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(Not) Coming of age? Unpacking the European Union's quest for strategic autonomy in security and defence

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ABSTRACT

Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine brought back the debate about the European Union's strategic autonomy ambitions in security and defence. The notion had slipped off the EU's radar following the post-2016 thematic shift in strategic autonomy discussions to global economic interdependencies. Our article contributes to an appraisal of the strategic autonomy debate in security and defence since Russia's full invasion of Ukraine, while also tracing the emergence and revival of the concept over the past 25 years. By unpacking the EU's quest for strategic autonomy as a process of maturation since the late 1990s, we examine the extent to which the EU has grown into an autonomous security and defence actor. We further discuss the implications of maturation for EU security and defence policy. Drawing on 20 semi-structured interviews with policymakers and foreign policy experts in seven member states, our study brings the underexplored aspect of national acceptability of EU external action to the fore. We show that significant progress has been made regarding both ideational and material aspects of EU security and defence policy. Yet, prevailing differences in underlying national beliefs, perceptions and goals about security and defence continue to hamper the Union's further maturation.

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Introduction

In EU foreign policy, old concepts die hard, and strategic autonomy is a prime example. The idea has informed the EU's efforts to grow into a sovereign security actor from the moment then-French President Jacques Chirac and British Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed on the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration, which paved the way for common EU security and defence policies (Ricketts 2017, Howorth 2018). The notion of strategic autonomy kept floating around, without appearing in official EU documents until late 2013, when the EU revived it for the purpose of enhanced security and defence cooperation (European Commission 2013). Upon taking centre stage in the 2016 EU Global Strategy

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(EUGS), where it mostly referred to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), strategic autonomy achieved buzzword status (European External Action Service 2016). The term struck a nerve among many EU actors as it epitomised a shared understanding that the EU would need to think and act more strategically – and as such more autonomously – in response to greater exogenous and endogenous pressures as part of a fragmentation of global and regional orders. Post-2016, a geopoliticisation of the term could be observed. Strategic autonomy became a prominent reference point in EU policy documents in other areas, too, such as trade, finance, competition, energy, climate, agriculture, health or technology (Miró 2023, pp. 317–318). From 2020 onwards, EU actors have been reiterating the EU’s quest for strategic autonomy by adding the “open” qualifier, with close attention to economic aspects (Schmitz and Seidl 2023, p. 846). The 2023 Spanish EU Council Presidency was at the forefront of breathing new life into “open” strategic autonomy, using the concept as a base for the “Resilient EU2030” strategy and calling for greater EU capacity in energy, digital technology, health and food (Spain’s National Office of Foresight and Strategy 2023).

In all of this, one trend has received little attention. Rather than having been *expanded* to global economic concerns (Powell *et al.* 2023), the notion of strategic autonomy experienced a thematic *shift away* from traditional security and defence questions. As one observer put it, this amounted to a “hijacking of the concept, and the EU then lost focus on it” (Interview 16). Letting these themes fade away in the open strategic autonomy discourse, the EU moved on from the decades-long stalemate its members had found themselves in when discussing national preferences for or against greater autonomy in security and defence. Yet this appeared counterintuitive, given shifting priorities in U.S. foreign policy (Howorth 2018, Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2019, Engelbrekt 2022), the decline of American hegemony prompting geopolitical reconfigurations and rivalries (Riddervold and Rosén 2018, Olsen 2022, Poutala *et al.* 2022), an intensification of hybrid security threats (Balcaen *et al.* 2022), and increased instability in the EU’s neighbourhood (Plank and Bergmann 2021, Nitoiu and Simionov 2023). This also seemed unreasonable as the EU and its members had been repeatedly caught off-guard when facing violent conflict with implications for European security. Examples were the Arab uprisings, ISIS’ rise to power, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, or the rapid fall of Kabul. Europeans were criticised for over-reliance on U.S. intelligence and policymaking, causing problematic bystander effects (Meyer *et al.* 2022).

How did the massive exogenous shock of Russia’s full invasion of Ukraine affect this trend? Initially, it seemed that the responses by the EU and its members “cast aside calls for European strategic autonomy” once and for all (Ratti 2023, p. 85). This led to suggestions that EU actors should instead embrace strategic interdependence (Aydıntaşbaş *et al.* 2023). While some experts declared European strategic autonomy in security and defence (hereafter: ESA) dead, others figured it would bounce back, especially if Europeans were willing to discuss the notion more honestly and got rid of ambiguity (Dempsey 2023, Michaels 2023). Calls for such efforts and for Europe’s ability to defend itself have recently been growing louder (Dempsey 2024, Martens-Preiss 2024, Pugnet 2024).

Our article contributes to scholarly investigations of these debates since Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine, while also unpacking the EU’s quest for ESA over time and with special attention to national preferences. In line with the aim of this special issue,

we ask: to what extent has the EU matured into an autonomous security and defence actor, and what are the implications of the (ongoing) maturation process for EU security and defence policy? While we explore the effects of the return of heavy warfare to Europe as a potential trigger for more autonomous EU security and defence action, maturation tends to happen gradually in various stages and nonlinear ways, necessitating a broader temporal evaluation. We therefore trace signs of maturation from the late 1990s to mid-2024. We draw on 20 semi-structured elite interviews¹ with policymakers (mostly from national ministries of foreign affairs and defence) and foreign policy experts in seven selected member states: Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain. Those countries were chosen to ensure variety in size, geographical location with different exposure to crises in the EU's neighbourhood, stances on the Atlanticist-Europeanist spectrum and strategic culture generally, and geopolitical interests. In addition, we evaluate national and EU policy documents as well as the secondary literature on ESA.

This article proceeds as follows. Section two provides an overview of the literature on ESA, including national perspectives. Section three discusses the concepts and theoretical expectations that help trace signs of EU foreign policy maturation. Section four presents the findings of our empirical analysis along two observed phases of maturation: discovery (from 1998 to mid-2013) as well as definition and experimentation (since late 2013). It also discusses the implications of the maturation process for EU security and defence policy. The conclusion links our findings back to the theoretical expectations about maturation and identifies avenues for future research.

Strategic autonomy in security and defence: what's the status quo and what do EU members make of the idea?

A central challenge when approaching strategic autonomy is its semantic ambiguity. While the term "autonomy" was carefully chosen over "independence" during the 1998 Saint-Malo negotiations (Interview 16), EU members have struggled to agree on basic meaning, such as *autonomy from whom* or *for what purpose*? When reviving the concept in late 2013, the EU's institutions kept it deliberately ambiguous (Interview 10). EU members could live with this: paying lip service to a vague concept was acceptable to them but substantiating it and committing to its implementation was, except for France, nothing they could buy into. Despite an abundance of policy-oriented discussions since 2016 (e.g. Biscop 2016, Fiott 2018, Kempin and Kunz 2018, Biscop 2019, Lippert *et al.* 2019, Morgen 2020, Sabatino 2020, Zandee 2020, Fiott *et al.* 2021, Helwig and Sinkkonen 2021, Retter *et al.* 2021, Simón 2022, Dempsey 2023, Michaels 2023, Weber 2023), academic in-depth engagement with ESA has long remained limited (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022). Specifically, more attention could have been paid to how the strategic autonomy debate has evolved since the late 1990s and why the concept gradually shifted away from traditional security concerns post-2016.

Recent scholarship has started exploring whether this latter trend has been reversed or reinforced with Russia's war on Ukraine and what the way ahead might look like (Costa and Barbé 2023, Helwig 2023, Ratti 2023, Juncos and Vanhoonacker 2024, Riddervold and Rieker 2024, Varma 2024). These efforts are linked to an ongoing search for the meaning of the concept (Csernaton 2022, Helwig 2022, 2023, Casolari 2023, Varma

2024, pp. 72–76). Scholars have highlighted that Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine was a reality check about the EU's role in European security and its strategic autonomy ambitions. They propose different explanations of why these ambitions have not materialised in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion. Costa and Barbé (2023, p. 442) investigate the "politics of diminishing [EU] actorness" and highlight the importance of grasping the diversity of EU-internal perspectives. They also show that EU security and defence action is always in flux: claims that the EU tends to fail forward or that its inadequate crisis responses are due to a gap between expectations and capabilities may be too simplistic. After all, EU defence capability development has defied expectations (*ibid*), as in-depth investigated by Fabbrini (2024) and Kleczka *et al.* (2024). Hoffmeister (2023, pp. 686–687) highlights that the EU, rather than NATO, provided the immediate political response to Russia's attack, among others by activating the European Peace Facility (EPF) for member states' military support to Ukraine. Helwig (2023, p. 64) argues that while the shortcomings in EU security and defence policy were obvious, the Union has displayed autonomous agency within the system of transatlantic security and global economic interdependencies, and has been shaping global responses to the war. As such, the EU's security and defence role "is set to become that of a muscled-up junior partner to the United States and NATO" (Helwig 2023, p. 65). Juncos and Vanhoonacker (2024) analyse an endogenous driver of EU policy change in response to exogenous pressures, namely the ideational power that discursive entrepreneurs (here: French policy elites and specifically President Emmanuel Macron) wield and the effect this has. They argue that French elites have been unable to persuade their counterparts in national capitals of the value that ESA could add. They conclude that most EU members are comfortable with NATO overseeing European security but that the strategic autonomy debate is far from over. Others add to normative discussions of why and how the EU should become strategically autonomous (Varma 2024) or why it should push for both better EU-NATO cooperation and deeper European security and defence integration (Ratti 2023).

While we see gaps in the literature and seek to contribute to recent analyses, this should not downplay the emergence of further relevant research along four strands. The first one explores how the EU – at least discursively – embraced strategic autonomy in light of increased global strategic competition and fragmentation of regional and international orders (Biscop 2013; Biscop 2016, Howorth 2017a, 2018, Riddervold and Newsome 2018, Riddervold and Rosén 2018, Smith 2018, Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2019, Deschaux-Dutard 2019, Martill and Sus 2019, Pieper and Lak 2019, Schreer 2019, Casarini 2020, Ringsmose and Webber 2020, Meijer and Brooks 2021, Nielsen and Dimitrova 2021, Cladi 2022, Olsen 2022). This literature centres on the EU's quest for purpose as a security actor considering exogenous and endogenous pressures, such as uncertain transatlantic security relations, especially after the arrival of the Trump administration, US–China rivalry, an increasingly assertive Russia, the Brexit referendum and the rise of populism. Scholars have suggested that the renewed debate about strategic autonomy in security and defence since 2013 was a natural response to these challenges. However, discussions remained speculative, without much attention to the concept's vagueness, and rarely engaged with how EU members beyond France felt about strategic autonomy. A second strand investigates how the phenomenon of EU differentiation affects the reality of EU and transatlantic security and defence cooperation (Howorth 2019, Bunde 2021, Ewers-Peters and Baciu 2022, Rieker 2022, Martill and Gebhard 2023,

Rieker and Giske 2024). Authors have explored differentiation as a potentially helpful mechanism for achieving greater strategic autonomy, as it brings flexibility and accounts for the accommodation of divergent national preferences concerning security and defence integration. At the same time, studies have demonstrated that differentiation can also increase the fragmentation of EU security and defence policy, undermining strategic autonomy. Third, studies unpacking the EU's struggles to act strategically as a security provider (Simón 2012, Cottey 2020, Meijer and Brooks 2021, Della Sala 2023) or the competing logics of CSDP (Duke 2019) have added value to our understandings of the limitations of strategic autonomy. Scholars have highlighted the EU's shortcomings and have argued that the EU has become increasingly irrelevant as a global security actor due to insufficient adaptation to changed geopolitical realities and difficulties in modifying and prioritising policy objectives, which results from strategic cacophony across EU members. A fourth strand discusses how EU members and third states have responded to the EU's quest for ESA. We situate our paper within this final strand, which has often focused on single cases (Knutsen and Tvetbråten 2022, Lundmark 2022) or two-case comparisons (Deschoux-Dutard 2022; Huntley 2022) but has also seen comparisons of three or more countries (Česnakas and Juozaitis 2023), including by think tanks (Franke and Varma 2019, Zandee *et al.* 2020, pp. 33–44, Helwig and Jokela 2021, Lewander *et al.* 2021). This literature includes extrospection (U.S. and UK approaches towards ESA; e.g. Billon-Galland *et al.* 2022, Deni 2022, Jakštaitė-Confortola 2023) and much-needed attention to how smaller EU members (Baltic and Nordic states, Belgium, Netherlands, Hungary, Czechia, Greece) approach the concept in comparison to bigger ones (Germany, France, Poland, Italy).

While insightful, these different research strands tend to be too focused on the status quo regarding ESA at certain points in time. We seek to shed more light on how the debate has evolved and how the EU has grown over the past 25 years, and how this has affected the development of EU security and defence policy. We do so by bringing in diverse national perspectives. This includes two EU members (Spain and Ireland) whose understandings of ESA have received less attention and who have either radically adapted national debates on European and international security following Russia's attack on Ukraine (Cottey 2023) or been centrally involved in shaping recent EU security and defence priorities (La Moncloa 2023, Fiott 2023b). It would have been relevant, too, to include the UK as a previous EU member that was involved in the emergence of ESA. Yet, London has been less engaged in debates since 2013 and we here prioritise learning more about current member state perspectives, which can feed into discussions of how to align ESA with the strategic interests of third states.

Framework for tracing the EU's maturation as a security and defence actor

In line with the research aim of this special issue, we contribute to discussions of how, if at all, Russia's war on Ukraine prompted a "coming of age" for the EU as a security actor. Whereas the shock has upended the foreign policies of many EU members, and the EU has consequently implemented some relevant changes in CSDP (see Section 4), we have also seen much continuity. For almost a year following the initial attack, EU and international efforts to militarily assist Ukraine hinged on key EU members and their unwillingness to move before the U.S. did. Overall, the EU's response to the war

confirmed that NATO remains in the driver's seat for European security provisions. Yet, this has triggered soul-searching among EU members and has lent urgency to the question of how they want to cooperate on territorial defence (Fiott 2023a, Perot 2024) and the management of external crises (Anghel and Jones 2023) going forward. EU members are preparing for a future in which – among many imponderables – Donald Trump may return to the U.S. presidency, which could alter the centrality of the U.S. in NATO and European security. While some speculate that such a development could push Germany to support greater strategic autonomy in security and defence so that the idea would gain ground among more EU members (Interview 15), we know relatively little about national (elite) preferences for EU security and defence cooperation, and specifically ESA, and how these have changed after February 2022.²

Drawing on the conceptual framework of this special issue, we unpack the EU's quest for ESA as a process of maturation and explore the implications of (partial/non) maturation for the EU's capacity as a security and defence actor. We are guided by the proposition that maturation occurs in different stages and is non-linear. As such, we may see signs of regression. The theoretical expectation is that the EU has matured into a serious (i.e. "prominent, respectable and recognised"; see Maurer *et al.* 2024) security and defence actor upon showing high reflexivity, adjusting to changed realities and seeking to impact its environment according to its own identity and worldview. This final stage of maturation would imply that the EU is drawing on past experiences when dealing effectively and resiliently with security and defence issues.

We link discussions of EU policy maturation to theoretical propositions about the national acceptability of EU external action (Michaels and Kissack 2021), adding to emerging research on how acceptable EU security and defence policy measures are to its member states (Angelucci and Isernia 2020, Isernia *et al.* 2022, Fernández *et al.* 2023, Kissack *et al.* 2024). While we cannot investigate this systematically for all relevant domestic actors (decision-makers, foreign policy bureaucrats, parliamentarians and the public), we pay attention to broader national concerns and aspirations that remain relatively unaffected by EU socialisation in Brussels and highlight policymakers' priorities. We can only provide a snapshot of national preferences in a limited number of countries. However, we believe that due to the variation in the countries analysed, our study is sufficiently representative of the "mood music" across EU member states and that this helps explain setbacks and progress in the ESA debate. We have asked our interviewees to elaborate on shared political beliefs and (more context-specific) perceptions as well as resulting political goals and red lines that affect the national acceptability of strategic autonomy in security and defence. Gaining a better understanding of those idiosyncrasies helps us to explain why the EU has struggled to grow into a security and defence actor who is able to think and act autonomously and to discuss the implications. In our view, such a combined theoretical approach – unpacking different stages of maturation and exploring what was acceptable to selected EU members at certain points of time – allows for a more nuanced investigation of qualitative changes in the EU's capacity as a security and defence actor than the proposition that exogenous shocks lead to real turning points in EU security and defence action (e.g. Koppa 2022). The EU as a security community tends to defy the expectation of the "critical junctures" literature. We zoom in more on national dynamics rather than just focusing on institutional developments in Brussels. Our emphasis on acceptability and maturation complements conceptual

approaches that suggest shifting attention from negative understandings of strategic autonomy (decoupling – *autonomy from*) to positive ones (enhance capacity – *autonomy to*) (Helwig 2023, pp. 57–58). By investigating which ideas about ESA EU members find acceptable or not, we can discuss the implications for how the EU seeks to strengthen its capacity and manage its relationships/interdependencies with the U.S., NATO and others. This also complements Ratti's (2023, pp. 82–85) approach to ESA.

We distinguish between two phases of the ESA-SD debate, the first one (more passive/introvert discovery, observation, and reflection) which ran from late 1998 to mid-2013, and the second one (identity formation, definition of the way ahead, and experimentation) which has been ongoing since late 2013. The first phase was dominated by an evaluation of the EU's actorness on the international scene and reflection about other global players shaping EU foreign policy (e.g. discussions of U.S. military presence in Europe). During this time, the EU's institutions and member states focused on discovering and debating the EU's potential and limitations as an autonomous security actor. From late 2013 onwards when increasingly facing geopolitical turbulences at its doorstep, the EU emphasised the need to become a more capable geopolitical power. The adoption of European Council conclusions on defence in December 2013 heralded the beginning of the second phase of the maturation process. ESA as an expression of, prominently French, ideas about reformulating EU policy started being discussed in EU institutions and national security communities. We follow Michaels' and Kissack's (2021, p. 14) conceptualisation of ideas in response to proposed EU policy measures as political *beliefs* (mental state of conviction), context-specific *perceptions* (viewing/understanding after processing information), and political *goals* (desired policy outcomes). All three factors determine whether EU policy measures are acceptable in national capitals or not (Michaels and Kissack 2021, p. 13). Until now, the EU has not yet reached the third phase of maturation, which would imply impacting its environment. However, we see changes during the second phase following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. While this did not serve as a catalyst to reach the third phase of maturation as an autonomous security and defence actor, it prompted a rethinking of security and defence cooperation across member states. The second phase will therefore be sub-divided into maturation occurring prior and post 24 February 2022. We argue that full maturation has not materialised due to a lack of EU-wide acceptability for an understanding of ESA that would involve a more serious security and defence role in which the EU would seek to shape its environment and learn from past experiences. Such maturation can only occur if most EU members converge in their respective beliefs, perceptions and goals. This could inform a shared identity and worldview in response to changed realities and facilitate the adoption of more ambitious policy measures.

Towards greater EU autonomy in security and defence? From baby steps to more mature leaps

ESA in security and defence prior to 2013

During the first phase of maturation, which tends to be marked by observation and reflection about how the environment shapes one's actorness, the EU discovered the possibility of acting autonomously in security and defence matters. It took its first steps in this regard prompted by Anglo-French agreement at the 1998 Saint-Malo Summit. This was informed

by a French “desire for independence and the concern to guarantee its strategic autonomy, as part of the progressive affirmation of the European project in terms of defense”, as outline in the 1994 French Defence White Paper (Ministère de la défense 1994, p. 139; own translation). This idea informed French beliefs, perceptions and goals, and has remained relatively stable in Paris ever since. Back then, Chirac and Blair shared the vision that the EU “must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, to respond to international crises” (Blair and Chriac 1998). This implied an ideational shift, specifically for the UK, as for the better part of the 1990s an autonomous role for the EU in international security had been “virtually unthinkable” (Howorth 2017b, p. 343). CSDP³ as a project took off as other EU leaders also agreed that the EU would need to learn to think and act autonomously in security matters – given the experience of the Balkan wars, changing US foreign policy priorities, NATO’s post-Cold War soul-searching and calls by the US that Europe would need to come of age as a security provider (Biscop 2013). Further, EU leaders faced the pressing question of whether to renew the treaty base for the largely dormant Western European Union and/or whether to strengthen the European element within NATO (Howorth 2017b, pp. 343–348).

These early years of observation and discovery included discussions of how CSDP should become operational. Decisions on this were mostly shaped by the EU’s external environment. After Turkey had lifted its opposition to CSDP and the possibility of EU-NATO cooperation, the Berlin Plus arrangements were adopted in 2002 (Howorth 2017b, p. 349). Yet the suggestion that the EU would have access to NATO planning, assets and capabilities as well as the unwritten rules of Berlin Plus (e.g. NATO’s “right of first refusal”) proved impracticable. Chirac and Blair fine-tuned their commitment to CSDP, as informed by ESA, in early 2003. They converged in their assessment of how the EU should help manage external crises – “including through EU autonomous operations, in close cooperation with the United Nations” – and that the geographical focus should be on Africa (Blair and Chirac 2003). The notion of autonomy was not formally anchored in EU documents on security and defence during this first phase. But it shaped – through the Anglo-French consensus – the launch of the EU’s second (and first overseas) military intervention (Operation *Artemis* in the DR Congo) in 2003 as well as subsequent deployments. From a French perspective, *Artemis* was seen as an opportunity to achieve emancipation from NATO and Paris garnered sufficient political support for such a move. While autonomy in EU crisis management was adopted as a blueprint afterwards, this was not translated into specific guidance on what strategic autonomy in CSDP missions and operations should entail.

These developments were paralleled by new formal objectives for the development of military and civilian capabilities that would underpin the EU’s role as an autonomous security actor. These included the 1999 Helsinki Headline Goal, a force catalogue which envisaged the possibility of deploying up to 60,000 troops and other key capabilities at 60-day notice and to sustain them for a year. While this was never formally abandoned, it soon became an unrealistic scenario. From 2004 onwards, when capability development was overseen by the newly created European Defence Agency (EDA), the EU focused its efforts on the Headline Goal 2010 and the EU Battlegroup concept as a key element. The latter was again based on an Anglo-French initiative and the experience of Operation *Artemis*. However, while the Battlegroups became a tool for capability development, member states never agreed to use

them. Overall, the EU struggled to recover from the internal rift over the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which hampered the EDA's efforts to boost capability development (Bátora 2009, pp. 1091–1093) and the Union's ESA ambitions towards greater strategic autonomy (Howorth 2005).

The Franco-British consensus grew weaker in the mid-2000s when CSDP became increasingly leaderless (Menon 2008). While ESA stayed around as a vague *leitmotif* and CSDP was developed further, enthusiasm for EU security and defence cooperation waned. In 2007, the EU established the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC), which has since overseen all civilian operations, and adopted the Civilian Headline Goal 2010. Similar progress was not possible regarding military operational planning as the UK vetoed initiatives for the establishment of an Operational Headquarters (Howorth 2017b, p. 358). The 2003 European Security Strategy, which made – apart from a vague reference to the “decision-making autonomy” of EU and NATO (Council of the European Union 2003, p. 24) – no mention of strategic autonomy, received an (unimpressive) update in 2008. This included the truism that for the EU to realise its full potential, it needs to be “still more capable, more coherent and more active” (Council of the European Union 2008b, p. 2). Further targets for capability development were adopted, for instance in a 2008 declaration, in which the EU held on to past Headline Goals and identified capability development for crisis management as a “principal challenge ... in a tough budgetary environment ... , [which] can only be achieved through a joint, sustained and shared effort” (Council of the European Union 2008a). The 2009 Lisbon Treaty introduced the possibility of “Permanent Structured Cooperation” (PESCO) for “[t]hose Member States whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions” in order to establish closer military cooperation within the EU framework (European Union 2012 Article 42(6)). Yet none of these initiatives got the EU closer to meeting its level of ambition for autonomous crisis management during these years. Rather than defining ESA in security and defence and experimenting with it, the notion slipped off the EU's radar. Overall, EU reflections during this phase revolved around how the environment was shaping the EU as an emerging security and defence actor, rather than vice versa.

European security is back on the agenda: 2013–2023

The intense struggle to cope with the economic and financial crisis had diverted the EU's attention from security and defence issues, but the situation changed in 2013. The deterioration of the Union's security environment put security and defence policy back on its agenda. The progress that followed leads us to argue that the second phase of maturation – marked by identity formation and experimentation – began in 2013. Initially, this phase was dominated by a prevailing lack of consensus about the concept of ESA, against which, however, a gradual development of EU security and defence policy, both ideational and material, took place (see also: contribution to this special issue). A key moment in this phase was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which accelerated the Union's efforts to strengthen its defence capabilities and fostered awareness of the limits of its strategic autonomy ambitions. Consequently, we have structured the following analysis into two parts, with the start of the war in Ukraine as a turning point.

A “security momentum” despite persistent national differences. The adoption of a broad range of security and defence – related conclusions by the European Council in December 2013 heralded the second phase of the EU’s maturation process as an autonomous security and defence actor (European Council 2013). Acknowledging previous attempts to consolidate and boost European defence industries (European Parliament and of the Council 2009), the 2013 summit called for intensified action in three areas: increasing the effectiveness, visibility and impact of CSDP, enhancing the development of capabilities, and strengthening Europe’s defence industry. From then onwards, heads of state and governments repeatedly called for advancements in EU security and defence (Council of the European Union 2015, European Council 2015), and EU foreign ministers emphasised that “the Council is more than ever committed to further strengthening CSDP and enhancing the EU’s ability to act as a security provider” (Council of the European Union 2015). Since then, the idea of ESA, defined by the European Commission as the EU’s ability to “assume its responsibilities for its own security and for international peace and stability in general” and to “decide and to act without depending on the capabilities of third parties” (European Commission 2013), has been prevalent. Member states were relatively comfortable with that due to the vagueness of the concept, which allowed them to pay lip service to the notion regardless of where they stood on the Atlanticist-Europeanist spectrum. Even Ireland as a neutral state was willing to support this. “Ireland has kept its toe in the water of these debates at official level but has never actually jumped in and stopped to make any meaningful contribution to the debates”; allowing it to “hide quite effectively without having to jump on either side (of the Atlanticist or Europeanist camp)” (Interview 16). As such, elite discussions on European strategic autonomy in security and defence never intersected with broader public debates on Irish security, including recent ones (Interviews, 12, 16, 20).

In the following years, European strategic autonomy and related concepts such as “geopolitical Europe” have been widely discussed in policy circles (Interviews 02, 08, von der Leyen 2019, Borrell 2020). Similar concepts, such as “open strategic autonomy”, “strategic sovereignty”, “capacity to act” and “resilience” became increasingly prominent, too (Damen 2022, p. 1). The cacophony of these various terms made the notion of ESA-SD increasingly blurred (Koenig 2020). Further, the concept has been divisive among member states, who either interpreted it according to their own interests or ignored it altogether. The main cause of discord was whether strategic autonomy “amounts to hedging against the prospect of US withdrawal, a necessary reinforcement [of the Western alliance] or even an emancipation from dependence upon a fickle United States” (Tonra 2021, p. 11). A handful of member states (with France at the forefront) saw strategic autonomy as a long-term goal of independence from the U.S. and as the only effective response to the external pressures facing the EU (Interview 03, 04 and 11). Yet, other member states were less keen to breathe life into an idea defined with the goal to de-couple from the U.S. (Interviews 02, 06, 09, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20). The election of Donald Trump as U.S. president and the cracks in U.S. transatlantic commitments did not lead to a substantial convergence of positions on strategic autonomy. Particularly for countries on NATO’s eastern flank, the U.S. remained an essential partner with which it shared a common threat perception of Russia (Interviews 08, 09, 10). This is why, despite serious setbacks in transatlantic relations during Trump’s presidency (Aggestam and

Hyde-Price 2019), these countries still perceived the U.S. as their key ally, in particular in light of different threat perceptions vis-à-vis Russia among various EU countries, most notably Germany.

However, despite differences in the understanding and level of acceptance of ESA in member states, the maturation of EU security and defence policy has significantly progressed since 2013 (cross-reference to other papers in the special issue). It occurred on two levels: the ideational, embodied by strategic reflection, and the material, captured by the strengthening of defence capabilities. The process of strategic reflection and adjustment to the EU's changing geopolitical environment manifested itself in the adoption of two foreign policy and security strategies: the EUGS in June 2016 (European External Action Service 2016, see also Sus 2021) and the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence in March 2022 (European External Action Service 2022, see also Sus 2024b). In addition, a number of further strategic documents have been adopted on various aspects of EU security and defence (Mogherini and Katainen 2017, European Parliament 2019) as well as on EU-NATO cooperation (NATO 2016, 2023). In these documents, and specifically in the Strategic Compass, which is the most detailed yet the most operational security strategy document the EU has ever had, member states have made significant progress in defining their ambitions and instruments in security and defence policy.

This progress at the strategic reflection level has been translated to the material level and experts mention "a security momentum" (European Parliament 2019), in particular for the post-2016 period. The rapid development of several new security instruments started with the adoption of the Implementation Plan on Security and Defence (Council of the European Union 2016) and made EU security and defence policy the fastest-growing field of European cooperation (Moser and Blockmans 2022, p. 1). Various instruments were introduced at the time that have paved the way for the enhancement of EU defence capabilities. The European Defence Fund (EDF) and Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) improved defence-industrial cooperation. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) enhanced interoperability among member states in the various areas of defence and security, and the European Peace Facility (EPF) provided a funding mechanism for EU actions with military and defence implications (see also Sus 2019). Nonetheless, until February 2022 implementation of these instruments was rather cumbersome. Differences prevailed among member states regarding the EU's long-term security and defence objectives, with one of the main challenges being insufficient national defence funding combined with a reluctance to increase the EU budget. This is why, notwithstanding continuing debates since 2013, strategic autonomy has remained an aspiration rather than a political reality.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a watershed moment for strategic autonomy?

Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine shook the European security architecture by bringing war back to Europe. It is therefore not surprising that it has significantly affected the EU's maturation, by accelerating progress in the development and use of EU security and defence capabilities.

The war intensified the debate on ESA in security and defence, especially in terms of evaluating the national perspectives of EU member states. Such an assessment is not straightforward, since there has never been a common understanding of what ESA is

or what it should become (Interviews 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19). The war has highlighted two patterns. Firstly, from the perspective of Central and Northern Europe, Russia's full-scale aggression has shown that strategic autonomy, defined as an aspiration to become independent from the U.S., is illusory and detrimental to European security (Interviews 01, 02, 06, 07, 09, 10, 11). Secondly, while French perspectives have shifted towards recognising a more prominent role for NATO and the U.S. in providing European security in the short term (Interviews 03, 09), the mid – and long-term goal – emancipation from Washington – has not changed (Interviews 03, 04, 05). This preference is also shared by some members of the German defence establishment (Interview 13).

Despite opposing views, there is some agreement about the impact of the war on European strategic autonomy. First, various interviewees argue that the EU has become less dogmatic and more pragmatic (Interviews 01, 12, 13, 16), as it talks less about its strategic autonomy but has started to do more (Interviews 03, 07, 09, 11). Other observers disagree, especially in Spain, where threat perceptions of and historical ties to Russia differ significantly from those of Central and Northern European states (Interviews 14, 15). As one expert put it, while – perhaps paradoxically – acknowledging that the EU needs to avoid free-riding, Madrid does not perceive the need for the EU to breathe new life into the notion of strategic autonomy in security and defence (Interview 19). Other Spanish experts agree that the political elite remains relatively indifferent vis-à-vis the idea of greater ESA (Interviews 14, 15): the broad national consensus is that the EU should not turn away from the U.S. and NATO (Interviews 15, 19).

After February 2022, many of tools have been further developed, enhancing the EU's security and defence capabilities. A prime example is the European Peace Facility, which has overnight been transformed from a conflict prevention tool to a powerful instrument at the EU's disposal, by enabling member states to provide Ukraine with lethal weapons (Bilquin 2022; Interviews 01, 02, 03, 08, 10, 11). Significant progress has also been made in joint defence procurement. A number of new mechanisms fostering EU industrial cooperation were launched (Briane 2022), with the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) being the most tangible example (Interviews 01, 02, 03, 08, 10, 11). Yet, many interviewees have underlined the importance of national decisions to increase defence spending and perceived it as critical for the advancement of EU's security and defence capabilities (Interviews 01, 09, 10, 17).

Further, the war has changed perceptions about the way in which the U.S. perceives EU security and defence integration and EU-NATO dynamics. The U.S. administration has started recognising the contributions that Europeans, through both national and EU instruments, are providing to the defence of Ukraine (Interviews 1, 17). A certain division of labour between the EU and NATO has emerged, indicating a complementarity between their operations and the perception that strengthening EU defence capabilities enhances the European pillar of NATO (Interviews 01, 02, 08, 09, 10, 13). However, despite an existing network of institutionalised mechanisms, EU-NATO cooperation still largely relies on informal contacts and ad-hoc formats due to the Turkey-Cyprus stalemate (Interviews 17, 18, Sus 2024a). Yet, considering U.S. and NATO military support for Ukraine, EU-NATO cooperation feeds into the evolving perspective of EU members towards ESA based on complementarity (Interviews 9, 13, 15, 19). This complementarity is also due to economic considerations: increased defence spending puts a strain on member states' budgets and, to be effective, it must be channelled into a core defence structure (Interviews 02, 08, 18).

As NATO provides a stronger (also due to the presence of the UK and Norway) and more established framework for defence planning than the EU, it constitutes the preferred arena for the advancement of European defence capabilities (Interviews 08, 10, 13, 17). Increased support for NATO and the perception of the EU as complementary is particularly evident in Germany (Interviews 02, 03, 13). The political elites of the main governing parties have been trying to restore Berlin's credibility as a reliable ally in the eyes of the Eastern Flank countries and the U.S. by increasing defence spending and sending a German battalion to Lithuania (Interviews 01, 02, 07, see also Mello 2024). In Ireland, however, there is anxiety about greater EU-NATO cooperation and any reference to NATO should preferably be matched by a reference to the UN. Yet, Dublin shows a greater willingness to talk if this is based on cooperative structures and entails "nothing legal". It is also worth noting that the Irish "triple lock" (stipulating UNSC authorisation for the deployment of Irish troops on peacekeeping missions overseas) is not just under review but policymakers are pressing for legal changes to remove this (Interviews 16, 20). There are clear red lines for some EU members – including Ireland and Spain – when it comes to potential elements of ESA (e.g. European nuclear deterrent)⁴, but there is substantial support for other aspects, such as cooperation on cyber security and hybrid warfare, among the most reticent members (Interviews 12, 15, 16, 20).

Despite the visible alignment of interests between member states and material changes implemented within EU security and defence, there is insufficient consensus about the long-term goal of ESA (Interviews 01, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20), and specifically what role the U.S. should play in European security (Interviews 05, 16, Helwig 2023). The strategic cultures and threat perceptions among the EU27 continue to differ, and this has not fundamentally changed with the war (Interviews 01, 03, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20). France remains most interested in the long-term goal of independence from the U.S. (Interview 03, see also Juncos and Vanhoonacker 2024), to the disagreement of many member states on NATO's Eastern Flank (Interviews 02, 06, 08, 09, 10). Those countries, particularly the small ones, think that Europe will in the mid-term only be able to defend itself against Russia in cooperation with the U.S. (Interview 06). Countries such as Spain, Germany, Finland and increasingly also Poland (Sikorski 2024) do not seek independence from the U.S., but see the urgent need to increase the EU's capabilities, given the possible divergence of European and U.S. interests regarding China or the Indo-Pacific.

The apparent lack of consensus among the EU27 about a coherent vision for the EU as a security and defence actor shows that the final phase of maturation – the active attempt to shape one's environment according to one's identity – has not yet materialised. It remains a key question whether another external shock – such as a potential victory of Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. presidential election – will further push EU members to buy into a more coherent outward-facing approach to security and defence. The question of the scope of ESA in security and defence will be central in such a process and the debate will continue (Interviews 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20).

Conclusion

By conceptualising the EU's quest for strategic autonomy as a process of maturation, we explored the extent to which the EU has grown into an autonomous security and defence actor over the past 25 years. In addition to tracing the emergence and revival of the

notion of ESA in security and defence since the late 1990s and discussing why it has not taken off despite various attempts, we took a first stab at exploring how debates have changed since the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine and which options are currently on the table. We also discussed the implications of maturation for EU security and defence policy. By zooming in on national perspectives on ESA in seven EU member states, we contributed to emerging research on the national acceptability of EU security and defence policy.

We highlight three main findings. Firstly, on a conceptual level, we found that while the conceptualisation of maturation along the three phases (see Maurer *et al.* 2024) is helpful, maturation needs to be unpacked as a non-linear process. When chronologically tracing developments during the first phase of maturation, we observed characteristics that the editors of this special issue assigned to the second phase of maturation: between the late 1990s and mid-2013, the EU was also gradually finding its own way and experimenting with the design of its crisis management operations. ESA should be seen as a dynamic and malleable process rather than an endgame.

Secondly, we suggest that maturation, conceptualised as progress towards thinking and acting autonomously in security and defence matters with a view to impacting one's environment, has been hampered by national differences in political beliefs, perceptions and goals. EU members – and not just the most reticent ones – have long been partially indifferent to the idea of ESA. While the EU as a security community tends to defy theoretical expectations, we found that the notion of acceptability of EU policy measures and the concept of maturation allow for a nuanced exploration of progress and regression in EU security and defence cooperation. We only provided a snapshot of national perspectives as we lacked the space to unpack this in detail, but we believe that our approach is well suited for in-depth research on national approaches.

Thirdly, we demonstrate that despite prevailing national differences and the fact that the EU has not yet reached the third stage of maturation in ESA, significant progress has been made regarding both ideational and material aspects of EU security and defence policy. The EU is now confronted with the need to build upon this incremental progress and to decide whether and how it wants to move on from predominantly theoretical debates. According to our findings, the EU is slowly gaining confidence in terms of what ESA-SD means, where its limitations are, and how to put the concept into practice.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has gradually grown into a more capable security and defence actor, as illustrated by the breaking of the taboo to export lethal weapons to conflict regions. The EU's institutions and its members also seem more aware of the EU's limitations as a security and defence actor than they were in the 1990s. There appears to be less naivety and more pragmatism, particularly regarding NATO (Sus 2024a). Member states realised that the EU's comparative advantage over NATO lies in its budgetary instruments and industrial policy (see also Haroche 2023, p. 3). But member states also recognise the advantage that the Alliance brings – a highly developed framework for military cooperation – and seem committed to strengthening the European pillar within NATO. It is too early to tell how sustainable these perceptions are, specifically considering a potential Trump victory and consequences for EU-NATO relations. It also remains to be addressed in future research whether there is a prevailing consensus among member states that budgetary instruments and defence industrial cooperation should form the core of European strategic autonomy.

Notes

1. For a list of interviews and our questionnaire, see Appendices 1 and 2.
2. For recent research on public opinion, see, Fernández (2023); Mader (2024); Mader *et al.* (2024).
3. While this was called “European Security and Defence Policy” back then, the current term and acronym are used in this paper to avoid confusion.
4. For a discussion of Spain’s ‘nuclear exceptionalism’ and reluctance to contribute to European discussions of nuclear deterrence, see Portela (2014, 2021). For recent German discussions about alternative nuclear protection, see Rühle (2024). For a commentary on European nuclear deterrence in the Irish Press, see Lindstaedt (2024).

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Appendices

Appendix 1. List of interviews

- Interview 01 with German senior policy official, 20.09.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 02 with German senior policy expert, 4.10.2023.
- Interview 03 with French senior policy expert, 4.10.2023.
- Interview 04 with French senior policy expert, 4.10.2023.
- Interview 05 with French senior policy expert, 4.10.2023.
- Interview 06 with Polish senior policy expert, 4.10.2023.
- Interview 07 with German senior policy expert, 3.11.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 08 with Polish senior policy expert, 3.11.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 09 with Estonian senior policy expert, 10.11.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 10 with Finnish senior policy expert, 14.11.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 11 with Polish senior policy official, 16.11.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 12 with Irish senior policy expert, 23.11.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 13 with German senior policy official, 24.11.2023 (phone).
- Interview 14 with Spanish senior policy expert, 28.11.2023.
- Interview 15 with Spanish senior policy expert, 28.11.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 16 with Irish senior policy expert, 28.11.2023 (zoom).
- Interview 17 with Finnish senior policy official, 30.11.2023.
- Interview 18 with Polish senior policy official, 30.11.2023.
- Interview 19 with Spanish senior policy expert, 2.12.2023 (email).

Interview 20 with Irish senior policy expert, 5.12.2023 (zoom).

Appendix 2. Questionnaire for interviews

1. General understanding of ESA in security and defence

- How is the concept traditionally understood in your country? (e.g. autonomous from whom/ what/for what purpose?)
- Is there a consensus in your country on how the concept is generally understood?

2. Specific building blocks or elements constituting this concept

- What should ESA in security and defence ideally include, according to your country? (various elements to be included or left out: conventional deterrence, cybersecurity capabilities, hybrid warfare, nuclear deterrence, joint procurement of weapons and ammunition, etc.)

3. The support for ESA and its respective elements

- What does your country support out of these elements and why?
- What are the red lines for your country and why?
- What are domestic differences regarding the support of ESA, if any (e.g. between political parties or government agencies)?

4. Recent development of ESA and the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine

- How has the overall debate on ESA since 2016 been perceived in your country? To what extent has Russia's war on Ukraine changed perceptions of ESA in your country and why?
- Have there been any other recent developments that have contributed to a rethink about ESA in your country?

5. ESA's failure to take off

- Why has it in your view been so difficult for the EU to grow into a security and defence actor who is able to think and act autonomously, despite obvious pressures? What role did capability shortfalls play?

6. How could ESA be fixed, so that the EU could become a more mature security & defence actor?

- What should be the next steps of the EU in order to push for ESA and achieve its ambitions? Does the EU first need to take a step back, perhaps to address the concept once again? Or are other preliminary steps needed, such as trust-building among Europeans?
- Or should ESA not be fixed and should the way forward in EU security and defence be a different one?