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## **UNPLAYED TRUMP CARD? GERMANY AND FRANCE TOWARD THE TRAJECTORY OF THE EU SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY AFTER RUSSIAN INVASION IN UKRAINE**

### **Abstract**

Growing tensions on the EU's eastern border, coupled with Donald Trump's isolationist declarations, have sparked a new debate on the trajectory of integration in the field of EU security policy following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as on the role of Germany and France as key actors shaping the future of Europe's security architecture. The authors examine the extent to which the EU's security and defence policy can be perceived as an underutilised 'trump card' of the European Union and whether its full potential requires deeper integration or can instead be achieved through differentiated integration and cooperation outside the Union's formal structures. The article argues that the limited utilisation of the EU's security and defence potential does not result from a lack of institutional instruments but rather from divergent member-state preferences regarding their activation. Germany represents an inclusive model based on broad participation, consensus-building, and the perception of extra-EU formats as supportive mechanisms for future EU integration. France, by contrast, promotes an avant-garde model, favouring narrower coalitions of willing

states, flexible forms of cooperation, and the development of European strategic autonomy. These differences are reflected in varying thresholds for activating defence initiatives, contrasting approaches to cooperation outside EU structures, and distinct leadership ambitions. France possesses additional advantages in the form of nuclear capabilities and a greater willingness to assume a leadership role, while Germany has strengthened its position through increased defence spending and the development of military capabilities. The findings suggest that the EU's security and defence policy remains a partially underutilised asset whose effectiveness depends on reconciling Germany's logic of inclusiveness and legitimacy with France's emphasis on effectiveness and strategic autonomy. The future of European defence will depend not on eliminating differentiation, but on the ability to employ diverse forms of cooperation as mechanisms that reinforce, rather than substitute for, integration at the EU level.

**Key words:** European Union, differentiated integration, EU security and defence policy, European integration

## INTRODUCTION

The full-scale war in Ukraine, described as a 'tectonic shift in European history' (Council of the European Union, 2022), became a catalyst for important initiatives in the area of European security and defence: from increasing defence spending and strengthening industrial cooperation to creating a Coalition of the Willing (for Ukraine) outside the formal EU structures. On 22 March 2022, during the French Presidency, the Council of the EU approved the Strategic Compass, which was intended to guide the development of EU security and defence policy until 2030, taking into account key challenges, including growing geopolitical competition fuelled by economic rivalry. The Compass was based on four pillars: acting, securing, investing, and partnering. The EU's priority was to increase defence readiness through the integrated, innovative, and resilient European defence technological and industrial base and a strengthened European defence industry (Council of the European Union, 2022).

At the same time, Europe's long-standing dependence on the United States as the continent's primary security guarantor, rooted in NATO structures, proved to be a significant challenge. This attachment to the US as a key ally committed to protecting Europe within NATO structures led EU member states to refrain from developing their military capabilities and reduce defence spending. At the time of

Russia's attack on Ukraine, only five EU member states exceeded the 2% GDP defence spending threshold (NATO, 2022: 52). On the other hand, the belief that NATO could still be perceived as the primary guarantee of Europe's security system was systematically undermined by the declarations and actions of the Trump administration after the 2024 US presidential election. In 2024, Trump firmly stated: 'If the Europeans treat us fairly, we will remain in NATO, but if not, I will strongly consider leaving the Alliance' (NBC News, 2024). Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth addressed this issue similarly, stating that Europe should take greater responsibility for building its own defence forces (Kayali, 2025). The Trump administration's stance undermined the guiding paradigm of Joe Biden's term: 'America is back', which he had announced four years earlier at the Munich Security Conference (Bunde, 2021). Currently, the 'Trump effect' (Maulny, 2026) has led to deep divisions within NATO (Fischer, 2024: 84).

According to the US National Defense Strategy, the model ally is seen as willing and able to defend itself with crucial, albeit limited, support from the United States. The Strategy therefore emphasises that

The Department [Department of War] will therefore incentivize and enable NATO allies to take primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defence with critical but more limited U.S. support [...]. Finally, we will be clear with our European allies that their efforts and resources are best focused on Europe (2026).

By positioning himself as the actor who deals the cards, Donald Trump exposes the EU's limited agency in the security domain, thereby reinforcing the need for the Union to possess a 'trump card' of its own. This rhetorical device is not merely a pun; it constitutes an attempt to examine Europe's future options, entangled in transatlantic political precedents. In such circumstances, two questions arise: To what extent can the EU's security and defence policy be considered an underutilised trump card, and how do Germany and France position themselves on whether its full potential requires a unified integration framework or can be achieved through differentiated integration or even differentiated cooperation outside the EU?

The metaphor of a 'trump card' is used to capture the gap between the availability of formal instruments and their strategic use, drawing on debates about institutional capacity, strategic autonomy, and political will. Analytically, EU security and defence policy can be considered as a trump card when it provides the EU with added

value beyond national and NATO defence arrangements in three key dimensions: institutions, capabilities, and operational use. 'Playing' the trump card here is understood as translating EU security and defence policy institutional capacity into binding political decisions, operational engagement, or lasting changes in defence integration. Three thresholds for playing the trump card can be distinguished: institutional, defined as the launch or significant strengthening of EU-level instruments; operational, referring to concrete operational engagement; and political, understood as the explicit prioritisation of the EU as a framework for action. The authors argue that EU security and defence functions as an untapped asset not due to a lack of instruments, but due to the varying approaches of states to security integration. In this article, EU security and defence is understood as an asset whose activation follows patterns of differentiated integration. EU security and defence is not uniformly 'inactive', but rather selectively activated by subgroups of Member States, leading to fragmented and uneven strategic outcomes. The differentiated use of the EU security and defence asset therefore implies the willingness of selected countries to accept uneven commitments and asymmetric burden-sharing.

The theoretical framework is built on the literature on differentiated integration and differentiated cooperation, with particular emphasis on the post-2022 perspective. The empirical material includes primary sources such as official strategic documents, government statements, and EU-level policy documents, complemented by secondary sources, including academic publications and policy reports. The temporal scope of the study covers the period from 2014 to 2025, with particular emphasis on developments following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which marked a critical juncture for EU security and defence policy. The case selection follows a most-different systems design: Germany and France represent contrasting strategic cultures, institutional preferences, and approaches to EU defence integration, making them suitable cases for exploring variation within a shared EU framework.

## METHODS: COMPARATIVE APPROACH

This article is a comparative qualitative analysis. This comparison shows that the limited utilisation of the potential of the EU's security and defence policy is not due to an insufficient number of instruments, but

rather to discrepancies in national activation thresholds, understood as a willingness to bear the political, operational and institutional costs associated with autonomous EU action. Even before the outbreak of the war in 2022, France and Germany consistently represented two distinct 'playing' models. While Germany advocated for an expanded Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), with a reluctance to make firm commitments and go beyond the EU mechanisms, France preferred narrow coalitions, often outside the EU legal framework, a willingness to make firm military commitments, and building European autonomy, independent of the US (Major & Mölling, 2019).

The aim of this comparative study is to explain how these two countries, previously considered the driving force behind European integration and a key alliance within the EU, are responding to changes that are crucial for the future of not only European but also global security architecture. The choice of these countries is not accidental. These countries have distinct strategic approaches to EU security and defence, and their contemporary form, crystallised after the Cold War, was reinforced after 2014 in the context of growing threats to European security, and ultimately became even more clearly defined after 2022. In this context, France is the undisputed leader of the Europeanist camp (Michaels & Sus, 2025: 70). In its view, the EU should become independent from the United States in the field of security. The war in Ukraine and the approach of Trump further strengthened Macron's support for enhancing European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) and the EU's defence capabilities across the board. By contrast, prior to February 2022, Germany positioned itself between the Atlanticist and Europeanist camps: it supported France's stance on ESA, yet viewed the strengthening of EU defence capabilities primarily as a means of reinforcing the European pillar of NATO. After February 2022, Germany made it clear that ESA cannot imply a withdrawal from the United States (Michaels & Sus, 2025: 58). At the same time, since 2022 Berlin has begun to play an increasingly important role in the security domain, increasing defence spending, engaging in defence of NATO's eastern flank, and actively supporting Ukraine (Michaels & Sus, 2025: 72). Given the importance of these two countries within the EU, the full realisation of the EU's security and defence potential would not be possible without France and Germany.

The comparative framework aims to demonstrate similarities and differences in both countries' approaches to developing the EU's security and defence policy and perceiving it as the EU's trump card.

Five key comparative criteria are considered: (1) Preferred integration model in EU security and defence: inclusive/avant-garde; (2) The relationship between the EU security and defence and alternative forms of integration outside the EU (as an alternative to the EU integration or as a factor in deepening cooperation between member states, leading to future consensus within the field of EU security and defence); (3) Trigger Threshold for the EU security and defence initiatives: low (without broad support) or high (with broad consensus); (4) Willingness to play the role of a leader (key player) in EU security and defence: high/low; (5) Capabilities to play the role of a leader (key player) in EU security and defence: high/low. The comparative criteria are derived from a review of the literature on differentiated integration and strategic autonomy (e.g. Lavenex & Križić, 2019; Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2023; Major & Mölling, 2019; Martill & Gebhard, 2023), and capture key dimensions shaping member states' approaches to EU security and defence: inclusiveness/exclusiveness; institutional preference; leadership ambition, and capabilities. Referring to the thresholds for playing the trump card, the third comparative criterion captures the propensity of member states to support mobilisation of these dimensions in practice. A high threshold reflects a preference for broad consensus, cautious decision-making (also in the context of military support and participation in missions), and reliance on EU-based frameworks. A low threshold indicates a greater willingness to act flexibly, including through informal groupings, or cooperation outside formal EU structures provided such actions are framed as contributing to EU-level objectives. Both countries possess the political power and institutional influence necessary to develop EU security and defence, yet have simultaneously faced numerous political crises since 2022. They represent different strategic cultures, unequal defence capabilities (especially in terms of nuclear deterrence), and differing visions of European defence.

#### EU SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY AS A TRUMP CARD FROM A DIFFERENTIATED INTEGRATION (DI) AND COOPERATION (DC) PERSPECTIVE

The EU has never aspired to the role of a military community. Moreover, it has even been repeatedly referred to as a 'military dwarf' (Bornio, 2022). Yet, strengthening the importance of military aspects in European foreign and security policy has become one of the EU's

key priorities in the new reality, uncompromisingly imposed by Russia. At the same time, the requirement for unanimity in decision-making processes, and especially the need to develop a coherent position on core state powers, such as security policy, amidst the high diversity of state preferences, deepens the integration impasse within the EU security and defence and encourages the search for alternative mechanisms outside the EU framework. Differentiation can also foster the integration of new policies and enable Member States to cooperate at different levels of integration (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2023: 4–34). Consequently, although differentiated integration has governed the development of EU security and defence policy since 1993, its role has become significantly more pronounced in the post-2022 context.

A comprehensive understanding of EU security and defence policy requires moving beyond a focus solely on differentiated integration (DI) and incorporating a framework of differentiated cooperation (DC), which in practice, especially in informal forms, has become the dominant mode of action for Member States. The EU's foreign policy approach is not primarily based on integration, but rather on flexible, often informal, arrangements of cooperation. This, in practice, translates into greater flexibility and capacity for action, but also the risk of fragmentation and incoherence. Generally speaking, differentiation is a systemic feature of the EU, as Member States differ in their interests, capabilities, and levels of engagement, leading to 'patchwork' forms of cooperation (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2023: 4–34). Although differentiated integration is, in simplified terms, defined in the literature as 'any type of integration or cooperation that allows states (member or third parties) and sub-state entities to cooperate in a heterogeneous and flexible manner' (Lavenex & Križić, 2019: 3), to understand the real functioning of the EU's foreign and security policy, it is necessary to analyse both DI and DC, as both forms coexist. Moreover, in practice, DC tends to dominate, especially in its informal forms. DI encompasses different levels of participation in the EU's integrated, institutional system and is based on formal, legally binding mechanisms. By contrast, DC is

any institutional arrangement that allows EU member states to cooperate in a non-uniform manner, without significant autonomy of EU institutions, based on consensus and voluntary policy coordination (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2023).

This also applies to initiatives in which member states deepen cooperation by creating informal groupings. Such groups of member states coordinate their actions to pursue common goals, within the EU's institutional framework or outside it, while remaining loosely connected to it (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2025: 932; Amadio Viceré, 2023). Many studies view informal groups as a manifestation of differentiated cooperation in EU foreign policy (Amadio Viceré, 2022; Lovato, 2024; Sus, 2023). Others point to their particular importance in the aftermath of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2025). These groups have become institutional solutions for EU member states seeking to pursue their security interests in different institutional contexts, organising the European security order both within and beyond the EU in response to the war (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2025: 933). Key patterns of differentiated integration are distinguished through the prism of three criteria: (1) the involvement of EU member states (uniform or differentiated); (2) the degree of convergence or weakening of cooperation between the interested states (integrative or disintegrative); (3) actions within the EU framework or outside its formal and legal structures.

Within the CFSP mechanisms, which directly result from the provisions of the Treaties, the following should be distinguished: delegation of tasks to a group of Member States operating on the basis of enhanced cooperation (Article 42(5) TEU; Article 44 TEU); differentiated involvement in 'regular' CSDP missions (Articles 42(1), 42(2) and 43 TEU); Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (Article 42(6) TEU; Article 46 TEU; Protocol 10 TEU). Constructive abstention (Article 31(1) TEU; Articles 362-364 TFEU) and inclusion and exclusion clauses (Protocols 21 and 22 to the TFEU). In practice, differentiated integration within the CFSP is also achieved through cooperation mechanisms that do not arise directly from the Treaties: regional groups, such as the Benelux or the Visegrad Group, which enable regular consultations and common positions; ad hoc contact groups bringing together both EU and third countries to respond to specific international crises; lead groups composed of selected Member States that take the initiative (e.g., E3 or the Normandy format) (Grevi et al., 2020). Integration logic thus distinguishes internal differentiation, when at least one member state does not participate in a given policy (opt-out), and external differentiation, when at least one non-EU member state 'joins' a given policy (opt-in) and fulfils the obligations arising from it, even despite the lack of participation



of all EU states (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen & De Vries, 2023: 6–8). For example, Norway has participated in several CSDP missions and European Defense Agency projects (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2021: 9–11). Moreover, although only EU member states can be members of PESCO, in 2020 the Council of the EU defined the conditions for inviting third countries to participate in projects implemented within PESCO. Even before the start of a full-scale war in Ukraine, Canada, Norway, and the USA participated in the military mobility project in 2021. After the Russian aggression, this aspect of external differentiation in EU security and defence was intensified: the United Kingdom joined the PESCO project in 2022, and Switzerland in 2025 (European Council, 2025). Neither of these logics, however, explains the participation of member states in enhanced cooperation outside the EU, which is not anchored within EU structures but nevertheless indirectly contributes to deepening integration in a given policy. This refers to alternative cooperation outside the formal structures of organisations, including the EU, encompassing tools such as bilateral security treaties, strategic partnership agreements, and multilateral groups ('Coalition of the Willing' for Ukraine). These forms of cooperation have become key tools for flexibility and leadership under time pressure (Sus, 2026). At the same time, they can become a catalyst for accelerating European integration. The question therefore arises: How far does achieving the full potential of EU security and defence require a unified framework of integration? If, in compensating for the structural shortcomings of the unanimity procedure, member states treat differentiated cooperation practices not as a step on the path to deepening integration within the EU, but as substitute mechanisms for EU initiatives, then it is difficult to speak of fully utilising their potential in the context of integration dynamics (Alcaro & Siddi, 2020).

#### GERMANY'S APPROACH THE EU SECURITY AND DEFENCE AFTER THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

Until 2022, Germany was perceived as a 'civilian power' (Zivilmacht), basing its position primarily on multilateralism, anti-militarism, and economic strength (Hacke, 1996: 3–14; Staack, 2000; Seppo, 2024). This resulted in a high threshold for political activation of EU defence and security instruments (including the CSDP) in reference to inclusive, consensual forms of cooperation within the EU. Germany,

repeatedly faced with cumbersome decision-making within the EU and NATO, has relied on informal groupings and minilateral formats such as the Weimar Triangle, E3, and EU5 to shape consensus and generate integrative dynamics (Aggestam, Hyde-Price, 2025). Nevertheless, Berlin has consistently supported the institutional development of the EU security and defence, including the launch of PESCO, the Coordinated Annual Defence Review (CARD) to coordinate military capability development planning, and the European Defence Fund (EDF) to finance multilateral research and armaments projects, treating them more as tools for organizing and integrating the European defence sector than as a basis for building EU autonomy (Martill, Gebhard, 2023; Gotkowska, 2017). Berlin's support for these instruments is not merely an expression of support for integration, but an operationalisation of the inclusive integration model. Germany sought to have as many member states as possible join PESCO, based on the principle of increased inclusiveness. In contrast to the avant-garde model, Berlin viewed PESCO as a mechanism for gradually bringing member states closer together, rather than as a tool for the emergence of a core European defence (Major & Mölling, 2019). In this sense, Germany treated the CSDP more as a potential institutional asset, the full activation of which should only occur after achieving broad political consensus. From the German perspective, EU security and defence could be seen as a trump card if it keeps as many member states as possible on board, thereby strengthening EU unity (Martill & Gebhard, 2023: 107). In this context, PESCO is a formula that generates 'positive differentiation' and greater convergence in the European defence sector (Blockmans & Macchiarini Crosson, 2019). This is especially true given that Germany supports the inclusion of non-EU partners in defence projects (Merz, 2026). This approach determines their attitude towards non-EU formats. Berlin views them not as substitutes for EU security and defence, but as essential support for building future consensus within the EU. An example is the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), which, although implemented outside the treaties, is ultimately intended to strengthen NATO's European pillar and the coherence of defence capabilities across the EU.

The reorganisation of the German foreign and security policy was announced on 27 February 2022, at an extraordinary session of the Bundestag. Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered a government statement on the Russian-Ukrainian war, which marked a turning

point ('Zeitenwende') for the global and European response to the war. Germany has committed to a more active role as a defence player (Bunde, 2022; Martill & Sus, 2024: 1132). Scholz declared both a shift in Germany's eastern policy and a greater commitment to developing the Bundeswehr's military resources and defence capabilities:

As a guarantor of European security, a bridge builder in the European Union, and a proponent of multilateral solutions to global problems, Germany continues to set the tone for the post-war order on the Old Continent and maintain its influence on global politics (Scholz, 2022).

Scholz's speech was groundbreaking because strengthening military capabilities and supplying heavy military equipment to other countries had previously been a topic German decision-makers were afraid to discuss in political debate. Scholz announced the modernisation of the army and increased defence spending (Scholz, 2022). To this end, he announced the launch of a one-time Bundeswehr fund worth 100 billion euros as part of the 2022 federal budget. The Chancellor also declared that Germany would fulfil its commitment to maintaining an annual defence contribution exceeding 2% of GDP. A clear shift in stance on military support for Ukraine is evidenced by the fact that, following Berlin's conservative policy of providing Ukraine with heavy weaponry in the first days after the Russian invasion, a few months later Germany became the second largest arms supplier after the United States and the lead country in the EUMAM military mission under the CSDP, which took place on the territory of Poland and Germany. It was the first military training mission on the territory of the EU, not of a beneficiary, despite the fact that, according to Article 42 TEU, a CSDP mission can only be organised outside the territory of the Union (Terlikowski & Madej, 2023/2024: 75). Despite the radical shift in rhetoric, the German threshold for mobilisation defence initiatives remains relatively high. This stems from a deeply rooted preference for broad consensus and cautious decision-making. Even in the wake of the war in Ukraine, every new EU policy and defence initiative is subjected to rigorous scrutiny in Berlin for its impact on transatlantic unity and the EU's internal cohesion.

In June 2023, the Federal Republic of Germany published its National Security Strategy for the first time in history. The catalogue of instruments aimed at strengthening Germany's national security contained in the document was based on the concept of 'integrated

security' (*integrierte Sicherheit*), which assumes the integration of all key security issues to protect against internal and external threats. Although the EU security and defence policy has been recognised as crucial in the field of crisis management, the lack of a precise vision for the ultimate shape of EU defence integration demonstrates the continued high threshold for EU security and defence policy, understood as a willingness to bear the political, operational and institutional costs associated with autonomous EU action. It was emphasised, however, that Germany is a country

deeply rooted in the transatlantic alliance, which is an expression of close ties and partnership with the United States (2023: 4).

In contrast to France's aspirations, which viewed the development of a common defence as a means of achieving strong European autonomy in the sense of independence from the United States, Germany prioritised an Atlanticist orientation. Although the Merz government has greater ambitions for an independent European defence, its diplomatic efforts aim to build EU capabilities that complement NATO rather than replace it. Germany does not assume that Europe will become completely independent from the United States through the development of EU security and defence, but rather, in response to the American president's demands, the EU will respond with a more equitable sharing of security burdens between the United States and European states (Puglierin, 2024). Berlin still considers NATO to be the foundation of European defence, based on strong transatlantic ties, which requires Europe to be more credible as an ally (Joint Declaration, 2024; Merz, 2026).

Even before his inauguration as Chancellor, in March 2025, the Bundestag voted on a constitutional amendment that allows defence spending exceeding 1% of GDP to be financed without the constitutional debt brake. This provides significantly greater fiscal flexibility and reinforces the government's commitment to achieving the 5% defence spending target by 2035 (Das Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2025). Merz sees these changes not only as a national issue but also as part of a broader European project:

The decision we are taking today can be seen as the first important step towards a new European Defence Community. A defence community that includes not only EU member states but also other countries that want to build it together with us (Nöstlinger, 2025).

In this context, he emphasised that capabilities within the framework of EU security policy development remain crucial and, at the same time, attributed to them an inclusive nature, which corresponds to the logic of differentiated external integration. Although Germany prioritises its involvement in formal mechanisms within the EU, it does not rule out the possibility of participating in alternative forms of differentiation outside the EU, as exemplified by its strong (though not leading) involvement in the Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine or the conclusion of a bilateral security and defence treaty with the United Kingdom in 2025. However, Germany considers these actions within the framework of the EU's interests:

[...] their [Germany and the United Kingdom's] cooperation is consistent with and benefits from the broader relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the positive development of this relationship is in their common interest (2025).

The ambitions of Friedrich Merz's government to equip Germany with the capabilities of a key player in EU security and defence go even further. During his inaugural address to parliament in May 2025, he emphasised that his government's top priority is transforming the German military into Europe's strongest conventional army to help counter the growing threat from Russia. The Merz administration is advocating breaking with Germany's traditional strict fiscal discipline, curbing debt, and pushing forward the massive federal spending plan approved in March of this year, which amounts to 500 billion euros for infrastructure, defence, and climate protection investments. Defence spending is to rise to 152 billion euros by 2029, tripling the 2023 level (Das Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2025). German defence efforts are also intended to contribute to the development of the Reichstag (EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, RDC), a project strongly supported by Germany. An example is the command post exercise (MILEX 24), which was conducted by Eurocorps at the Bergen training area in December 2024. Furthermore, in the case of EUBG 25, Germany is the framework (lead) nation, and 17 EU member states are contributing soldiers in various military branches (EUROCORPS, 2025).

Germany, therefore, bases its vision of developing the EU security and defence as a trump card on an inclusive model that accommodates broad participation by member states, as well as third countries interested in closer security cooperation. Although

Germany prioritises integration within the EU and NATO structures, it does not rule out external differentiated cooperation outside the formal framework. However, it bases its participation in non-EU formats on its commitments arising from EU and NATO membership and views these mechanisms as a factor supporting cooperation that leads to future consensus within EU security and defence. Under Merz's leadership, Germany has also demonstrated a high willingness to play the role of a key player (Łukasik, 2025). This is evidenced by internal reforms aimed at increasing German defence spending and modernising the Bundeswehr, as well as promoting arms cooperation between member states and modernising the European arms industry, which is intended to be part of building a European Defence Community. The government's strong political ambitions clash with limited strategic legitimacy and a historical reluctance to lead unilaterally. In addition, Berlin currently lacks both the appropriate military capabilities and nuclear potential, as possessed by, for example, France, and sufficient political legitimacy to play a leading role in European security (Kwiatkowska, 2025). Berlin is striving to play the role of 'leadership from behind', which in the context of differentiated integration means being a mediator of interests rather than an aggressive promoter of its own vision of strategic autonomy.

### FRANCE'S APPROACH THE EU SECURITY AND DEFENCE AFTER THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

In the 2017 Sorbonne speech, Macron presented an EU security and defence vision of gradual construction of European strategic autonomy in the field of security (Macron, 2017) by strengthening EU defence capabilities to achieve independence from traditional security guarantors (Biscop, 2019; Fiott, 2018). Strategic autonomy, as conceptualised in French strategic thinking, encompasses three interrelated dimensions: operational autonomy (capacity for independent military action), industrial autonomy (indigenous defence production), and decision-making autonomy (ability to define security interests without external constraint) (Fiott, 2018). Macron spoke in favour of a potential US withdrawal from certain security areas and the emergence of new threats, including geopolitical instability. He also emphasised the need to develop a common strategic culture in the form of harmonisation of doctrines, integration

of operational structures and the creation of European intervention forces (Jurczyszyn, 2017). While the Strategic Review of Defence and National Security adopted in 2017 operationalises strategic autonomy through industry, technology and resources to ensure operational autonomy (Ministry of Armed Forces, 2017), the updated version steers toward a different understanding of the term. The Strategic Update, as it were, abandons the concept of strategic autonomy in favour of European sovereignty (Ministry of Armed Forces, 2021). In this case, it is understood as an independent European security and defence pillar, developed in accordance with and in line with NATO's development plans. As for the alliance itself, in turn, attention is drawn to the need to update and strengthen its political dimension (Ministry of Armed Forces, 2017).

As in the case of Germany, the catalyst for the change in France's approach to the EU security and defence policy was the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the reorientation of US policy regarding its engagement in Europe (Ratti, 2023). On the other hand, France's approach to post-2022 EU security and defence is a prime example of an avant-garde integration model, based on greater willingness to act flexibly, including through informal groupings, or cooperation outside formal EU structures (low threshold). Paris uses differentiated integration and cooperation mechanisms not as ends in themselves, but as a way to circumvent the decision-making paralysis in the EU-27 format. In contrast to Germany's inclusive approach, France promotes the creation of a 'hard core' of states capable and willing to act. This strong will to play a leadership role manifests itself in the belief that the effectiveness of European security and defence depends on the cooperation of the most militarily advanced members, making the French vision of integration more exclusive and focused on specific operational outcomes rather than broad political consensus. Initially, Russia was not seen as an immediate threat, but as a challenge to the shaping of European stability. EU security was to be built on the basis of the strategic autonomy of EU capabilities and the development of geostrategic interests with Russia (French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2022). As the war progressed, France's position and vision on security changed. Russia began to be seen as a direct threat to the stability and security of the region, and the security architecture itself as necessary to shape against Russia, not around it (Weber, 2024: 1–23). The need to balance Russian influence through European cooperation and instruments of economic leverage also

became apparent. What is more, in 2023 the concept of European defence became a leading thought in French strategies.

During the EU Council Presidency in 2022, France's priority was to implement the Strategic Compass, which aims to develop CSDP capabilities towards EU defence independence (EEAS, 2022). The elements of the strategy most strongly emphasised by France were the construction and revitalisation of the European defence industry, aiming to reduce dependence on the US military industry. The results of the work became the Future Combat Air System project, developed with Germany and Spain, and the Main Ground Combat System, developed in cooperation with Germany (Deschaux-Dutard, 2022: 591–608). Projects such as these exemplify France's *modus operandi*, focusing on operating outside formal EU structures as intergovernmental initiatives with selected willing partners, proceeding without EU-wide consensus (Major & Mölling, 2019). In this regard, the French approach to EU security and defence policy is characterised by a low threshold. The ability to quickly, often unilaterally or as part of a coalition, make decisions about the use of force contrasts with the German culture of restraint.

France's ambition to build a militarily autonomous Union, combined with its own concept of national security, reflects its aspiration to lead the transformation of European defence (Ewers-Peters & Baciú, 2022: 666–688), which, on the other hand, does not have to mean within the EU framework. Strategic documents clearly emphasise the need to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy and set ambitious technological and industrial goals for the Union (Ministry of Armed Forces, 2022). However, understanding the need to maintain close transatlantic relations as the basis for European defence, France is constituting a unique way of shaping its approach to international security, as the proponent of two forces: NATO and CSDP (Ministry of Armed Forces, 2022).

France actively promoted PESCO as a mechanism for internal differentiation. As a result, it led to enabling 25 willing member states to deepen defence cooperation through binding commitments. However, France's experience reveals direct tension between inclusive participation (preferred by Germany) and substantive commitment. PESCO represents broad political support; its 60+ projects demonstrate the lowest common denominator rather than the ambitious project that France seeks. Therefore, France looks at PESCO as a valuable tool with insufficient capabilities which require supplementation



through Article 44 TEU and constructive abstention under Article 31(1) TEU. The Strategic Compass' explicit reference to applying Article 44 to RDC reflects French success in further institutionalising flexibility within CSDP (Maślanka, 2024). Strategic employment of external differentiation is being used to incorporate third countries into CSDP mechanisms. This leads to the expenditure of a pool of potential contributors without requiring EU membership. The 2020 Council decision enabling third-country PESCO participation created a legal framework in which France finds itself as an active user. Most distinctively, France involves alternative cooperation outside formal EU structures via differentiated alternative integration (Groenendijk, 2019). Critically, France views alternative forms of integration or cooperation outside the EU not as a permanent substitute for EU security and defence policy but as a mechanism for building European (as well as French) capabilities. The European Intervention Initiative (E12) enables France to develop common strategic culture and operational concepts without EU institutional constraints. French involvement in formats such as the European Intervention Initiative is an example of using differentiated cooperation as a capacity-building tool 'outside' treaties. This approach contrasts with the German approach of treating non-EU formats solely as support for future consensus. France's approach to non-EU formats is instrumental and pragmatic. Paris does not see initiatives like the E12 merely as support for a future EU consensus (as Berlin does), but as real catalysts for action that can function independently of treaty structures if they prove ineffective. In this logic, differentiated cooperation outside the EU framework is treated as a way to build strategic autonomy without relying on the most reticent partners. Similarly, bilateral security treaties with the UK and Germany advance specific cooperation with key partners without requiring consensus from all EU member states (Aachen, 2019).

Considering Donald Trump's re-election, the French concept of a 'careful balance' in European security seems to have steadily remained Emmanuel Macron's direction for the coming years (Weber, 2024: 1–23). While Macron rhetorically balances strengthening sovereign EU security and defence capabilities with transatlantic relations, France's actual approach seeks to progressively replace rather than complement NATO security guarantees (Dziubińska, 2024). France employs an avant-garde integration model (Major & Mölling, 2019), maintains low thresholds for security and defence initiatives, and

actively pursues its ambition to lead European strategic emancipation from US dependence (Dziubińska, 2024). The 2024 speech continues and complements the vision of European sovereignty launched seven years earlier. It adapts the ideas previously marshalled to the new dynamic international situation and newly emerging crises such as the Russo-Ukrainian War (Macron, 2024). At the same time, Macron pointed out that the EU has made significant progress in creating autonomous defence structures and remains strongly linked to NATO, as the pillar of security on the continent. More importantly, Macron, diagnosing the state of the EU security, noted that its current shape and its resilience are insufficient in the face of dynamic threats. The position on building European defence capabilities complementing Atlantic structures has been sustained. He also emphasised the areas of necessary revision within the CSDP, such as anti-missile systems, deep strike capabilities and cyber defence. Considerable emphasis was also placed on the need to develop the defence industry, which has so far been dependent on non-national, non-European suppliers. As a solution, Macron proposes the creation of a European system of preferences for defence contracts (Macron, 2024). The French vision is therefore still based on the principles of careful balance, but the summit in Paris convened by Macron in February 2025 suggests that, together with the leaders of the countries with the greatest financial and military potential, he understands the need for deeper independence for Europe, ultimately replacing American security provision.

France's position towards NATO has also been redefined. Before 2022, NATO was generally seen by the French side mainly as a tool for territorial defence (Weber, 2024: 1–23). Its current shape is formed by a view that justifies the necessity of using NATO as a deterrent against Russia (French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2022). In addition to its potential to shape the balance of power in Europe, France has found a niche and a need for leadership in NATO transatlantic relations (Schmitt & Tenebaum, 2023: 353–372). It began to outline its leadership ambitions not only to advocate for a European Defence Union within the CSDP, but to join Germany, the US and aspiring Poland in being the commander-in-chief of NATO's eastern flank (Weber, 2024: 1–23). Before 2022, the essence of European capabilities in creating security was crisis management and lobbying for a strong European defence independent of NATO (Ratti, 2023: 73–89). The highlighting of defence inefficiencies of the

EU became the catalyst for the French perspective, in which the Alliance, initially, is to be the European security guarantor, and then, with the development of European defence capabilities, to become a mere complement to the EU security architecture (Ewers-Peters & Baciú, 2022: 666–688).

The nuclear dimension constitutes the most crucial asymmetry distinguishing French from German approaches to EU security and defence and fundamentally enables France's strategy. Russian attacks exposed Europe's conventional shortfalls in defending NATO's exposed territories, consequently making it even more reliant on nuclear deterrence. However, the United States remains the only state possessing substantial tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe via NATO's nuclear sharing agreement (Larsen, 2025). France's position as the EU's only nuclear power possessing approximately 290 operational warheads across submarine-launched ballistic missiles and air-launched cruise missiles provides the most credible foundation for pursuing the leadership role (Verstraete, 2024). All the more so because France had ambitions to lead the Coalition of the Willing. Further 'Europeanisation' of deterrence would need to occur with deeper cooperation between France and the UK in terms of building nuclear capacity (Larsen, 2025).

The French perspective on the development of European security instruments also requires a look at the way strategic partnerships and relations are established. France is developing global bilateral partnerships covering the Indo-Pacific, the Persian Gulf, the Sahel, MENA, as well as Latin America (IISS, 2019: 57–67). It sees relations with Germany and the UK as key in building European security. In this regard, the current international landscape strongly favours France as a European leader in security. As the only EU member state, it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Moreover, it is also the only EU member with a nuclear arsenal that can become the basis for building an independent European security architecture (Torbicka, 2023: 138). Having its own deterrence system places France in a privileged position in the European security architecture. This allows Paris to promote the concept of strategic autonomy from a position of strength, offering Europe an alternative security umbrella to the American one. This structurally distinguishes French leadership capabilities from those of Germany, which are based primarily on economic and industrial potential. France's ambitions, coupled with its highest defence budget, allocating 43.1 billion euros (representing

approximately 1.9% of GDP in 2024) because of its numerous deployed troops and global military aspirations and power projection, confirm a strong stance toward European military autonomy (SIPRI, 2025). In addition, the country is making significant investments in defence, maintaining its nuclear posture and participating in cooperative military procurement projects. France also pursues a broad policy of international cooperation, which allows it to pursue its military ambitions at the global level (Ewers-Peters & Baciú, 2022: 666–688).

TABLE 1  
EU security and defence policy as a trump card:  
a comparison of the German and French approaches

| Comparative Criteria                                                         | Germany                                                                                              | France                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) Preferred Integration Model                                              | Inclusive (broad participation, avoiding the EU's 'hard core' of defence)                            | Avant-garde (narrow coalitions of states ready for deeper integration) |
| (2) Position on alternative forms of integration/ cooperation outside the EU | Non-EU formats as support for future consensus in EU security and defence policy, not as substitutes | Non-EU formats as capacity-building tools                              |
| (3) Trigger Threshold for the EU security and defence initiatives            | High (preference for broad consensus, cautious decision-making)                                      | Low (willingness to operate in a narrow circle)                        |
| (4) Willingness to play Leader (Key Player) Role                             | Growing but cautious (strong ambition, limited strategic legitimacy)                                 | High (leadership ambition, active political role)                      |
| (5) Capabilities to play Leader (Key Player) Role                            | Low: absence of nuclear weapons                                                                      | High: nuclear capability                                               |

Source: own elaboration

Despite these ambitions, France is encountering difficulties in building a broad consensus in Europe. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe tend to lean towards NATO more and prefer close relations with the United States, fearing that weakening transatlantic ties will expose them to a greater threat from Russia. The French strategy, while visionary, therefore, requires overcoming internal divisions within the EU and finding a balance between European sovereignty and cooperation with NATO. France, as the main proponent of European strategic autonomy, has constantly sought to increase the EU's military capabilities (Weber, 2024: 1–23). However,

inadequate operational capabilities, internal divisions over vision and policy direction, and technological and industrial constraints mean that the EU's security and defence policy lacks sufficient capabilities to take the EU out from under NATO's wing. France, aspiring to be a European security leader, may be forced to intensify its European autonomy measures even further.

## CONCLUSIONS

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EU security and defence policy has gained clear relevance and can be interpreted as a potential trump card. However, it remains only partially utilised. The analysis shows that this underutilisation does not stem from a lack of instruments, but from the differentiated and selective ways in which Member States activate them across institutional, operational, and political dimensions. Consequently, the EU's security and defence policy is not uniformly underused, but rather unevenly employed, depending on national preferences and thresholds of engagement. The findings also indicate that its full potential does not rely solely on a unified integration framework, but is increasingly realised through a combination of differentiated integration within the EU and differentiated cooperation outside it.

The comparison of Germany and France across five criteria highlights two distinct models shaping this dynamic. Germany promotes an inclusive approach, favouring broad participation, treating non-EU formats as supportive of future EU consensus, and maintaining a high threshold for action based on cautious, consensus-oriented decision-making. Its willingness to lead has increased since 2022 but remains restrained, while its capabilities, despite strong economic resources, are limited by military constraints and the absence of nuclear deterrence capabilities. France, in contrast, follows an avant-garde model based on narrow coalitions of willing states, uses non-EU formats as autonomous tools for action and capability-building, and operates with a low activation threshold. It demonstrates a consistently high willingness to lead, supported by robust military capabilities, including nuclear weapons, which enhance its credibility as a European security actor.

Overall, EU security and defence policy emerges as a differentiated and contested trump card, whose effectiveness depends on the

interaction between these two approaches. Germany's model prioritises inclusiveness and legitimacy, whereas France's emphasises effectiveness and strategic autonomy but risks fragmentation. The future development of EU security and defence will therefore depend not on eliminating differentiation, but on whether these divergent approaches can be aligned in a way that allows differentiated forms of cooperation to reinforce, rather than substitute for, EU-level integration.

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