European Commission while overseeing the European External Action Service, which comprises 5000 members and has been functioning as a combined foreign ministry and diplomatic corps since its inception in 2010. The HR/VP is vested with the authority to propose initiatives, engage with third countries, and represent the EU in international organizations, rendering this position pivotal to coherent and effective foreign policy leadership. By occupying a central role within the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission, the HR/VP can ensure a unified approach to foreign policy and respond promptly to crises and opportunities. This comprehensive mandate and the requisite institutional support distinguish the HR/VP as the preeminent leader in EU foreign policy affairs (McCormick, 2020, p. 433). One notable transformation was the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) rebranding to the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), highlighting the EU's commitment to establishing a more integrated defense strategy that would allow for joint action on security matters. In 1998, in St Malo, France, French President Jacques Chirac argued that the EU should be able to play its full role on the international stage and should have the capacity for autonomous action backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and readiness to do so. The European security policy had taken a new identity with the formation of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) in 1999. The ESDP was a critical step in developing a European security policy outside NATO, based on the Petersberg tasks and the maintenance of battle groups capable of short-notice military action. In 2003, the European Council adopted the European Security Strategy, the first-ever joint declaration by EU member states of their strategic goals. It was the first comprehensive outline of the EU's security priorities, identifying threats and outlining key objectives. The strategy declared that the EU was inevitably a global player and should be ready to share responsibility for international security (McCormick, 2020, p. 435). In 2016, the EU took a significant step further by formulating its Global Strategy, a comprehensive document that outlines its strategic interests and priorities in the global arena. The High Representative presented this strategy and emphasized the importance of the EU's role in promoting peace, stability, and prosperity worldwide. Strategic Autonomy emerged from the discussions surrounding the 2016 Global Strategy, advocating for the EU's ability to act independently and decisively in international relations. It stresses the need for the EU to bolster its capabilities, ensuring that it can effectively respond to challenges and assert its presence on the global stage without relying solely on external powers. Overall, the developments stemming from the Treaty of Lisbon and subsequent actions reflect the EU's commitment to enhancing its security and foreign policy framework to address complex global challenges effectively (European Union External Action, 2016, p. 19). The European strategic autonomy is defined as "The capacity to act independently in an interdependent world. It is not synonymous with autarky, but it does require developing a capacity to act, in particular in traditional security fields where Europe has relied on US support for the last 70 years." (Varma, 2024, p. 65). Varma argues that Europeans have enhanced their defense capabilities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, U.S. political changes, and calls for greater autonomy. This push for European strategic autonomy and sovereignty highlights the need for Europeans to address their ability to act regionally and globally. Strategic autonomy has proven to be quite divisive among member states, as each tends to interpret it according to their interests or, at times, completely overlook it. The primary source of disagreement is whether pursuing strategic autonomy strengthens the Western alliance by addressing the United States' gradual withdrawal from its commitments to NATO or whether it represents a necessary step toward emancipation from reliance on the often-inconsistent United States. In this context, France views strategic autonomy as a long-term objective to establish greater independence from U.S. influence. Furthermore, France believes this autonomy is the only

adequate response to the European Union's external threats, suggesting that a collective effort toward this goal is crucial for the EU's future stability and security. France remains most interested in the long-term goal of independence from the U.S. (Michaels & Sus, 2024, p. 392). Emmanuel Macron, the current French President, advocates for EU strategic autonomy. Under his presidency, France has emerged as the vanguard in efforts to redefine European foreign and security policy, including its role on the global stage. In 2023, during a trip to China, he argued for reducing the EU's reliance on the United States and avoiding dependence on U.S. policies. According to Macron, strategic autonomy will secure the EU's future position as the third superpower in an increasingly multipolar world (MacKenzie, 2023). The European geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These aggressive actions highlighted the inherent limitations and shortcomings within the defense capacities of EU countries, illustrating their struggle to effectively counter external threats, particularly from major powers like the Russian Federation. Research conducted by Meijer and Brooks underscores the perception among some U.S. scholars that Europe could swiftly rebalance against Russia should the United States withdraw its military presence from the continent. They classify Europe as the "easy case" for U.S. withdrawal, contrasting it with Asia, which they consider more complex. However, Meijer and Brooks contend that European countries lack the necessary institutional frameworks and military capabilities to confront Russia independently in the foreseeable future. A significant reduction in U.S. military presence in Europe could lead to heightened instability, making the continent more vulnerable to Russian aggression while complicating cooperative defense efforts among European nations. Despite a growing desire for strategic autonomy within Europe, achieving it would require a coordinated, long-term strategy, particularly given the profound differences in national defense policies and the observable shortfalls in military capacity across the continent (Meijer and Brooks 2021, 42-43). Therefore, the continued presence of U.S. forces is essential for maintaining stability and security in Europe, as it provides a crucial deterrent against potential aggressions from Russia and fosters a collaborative defense environment among European nations. The following graph presents the NATO European and Canadian defense expenditures before and after the Ukraine war.

Graph 1 : NATO Europe and Canada - defence expenditure
(annual real change, based on 2015 prices and exchange rates)



Source: NATO. 2024. "Defense expenditure of NATO countries (2014-2024)." *Press Release*. Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has pushed the EU states to invest more in their military, reducing the financial burden on the U.S. However, they still need U.S. funding and leadership in their security.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper has explored France's pivotal role in advocating for strategic autonomy within the European Union's security and defense policy. Over the years, especially following the end of the Cold War, France has pushed for a more independent EU approach to security, aiming to reduce reliance on the United States. This push has gained momentum in light of significant global events, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the shifting attitude of U.S. leadership under President Trump. The push for strategic autonomy follows the realist theory's assumption of self-help and balancing against the threat from an external actor such as Russia. The EU has attempted to become more self-reliant militarily and has engaged in balancing against Russia by forming new alliances with countries such as Finland and Sweden, which both joined NATO. As the EU officially adopted the concept of strategic autonomy, it began to reflect a desire for greater self-sufficiency and a more assertive role on the global stage. However, the push for autonomy has also highlighted the challenges

within the EU, particularly the varying perspectives of member states. While some countries align with France's vision, others remain wary and concerned about security vulnerabilities, especially regarding threats from Russia.

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