

Article

A Weakening Transatlantic Relationship? Redefining the EU–US Security and Defence Cooperation

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss how a weakening transatlantic relationship influences European defence cooperation and integration. It also asks how these observed patterns of weakening EU–US relations can be explained and what the consequences might be for the EU’s efforts to build a stronger and more coherent security and defence policy. Building upon a “comprehensive neo-functionalism” approach first coined by the Norwegian scholar Martin Sæter, European security and defence policy should be seen as part of an externalisation of EU integration as a response to weakening transatlantic relations. The debate on European “strategic autonomy,” the Strategic Compass, and the European “defence package” should therefore be considered as part of such an externalisation process of actively influencing and reshaping the transatlantic relationship. When analysing European security and defence, the article also shows that it is misleading to regard European integration as something to be subordinated to NATO. Nevertheless, a European security deficit does exist due to differing perspectives among member states on how the EU process should relate to NATO. The article, therefore, concludes that strategic autonomy can only be developed with close EU–NATO cooperation. Furthermore, a more multipolar world order where the EU no longer can rely upon a transatlantic security community to the same extent as before challenges the EU’s role as a defender of multilateralism and poses new challenges to the EU’s common foreign and security policy.

Keywords

EU defence package; EU Strategic Compass; European Union; NATO; neo-functionalism; security deficit; strategic autonomy; transatlantic relations; United States foreign policy

Issue

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1. Introduction

The hasty military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 was not only tragic for the Afghan population (Reuters, 2021). It was also a sign of a weakening transatlantic relationship and demonstrated the US’s declining international leadership (Melby, 2017a; Puglierin, 2021; Varma, 2021; for an alternative view see Olsen, 2022). This development, which has been ongoing for several years already, affects the workings of the two Euro–Atlantic institutions, the EU and NATO, as well as the relationship between them (Biscop,

2020; Riddervold & Newsome, 2022; Warrell et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the unprecedented Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 represents an attack, not only on Ukraine and its 44 million inhabitants but also on the European security order as a whole. At the time of writing (March 2022), it is far too early to tell what the long-term consequences of this attack will be for European security and defence integration and transatlantic relations. It will most definitely constitute a recast of the European security order whose consequences are, for now, hard to predict. In this article, I will therefore discuss how a weakening transatlantic

relationship up until the events on 24 February 2022 influences European defence cooperation and integration. I also examine how these observed patterns of weakening EU–US relations can be explained and what the consequences will be for the EU’s efforts to build a stronger and more coherent security and defence policy. Hence, the main question of this article is how the EU’s efforts to build “strategic autonomy” can be understood empirically by analysing the debates and policy developments in the so-called European “defence package.” This package consists of a series of measures to enhance European defence capabilities and efficiency. It includes a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and a European Defence Fund (EDF) of eight billion euros during the timespan from 2021 to 2027. In addition to the defence package, EU leaders are also elaborating on a Strategic Compass to be finalised during the French EU presidency in 2022. The aim is to set a common strategic vision for EU security and defence (European Union, 2021a) whose goals are to operationalise the EU’s strategic autonomy and “to refine the EU’s level of ambition, and to better link the EU’s strategic, operational and capability needs” (European Union, 2021b).

This article argues that the weakening transatlantic relationship leads to a European “security deficit.” Such a deficit implies that the EU and its member states will not be able to fill the gap that US leadership in European security traditionally has provided for within the NATO framework. This security deficit will also challenge the EU’s role as a defender of multilateralism and pose new challenges to the Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). To account for this widening transatlantic gap and the growing security deficit, we need a theoretical toolkit that explains the widening transatlantic gap’s influence on European defence integration and cooperation. In fact, developments in transatlantic relations are a particularly important factor in understanding the evolution of EU defence integration and cooperation. Unfortunately, the European integration literature has often had a narrow approach and focused on internal EU processes. This applies to studies taking an institutionalist approach in the form of studies on European governance approaches, as well as integration theories such as neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism (Wiener et al., 2018).

By building my arguments on Sæter’s (1998) approach to comprehensive neo-functionalism, it will be possible to overcome these tendencies to narrow-mindedness seen in the literature. The main reason is that such an approach that builds upon Ernst B. Haas’ book *Beyond the Nation-State* (1964) spans the “whole spectrum of actor interests, power relationships, modes of action and response, and forms of institutionalisation” (Sæter, 1998, p. 52). With the help of this comprehensive neo-functionalist approach, we can then analyse how the elaboration of European security and defence policies is part of an EU externalisation process.

By developing the EU’s ability to act within the security and defence field, the EU will actively seek to influence its international environment, including the changing nature of the transatlantic relationship. Based on such an analytical framework, “on actively influencing and reshaping the international environment” (Sæter, 1998, p. 38), I conclude that only a stronger EU–NATO relationship can be the basis for European strategic autonomy. Such a close relationship between these two institutions is a necessary condition for mitigating the negative consequences of the weakening transatlantic relationship. A closer EU–NATO relationship also implies a corresponding Europeanisation of NATO where the Europeans take on more responsibility for their own security. Nevertheless, even though initiatives such as the defence package and a Strategic Compass are steps in the right direction to enhance the EU’s role as an international actor, there is still a “discontinuity challenge” in European integration, causing the aforementioned security deficit. Disagreements between France and Germany on the elaboration of the EU’s strategic autonomy cause this discontinuity challenge. In fact, a common Franco-German vision on European security and defence is not yet visible (Kunz, 2019).

The arguments are organised in the following manner. First, I elaborate on the theory of comprehensive neo-functionalism and explain how such a broad approach can explain EU efforts to enhance the Union’s security and defence policy, especially during times when the transatlantic relationship is weakening. Second, I discuss the changing nature of the transatlantic relationship, emphasising altered US foreign policies and their consequences for Europe. Such an analysis is important since it affects the EU’s efforts to build a stronger and more coherent security and defence policy. In the last part, I elaborate on the European defence package and the work on the Strategic Compass to enhance the EU’s ability as a security and defence actor. Due to the discontinuity challenge in European integration, I conclude that stronger EU–NATO cooperation and a corresponding Europeanisation of NATO is the only realistic way for the EU to achieve strategic autonomy.

2. “Comprehensive Neo-Functionalism” as a Framework for Analysing Transatlantic Security and Defence Relations

The Norwegian scholar Martin Sæter’s interpretation of neo-functionalism as a tool for analysing European integration is still very fruitful (Sæter, 1998). It builds upon the works of Ernst B. Haas, the founder of this school. Unlike other scholars who build their analyses on Haas’ book *The Uniting of Europe* (1958/2004), Sæter applies Haas’ *Beyond the Nation-State* (1964) as a theoretical background to build his arguments. By doing so, he avoids the shortcomings of neo-functionalism, namely its normativism and determinism (Sæter, 1998, p. 17). Traditional neo-functionalism understands integration as

spillover processes through an expansive logic of sector integration, meaning that integration in one sector is likely to trigger integration in others (Niemann et al., 2018, p. 49). Hence, integration in this form implies a gradual transfer of loyalty from the national to the supranational level. This would, according to Haas, lead to a federation governed by the supranational institutions established by the Treaty of Rome (Haas, 1958/2004, pp. 34–35). According to this view, there is no conflict between supranationality and intergovernmental forms for cooperation. Therefore, the main criticisms against neo-functionalism have been its underestimation of the significance of national sovereignty and nationalism as barriers to the integration process itself (Niemann et al., 2018, p. 50). This has traditionally been the view of the intergovernmental school that emphasises national interests, including within the sphere of security and defence (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2018).

What Sæter (1998, p. 13) does is analyse EU integration as “system-transformation depending on the convergence and redefinition of the interests of the actors” involved, namely the national interests of the member states. Hence, it is up to the interests of the member states to redefine their interests that determine whether the integration process leads towards a more universal form of system, or not. By naming this approach as “comprehensive neo-functionalism,” he stresses that this approach engages in dialogue with other theoretical schools, from Realism to Liberalism, since it covers all types of interest politics. Therefore, this approach avoids the traditional weaknesses of neo-functionalism by meeting central realist requirements concerning national interests. The central feature of this form for neo-functionalism is, therefore, European integration through the nation-state, but also beyond it in perspective of what Haas (1964) and Sæter (1998, p. 26) call a “more universal type of system.” This is, of course, in contrast with a more traditional understanding of neo-functionalism that bypasses the nation-state. Such a perspective is, for example, seen in Haroche’s (2020, p. 853) research paper on the development of the EDF. Here he explains EDF’s development through a process characterised by “political cultivated spillover” processes—that is, a process where the European Commission is in the lead, followed by an offensive spillover process from the economic to the defence sphere, further supported by a bureaucratic spillover process that could lead to even more integration within the field.

Such an approach stands in contrast with Sæter’s “comprehensive neo-functionalism” and would not be a relevant analytical tool to analyse the changing nature of the transatlantic relationship on European security and defence. However, what is relevant is to emphasise that there is no automaticity in the integration process, and even more important, to regard EU integration as both supranational and intergovernmental in nature (Sæter, 1998, p. 52). Hence, Sæter describes EU integration as “comprehensive confederalism” with an

institutionalised intergovernmental leadership comprising foreign and security politics (Sæter, 1998, p. 77). This has been the dominant integration strategy since 1970 when the forerunner to today’s CFSP, the European Political Cooperation, was established. Since then, the CFSP has further developed where the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) today provides the EU with legal personality and has established a European External Action Service under the leadership of the High Representative of CFSP. Furthermore, this Representative is also Vice President of the European Commission. It furthermore includes a mutual defence commitment and a solidarity clause (Howorth, 2014, pp. 50–51). This leads us to the question of how the EU process of externalisation changes and reshapes the international environment, such as how it responds to a weakening transatlantic relationship in which the US shows a reduced commitment to international leadership (Melby, 2017a).

In this case, the greatest insight from comprehensive neo-functionalism is that it would be misleading to regard European integration as something to be subordinated to the wider sets of Western institutions under US leadership. The background for such a statement was that Haas himself concluded “that European integration should be seen as politically subordinate to the existing wider frameworks of cooperation and interdependence” (as cited in Sæter, 1998, p. 36). However, to subordinate the EU under the US-led NATO alliance will violate reality since it disregards the chief integration motifs of the main actors involved, but also because it will disregard the character of the EU integration process itself where the EU seeks more autonomy from the US (Biscop, 2020). This fact has become even more important in recent years with the debates on European strategic autonomy and sovereignty, which included the security and defence spheres. Here we also see a development in the transatlantic alliance since 2016 with the adoption of the EU’s Global Strategy (European Union, 2016), where the US will have to interact more directly with the EU in addition to its engagement through NATO (Biscop, 2020, p. 81). For example, the PESCO mechanisms are formulated in article 42.6 of the Lisbon Treaty and were long considered politically impossible to use. As Sven Biscop once stressed: “PESCO has been seen as toxic—until today. It seems that the combination of three powerful agents, Putin, Brexit, and Trump, has started the decontamination process” (Biscop, 2017, p. 3). Consequently, the activation of PESCO and the other initiatives under the defence package is part of such an externalisation that changes and reshapes the transatlantic security and defence relationship.

Nevertheless, even though it is important to clarify how the EU process influences transatlantic relations, it is also important to clarify “discontinuities” in the integration process itself. In the coming years, we will face an even more multipolar world and an EU that can no longer rely on a transatlantic security community to the extent that it did before. The US pivot towards East Asia and

the rise of China as a global peer competitor is an important part of this development. Furthermore, transatlantic relations will to an increasing extent, be “viewed by the United States through the prisms of China, just as during the Cold War they were viewed by the prism of the Soviet Union” (Baun & Marek, 2021, p. 44). This will undoubtedly challenge the EU’s role as a defender of multilateralism and pose new challenges to the EU’s common foreign and security policy. The most important form of discontinuity will be in how the EU relates to NATO and what kind of security community NATO will develop into in the coming years. As Stanley Hoffmann asked many years ago: “What will shall animate Europe?” (Hoffmann, 1964, p. 95). This question still goes straight to the core regarding what kind of autonomy the EU develops and how the Union will position itself in relation to other actors within the Atlantic system. After Brexit, this will not only relate to the US but also to Great Britain, as the submarine deal between Australia, Great Britain, and the US (AUKUS) illustrates. As Rieker (2022, p. 145) in this thematic issue underlines, this dispute cannot be reduced to a purely Franco-US conflict since the EU and the member states also expressed support for France in this matter.

These differences have always been present in the EU process. We may even argue that Brexit was one of the consequences of this discontinuity because Great Britain has viewed the EU process as primarily part of an Atlantic system and has consequently been sceptical of the EU developing its own security and defence policy. Furthermore, as Haroche (2020) and others have underlined, delegating security and defence competencies to supranational institutions has been difficult due to member states’ insistence on national sovereignty on these issues. The results are military capacity shortfalls that will be hard to close, causing this security deficit. This makes some scholars ask whether European strategic autonomy is just an illusion (Meijer & Brooks, 2021).

However, the EU has since 2016 taken huge steps in enhancing the EU’s role as a security provider. Most importantly, with the EDF, the EU has now crossed its Rubicon since the European Commission now has supranational powers on funding European defence research and military capability projects. The next part will further outline the changing nature of the transatlantic relationship, seeking to explain the patterns of weakening EU–US relations. Furthermore, it will analyse what consequences such a weakening will have for the EU’s efforts to build a stronger and more coherent security and defence policy.

3. The Changing Nature of the Transatlantic Security and Defence Relationship

From the previous theoretical part, we see that the EU integration process plays a fundamental part in the European security order. This takes the form of both deepening and widening the integration process itself

and externalising and reshaping the EU’s international environment, including the transatlantic partnership. As G. John Ikenberry (2008, pp. 9–10) underlines, the European security order is based upon a grand bargain between the US and its European allies and partners:

The United States provides its European partners with security protection and access to U.S. markets, technology, and supplies within an open world economy. In return, these countries agree to be reliable partners that provide diplomatic, economic, and logistical support for the United States as it leads the wider Western postwar order.

This grand bargain still holds, but it is changing as the US is increasingly reluctant to engage in international leadership, either on its own or within a multilateral framework. As Michael Smith, also in this thematic issue, emphasises, “transatlantic relations become an arena in which drivers of broader structural change are mediated and managed by the key participants, here the EU and the US” (Smith, 2022, p. 220). This transatlantic bargain has laid the foundation for the institutionalised Euro-Atlantic security order (Olsen, 2022). To secure such a security order, historical experience has shown that it depends on there being a clear US leadership role in Europe (Melby, 2017a, p. 70; Menon & Ruger, 2020, p. 371). Should the US become unable to fill such a role, insecurities among European countries regarding the trustworthiness of US security guarantees might develop which might increase the potential for division within or fragmentation of the European security order. Furthermore, these observed patterns of weakening EU–US relations will have consequences for the EU’s efforts to build a stronger and more coherent security and defence policy. At the same time, the EU has become indispensable for the member states since they set the overall strategy on foreign and security policy through the EU, and it provides them with a sufficient political and economic power base (Biscop, 2020, p. 82). Searching for the underpinnings of the US’ lack of will to provide leadership in European security will become even more important since it will influence EU strategy to set new conditions for its foreign and security policy.

In this respect, most scholars emphasise internal politico-economic developments in the US itself as the main reason for the lack of leadership (Gasparini, 2021; Melby, 2017a). These developments include an increasing political polarisation of US politics that also influences its decision-making abilities and foreign policies. Furthermore, huge socio-economic and ethnic changes have transformed the US into a truly multi-ethnic society, making the US’ national identity far more fragmented (Melby, 2017a, p. 154, 2017b). These developments have changed how the US views itself and its role in the world. These tendencies started during the Obama presidency (2009–2017) and were further amplified during the Trump presidency (2017–2021). An overarching

aim for President Obama was to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that started during the presidency of George W. Bush (2001–2009). Based on this overarching assessment, we might state that there will be no return to a transatlantic security community in a traditional sense (Janes, 2021, p. 63).

In fact, the Obama administration laid the foundation for a new era in US foreign policy where the US' dominance would not be as visible as before. How President Obama handled several international policy challenges, such as Libya in 2011 and the war in Syria from 2011 and onwards, is, therefore, the shape of things to come (Lewis, 2013; Tierny, 2016). We can make the same judgements regarding recent events from the Biden presidency (2021–), such as the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 without sufficient consultation with NATO allies. Furthermore, the same goes for how the submarine deal with Australia (AUKUS) from September 2021 was handled, causing a diplomatic crisis between the US and France (“Aukus: UK, US and Australia launch,” 2021).

The presidency of Joe Biden started with a great deal of optimism after four dismal years under Trump. In President Biden's first foreign policy speech after his inauguration, entitled *America's Role in the World*, on 4 February 2021, he stated: “America is back. Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy” (Biden, 2021). Such a statement from the US President and corresponding statements from other politicians in the administration, including Secretary of State Anthony Blinken (see, e.g., Blinken, 2021) and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan (see, e.g., Sullivan, 2021), were, of course, met with big relief in Europe and elsewhere. Hence, the transatlantic security community survived the Trump presidency against all odds (Schuette, 2021).

However, this kind of statement conceals the huge changes the US and the transatlantic security community have gone through, at least since the Obama administration (Kaufman, 2017; McKay, 2019). What President Obama did was to start to question the US' power base and the economic and military preconditions for the US leadership (Melby, 2017a, p. 283). Gasparini (2021, p. 1) is, therefore, certainly right when he points out that European leaders will be disappointed if they expect a return to typical past transatlantic relations under the presidency of Joe Biden. The increasing transatlantic rift has relatively little to do with the Trump presidency alone, even though its character and content contributed significantly to transatlantic divergences (Herszenhorn, 2020).

Clearly, these developments influence the workings of institutions such as NATO and the EU and especially the burden-sharing debate, which has been particularly significant since the NATO summit in 2014 (NATO, 2014). Even though the Trump administration in style was very different from the current Biden administration, they also shared much of the same approaches to international affairs. The most important difference was that the

Obama and the current Biden administrations pursued their foreign policies within multilateral and institutional frameworks. Donald Trump, on the other hand, without doubt, was the most chaotic president in American history. No American president has been so willing to rely on instinct rather than careful analysis and institutionalised decision-making processes (Knutsen & Tvetbråten, 2021, p. 28). The aim was to secure as much freedom of manoeuvre for the US as possible. Interestingly, the Obama Administration pursued a foreign policy on the presumption that the US-led liberal order now rested on such a solid foundation that traditional US leadership is no longer needed to the same extent as before (Ikenberry, 2014). In fact, assessing Biden's foreign policy outlook as described in his article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2020 can be understood within such an approach to international affairs (Biden, 2020).

True, the Biden administration started optimistically with a series of initiatives to prove that it was returning to the world and to underline its role as an international leader. In spring 2021, the US re-joined the Paris accords on climate change and the World Health Organization. At the NATO summit in Brussels in June, Biden re-committed the US to NATO, underlining the importance of the alliance to US and European security and met with the EU leaders within different formats, including an EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Brussels in February and a European Council meeting in March (Brattberg, 2021). An EU–US summit also took place in June after the G7 and the NATO summits (Brattberg, 2021; NATO, 2021). Among the items under discussion was establishing an EU–US security and defence dialogue and a new transatlantic agenda for global cooperation.

How the EU relates to NATO is an integral part of this relationship. Undoubtedly, the relationship has been difficult, not least because a zero-sum perspective has reigned: what is good for the EU is bad for NATO, and vice versa. However, the two organisations adopted two Joint Declarations in 2016 and 2018 that laid the foundation for 74 areas of cooperation on issue areas including military mobility (a PESCO project), counterterrorism, strengthening resilience to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear-related risks, and promoting the women peace and security agenda (NATO, 2016, 2018). Contrary to what one might expect, this zero-sum perspective is still relevant, as seen when NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in November 2021 warned against the establishment of a small EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of some 5000 personnel (“NATO-sjefen advarer mot EU-plan,” 2021). The same is also true from a US perspective, which might sound somewhat paradoxical: A reduced US willingness to lead European security and a negative stance towards European measures to improve the transatlantic burden-sharing.

One change might have taken place in October 2021. At NATO's defence minister meeting in Brussels, the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that the US supported a common EU defence plan that strengthened

NATO (“Austin says U.S. supports EU,” 2021). In addition, the French Minister of Defence Florence Parly stated at the same meeting that the EU’s defence plans would benefit the US and consequently strengthen the alliance: “A stronger Europe will contribute to a strengthened and more resilient alliance,” she said (“Austin says U.S. supports EU,” 2021). The then German Minister of Defence, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, also made a similar statement but underlined the necessity of bringing NATO and EU policies into greater alignment.

We might therefore argue that the US has a positive influence on EU strategic autonomy if it is done in a transparent way where the two joint declarations from 2016 and 2018 “form some concepts that help us forward” (US State Department interview, 12 August 2020). On the other hand, the US ambivalence towards the EDF, calling it a “poison pill” that would destroy transatlantic cooperation and hinder US access to the European defence market (Fiott, 2019), illustrates the conflicting dynamics in transatlantic relations. That is, between an EU integration process along comprehensive confederalist lines and the Atlantic framework set by the US. In fact, without these changes in US foreign and security policies during recent years, it is far from certain that the EU would have intensified its security and defence policies. This strengthening security and defence dimension is henceforth a clear example of the externalisation process in terms of actively influencing and reshaping the international environment. This is especially relevant for NATO where a corresponding Europeanisation of the alliance is an overarching goal. So, when the EU now develops and strengthens its security and defence policy through the defence package and the Strategic Compass process, we must also identify the impediments to such a process. As I discussed in the theoretical part of this essay, this is the discontinuity challenge in European integration which is causing a European defence deficit.

4. The European Security Deficit

To enhance the EU’s role as a security actor is an attempt to influence the changing nature of the transatlantic relationship. Therefore, a weakening transatlantic relationship is the main impetus behind the EU’s efforts to build strategic autonomy and thereby “actively influencing and reshaping the international environment” (Sæter, 1998, p. 38). Insights from the comprehensive neo-functionalist approach provide us with an understanding of how to view the relationship between the European integration process and the Atlantic levels of cooperation. Since it is misleading to regard European integration as something to be subordinated to the wider Western institutions under US leadership, a more integrated EU in security and defence will consequently imply enhanced needs for EU autonomy in its relationship with the US (Biscop, 2022). In addition, as Aggestam and Hyde-Price (2019, p. 124) emphasise, we also see “widening differences on values and norms and differ-

ences over trade and economic relations” in transatlantic affairs. This makes the search for strategic autonomy even more pressing. Nevertheless, a European security deficit still exists due to differing national interests, a phenomenon that also can be explained by the same theoretical approach. However, the Strategic Compass and the European defence package are important steps towards European defence integration.

Hence, the defence package in the form of CARD, PESCO, and EDF, and the work on the Strategic Compass point to enhanced EU autonomy, but politicians and scholars alike are still striving to define this concept (Nováky, 2020). However, as this analysis shows, autonomy will mainly imply a rebalancing of the transatlantic relationship to make it more viable and long-lasting. NATO will therefore benefit from enhanced European defence capabilities. From the EU side, strategic autonomy means that the Union needs to take on more responsibility for its own security: “We need to be able to act rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts, with partners if possible and alone when necessary” (European Union, 2022, p. 3). Clearly, this definition is in strong need of operationalisation. Therefore, the purpose of the Strategic Compass is to conduct such an exercise to bring greater coherence and a common sense of purpose to European security and defence (Fiott, 2021, p. 164). The meaning is to “narrow the gap between ambition and reality when it comes to the EU’s external action; facilitate the development of a shared strategic culture; and clarify the overall image of EU defence cooperation” (Nováky, 2020, p. 1).

However, starting work on the Strategic Compass in 2020 could be considered as putting the cart before the horse. Even though the Strategic Compass will not replace the Global Strategy from 2016 (European Union, 2016), it provides a security political framework to the defence package, which started some four years before the work on the Compass. In the Compass, which was made public on 21 March 2022, the EU stress that, today and in the coming years, it will face a more volatile, complex, and fragmented security landscape (European Union, 2022, p. 7). This necessitates that the EU and its member states “must invest more in their security and defence to be a stronger political and security actor” (European Union, 2022, p. 6). Consequently, the EU needs to reinforce its civilian and military CSDP missions and operations. One of the most concrete outcomes of the Compass will therefore be the establishment of a Rapid Deployment Capacity of some 5000 troops. This capacity should make the EU able to meet different types of crises and is built upon the existing Battle Group concept. These battle-groups can hardly be considered a success (Duke, 2019). To make it more useful, a strengthening of existing command and control structures, like the Military Planning and Conduct Capability and the corresponding Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability, is surely needed.

All these efforts as laid down in the work on the Compass consequently lead us to ask whether the EU

is a unique security and defence actor, or whether it is more like a “normal” one that, instead of pursuing norms, acts like any other (state) actor would do. As Rieker and Riddervold (2021, p. 11) demonstrate, the EU has become “increasingly interest-based and security-oriented in its immediate crisis response,” but more “principled...in its longer-term, overall policies.” Nevertheless, Howorth (2014, p. 71) is certainly right when he stresses that the uniqueness of the EU is in having civilian-military synergies alongside a strong civilian security identity. Due to the character of the international environment, we might therefore assume that in the coming years, the EU will enhance its abilities to meet a more hostile threat environment. From this, we might argue that the EU will act more in line with other (state) actors in the international system.

Hence, the purpose of the defence package is to enhance the EU’s capacities and generate military power. Only by pooling defence resources can the European member states field a comprehensive full-spectrum force package for projection in Europe and beyond (Biscop, 2020, p. 90). By addressing capability shortfalls through the yearly CARD process, the aim is to make better use of limited defence resources. The CARD process should consequently contribute to a gradual synchronisation and mutual adaptations of national defence planning cycles and capability development practices (European Defence Agency, 2022). Since CARD identifies capability shortfalls, the aim of PESCO is to “gradually deepen defence cooperation to deliver the required capabilities to also undertake the most demanding missions and thereby provide an improved security to EU citizens” (European Union, 2021c). PESCO is henceforth capability-driven and legally binding to improve the EU’s military capabilities (European Union, 2017). At present, there are 60 different PESCO projects, based on 20 legally binding commitments and comprise project areas within the fields of training, land, maritime, air, cyber, and joint enablers. Through these binding commitments, the aim is to “overcome capability shortcomings identified under the Capability Development Plan (CDP) and CARD. These capability projects shall increase Europe’s strategic autonomy and strengthen the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB)” (European Union, 2021c). The final part of the defence package is EDF. The Fund is key in EU capability developments and support member states in the development of defence material and technology and defence research. The aim is to reduce the European dependence on non-European actors in developing new and disruptive technologies. Most importantly, the nearly eight-billion-euro defence fund is a game-changer in European defence cooperation and integration. The reason, of course, is that it is organised under the auspices of the European Commission and is a clear sign of the blurring of the traditional dichotomy between intergovernmental and supranational decision-making (Håkansson, 2021), fully in line with the comprehensive neo-functionalist approach.

From this, we can also conclude that the aims of the Strategic Compass and the defence package are to set a common strategic vision for EU security and defence. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the current discontinuity challenge in European security and defence integration. There are still quite substantial differences between the member states on how autonomy should be further developed. These differences relate to the EU’s relationship with NATO and the US, i.e., how Europe should respond to a reduced US will to lead. In addition, this discontinuity also relates to differences in threat perceptions and whether security and defence should become more supranational (Meijer & Brooks, 2021).

Interestingly, in this regard, we can identify quite substantial differences between France and Germany, the traditional motor of the integration process. Since becoming president in 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron has taken several political initiatives to enhance European security and defence. All of them as a direct response to a weaker transatlantic relationship. The most well-known is the European Intervention Initiative (E2I), formally located outside the EU framework but still intended to build a common European strategic culture. From the French perspective, the intention is not to tear down NATO but to complement it and make the transatlantic relationship more reliable (Major, 2021, p. 37). Hence, as analysts from the German think-tank SWP state: “Paris is looking for new ways of preserving its autonomy in defence policy and of filling the strategic vacuum that has been created by the waning US interest in Europe and its periphery” (Kempin, 2021, p. 2).

On the other hand, Germany warns against French proposals on making the EU more independent from the US (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020). The former German Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, therefore, emphasised that Europe should assume more responsibility on defence matters but stressed that the US and NATO remain vital for European security. Therefore, Franco-German leadership on European defence is not in sight (Kunz, 2019).

These divergences relate specifically to how these two countries assess the transatlantic relationship. From a French perspective, the Trump presidency was a clear sign of a structural change in transatlantic affairs, in the form of a US that constantly distances itself from Europe. The German perspective is that transatlantic relations will go back to normalcy once Trump leaves office.

With these divergences in mind, any realistic strategic autonomy by the EU must be built in close cooperation with NATO and a strong EU–NATO partnership (see also Howorth, 2019). Surely, it will be a long-term process where NATO itself goes through a rebalancing process, perhaps implying a European Supreme Allied Commander at some time. Nevertheless, three decades of EU security and defence cooperation and integration shows that any common policy in this area must be realistic.

5. Conclusions

As the analytical framework of this thematic issue underline, there is more potential for a weakening of the EU–US foreign policy relationship today than in any previous phase of this relationship. Furthermore, with a rising and more assertive China, Europe is no longer central to US foreign policy priorities. In this article, I have discussed how a weakening transatlantic relationship influences European defence cooperation and integration. It also asked how these observed patterns of weakening EU–US relations can be explained and what consequences such a weakening will have for the EU's efforts to build a stronger and more coherent security and defence policy. This article has shown that the build-up of common European policies on these issues will be far from an automatic process.

On the contrary, there is still a discontinuity challenge in European integration. Further research should dig deeper into this discontinuity challenge, not least because Howorth (2019, p. 35) is utterly pessimistic when he states that no such strategic autonomy will be achieved before NATO's 100th anniversary in 2049. That is too long to wait. Research on how such autonomy can be further developed should be one of the most important research questions on European security issues in the times to come. In this perspective, the war in Ukraine might lead to enhanced European defence integration since it is only through integration that Europe will be able to take greater care of its own security. Therefore, this war might become an impetus for more externalisation of European security and defence by actively influencing and reshaping the transatlantic relationship.

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