Explaining the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis

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Abstract

This thesis will be studying the EUs Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the notion of strategic autonomy, asking why at this particular time does the EU strive for strategic autonomy. This research puzzle together with the research question *What factors are behind the EUs sudden strive for strategic autonomy and how can it best be theoretically explained?* provides the focus of this thesis. We will be using a qualitative content analysis as a method to bring clarity to the puzzle and answer the question.

The thesis will be arguing that while the traditional mainstream theories of liberalism, realism and constructivism has partial answers to the question, we will be arguing that the best theoretical understanding of why strategic autonomy has become such an important concept is neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism is a much more comprehensive analytical tool for analysing international politics than liberalism and realism since it combines the international system level with the domestic level institutions, this makes it the preferred theory to answer the research puzzle.

Abbreviations

CARD - Coordinated Annual Review on Defence

CDP – Capability development plan

CSDP – Common security and defence policy

EDF – European defence community

EU – European Union

EUGS – European Union global strategy

INF – Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PESCO – Permanent structured cooperation

MPCC - Military Planning and Conduct Capability

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Introduction

Aim and purpose

In recent year European leaders have devoted a great deal of attention to the goal of achieving European strategic autonomy in the realm of security and defence. However traditional mainstream International Relations theories are not able to adequately explain why this has taken place at this moment in time. This research puzzle provides the focus of this analysis of the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the notion of strategic autonomy.

The aim of this thesis is to theoretically explain with the help of a qualitative content analysis why European leaders have focused considerable time, energy, and resources on the quest for strategic autonomy. The theoretical ambition is to utilize neoclassical realism as a tool of multilevel analyse examining how both system and domestic-level interaction influence leaders in their foreign policy behaviour.

The European Union (EU) has a long history of incremental steps towards the enhancement of its security and defence cooperation. In 1999 the EU launched the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This was given further impetus in 2009 with the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty which created the possibility for member states to engage in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in security and defence matters, however, this mechanism was not activated until 2017.

What has changed for the EU to accelerated CSDP cooperation's right now and not before? Mainstream International Relations theories do give us some clues as to why, liberalism argus that the domestic political level is the most relevant place to analyse, while realist would focus on the balance-of-power or balance-of-threat of the international system. Finally, constructivist focus on normative structures such as knowledge, rules, beliefs, and norms, which according to constructivist constructs the states identities and interest. All these theories offer partial insights on how states behave, but what they miss is the complex interplay of the systemic level on the domestic level and how it leads to foreign policy decision. This is where neoclassical realism has its strengths, by combining the different levels in an integrated theoretical framework it reveals a broader landscape of analysis and

helps us better understand theoretically why there is so much activity right now in CSDP and why the notion of strategic autonomy has become so important.

This thesis will therefore argue that the theoretical approach of neoclassical realism is the best approach for explaining the EUs search for strategic autonomy. Neoclassical realism analysis all the different unit-levels. This thesis will describe how the pressures from the changing international system has affected the EU and the leaders of its most important member countries Germany and France. An important unit-level factor that influences the whole discourse on strategic autonomy is the strategic culture of Germany and France. Germany and France also represent two different views on strategic autonomy, France is a big supporter and Germany is cautiously optimistic.

This thesis will be using a qualitative content analysis, by a thorough analysis of policy document, written statements from EU leaders and interviews with political leaders,

The research puzzle that is the focus of this thesis is the EUs Common security and defence policy (CSDP) and more specific the notion of "*strategic autonomy*" in security and defence issues, and what can explain the sudden strive for strategic autonomy? Which leads to the research question: *What factors are behind the EUs sudden strive for strategic autonomy and how can it best be theoretically explained?*

The thesis will proceed as follows. The first section will briefly describe the evolution of CSDP and give a definition of what strategic autonomy within security and defence means. The next section will give a presentation of the three mainstream international relations theories and there take on the EUs CSDP and strategic autonomy. Then follows a presentation of the selected method for the thesis, and the last section will be an analysis and motivation of why this thesis thinks that neoclassical realism is the best theoretical framework for understanding CSDP and strategic autonomy.

Evolution of CSDP and the quest for strategic autonomy

The history of a common security and defence policy (CSDP) in the EU is long, dating back to 1948 and the Treaty of Brussels with the defence clause that created Western European Union (EEAS, 2020). In the early 1950s there was an attempt to create a European defence Community (EDC), the plan was to create a European army with a single political and military European authority (CVCE, 2020). The proposal was rejected by the French national assembly and was never ratified.

The first real important milestone for a common foreign and security policy was with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, which laid the foundation for the EU to build CSDP on. The next milestone was the St Malo declaration in 1998 between France and United Kingdom, which has been described as the start of the European defence project. The British and French declaration should be viewed as an acknowledgement that the EU failed in the Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s. This was supposed to be the hour of Europe when Europe stood up and solved its own problems without outside help. Sadly, the EU was not up to the task when faced with escalating violence (Hyde-Price 2018: 396). Lessons learned from that episode went straight into the St Melo declaration where it stated that *"the union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military force, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so"* (Chaillot papers 47, 2001:8). At the same time emphasising that NATO was the bedrock of European security. Two years later at the European council meeting in Nice, key CSDP institutions were formally established and by 2003 the EU had undertaken mission and operations. As impressive as this seems it is important to remember the ambition that the ´headline goals` put forth, and that where agreed upon at the Helsinki Council meeting in December 1999, of having the capacity to deploy within 60 days and sustain up to a year 60,000 personal, those troops should also be military self-sustaining has not yet been meet (Fiott, 2020:6).

In 2003 the EU released the European Security Strategy, which is a milestone since it is the first strategic document ever produced by the EU. ESS set forth the EUs security strategy by identifying key threats and global challenges that EU faces. Now almost twenty years later, one thing that stands out is the first line in the introduction:

Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free. The violence of the first half of the 20th Century has given way to a period of peace and stability unprecedented in European history (Council of the European Union, 2003).

That optimism stands in sharp contrast to the EUGS that stated that the Union faces a region that is more unstable and more insecure.

Since then, the security and defence cooperation has intensified especially after the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. That is when the EU developed its common security and defence policy (CSDP), another watershed event was the presentation of the *Global strategy for the European union's foreign and security policy* in 2016, which replaced the ESS from 2003. The EUGS defines the vital interests of the EU foreign and security policy, and focuses on the most important strategic priorities, which the EU foreign ministers boiled down to four pillars, these are security and defence, building state and societal resilience, taking an integrated approach to conflicts and crises, strengthening cooperative regional orders and a rules-based global governance (EEAS, 2017).

The EUGS also included several important defence initiatives, here we will present the most significant ones; Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) allows member states on voluntary basis to cooperate in security and defence to jointly plan, develop and invest in shared capability projects, and enhance the operational readiness and contribution of their armed forces (EDA, 2020). Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), which is an annual review that will help to promote capability development by addressing shortfalls, deepen defence cooperation and to ensure optimal use of defence spending plans (EDA, 2020).

The last one is Capability Development Plan (CDP), that looks at future security threats, identifies capability needs that supports decision-making at EU and national levels (EDA, 2020). Together with these initiatives, the concept of strategic autonomy has started to gain momentum inside the EU.

Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy is a wide-ranging concept that includes economic, technology, trade and more, this thesis will focus on strategic autonomy in the realm of defence and security. Strategic autonomy is a vague term that can mean a lot of thing, the first CARD (2020) review stated that there is a "uneven understanding of the concept of strategic autonomy" within the EU (CARD, 2020).

In European Union global strategy (2016) they write that:

> *As Europeans we must take greater responsibility for our security. We must be ready and able to deter, respond to, and protect ourselves against external threats. An appropriate level of … strategic autonomy is important for Europe's ability to foster peace and safeguard security within and beyond its borders.* (EUGS, 2016:19).

The Council of the European Union (2017) defines strategic autonomy as the "*capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible".* This rather vague term has led to discussions in policy circles and national capitals about exactly what the implications it has for the EU.

The European Union Institute for Security Studies has come up with three different conceptual visions of strategic autonomy that helps to focus our thinking: autonomy as *responsibility*, those who advocated autonomy as responsibility sees that greater burden sharing inside NATO, and within EU frameworks to strengthen the transatlantic alliance. In 2007 at the Munich Security Conference Robert Gates the U.S defence secretary told the Europeans to increase their defence spending (NY times, 2007). Increased burden sharing is a long-time American demand of its NATO allies, in 2006 the NATO defence ministers agreed to spend a minimum of 2 % of their GDP on defence, something that many of the European countries has never meet (NATO, 2020).

Autonomy as *hedging,* in the case that the US would withdraw from Europe, hedging is a way to ensure that EU defence structures and policies are capable to function autonomously. Hedging is seen as a way for the EU to maintain a good relationship with the USA, while at the same time focus on their on strategic defence areas (Fiott, 2018:4)

And finally, autonomy as *emancipation,* which is the most radical of them all. Advocates of this view means that "*the EU can either protect European territory and its global interests by relying on full spectrum capabilities that are produced and owned by European governments, or it cannot.*" (Fiott, 2018:6). Autonomy as emancipation means freedom from the dependencies the EU has with the US and the ability to not become dependent on another country again.

Going by the definition of strategic autonomy described by the Council and the EUGS above, it is reasonable to describe it that the EUs vision is somewhere between responsibility and hedging. They still want and need close cooperation with NATO and at the same time they are unsure about the American commitment to the defence of Europe. Scholars like Fiott (2018:7) also states that the most convincing characterisation of EU strategic autonomy is that it lies somewhere between responsibility and hedging. Therefore, the definition that this thesis uses when referring to strategic autonomy is that of a mix if responsibility and hedging.

Literature review

There are several different theories that could be applied to the puzzle of the EUs CSDP and the notion of strategic autonomy. Here we will give a short presentation of the three mainstream international relations theories, liberalism, constructivism, and neorealism.

Liberalism

Liberalism, which is mostly concerned with the domestic political level, an argument a liberal could make is that when the internal politics of the three biggest security and defence contributors are in line and the people of European Union want the EU to take a bigger responsibility in securing the EUs boarders and its interests internationally, the internal politics will make them act according to the domestic pressures. It is true that the EU stands for liberal values as the EUGS (2016) makes clear, the EU is grounded in core liberal beliefs such as respect for and promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms, free trade, and the rule of law. But this does not explain why the EUs quest for strategic autonomy is starting to gain momentum right now. When for example there have been popular support for an increased military cooperation for many years. There are different strands of liberalism that defy a common definition, but they share certain assumptions, principals and a set of economic, philosophical, and political ideas. Richter (2016:50) writes that a liberal country can give up some of its sovereign to coordinate their polices at the regional or international level, and that such a decision is based on rationality. Member states basically makes a pros and cons list of the things that can happen if they join CSDP, and then makes the choice that will deliver the most utility for them.

Pohl (2013a:369) argues that it is not the material capabilities that defines CSDP but the ideas about the proper means and ends of foreign policy, and that the relevant arena for the struggle for power is the domestic stage not the international stage. The national governments are focused on what their domestic societies want. According to Pohl (2013b:319) foreign policy is conducted primarily with a focus on expected domestical pressures and that the sources of domestic expectations are determined by normative values and perceptions of national interests. The public support for a common security and defence policy for the EU has been in the 70 percentiles since the 1999 (European commission, 2019). If Pohl is correct when he claims that foreign policy is conducted with domestic pressures and domestic expectations

in mind, why then has it taken such a long time to get CSDP to strive for strategic autonomy. When the public support has be so strong for such a long period of time.

In a democracy there are always internal struggles between the rival parties some may want more EU institutional integration, some will want less, this is nothing new and has been a function since the dawn of democracy. Of course, it is correct that you must have domestic political will to implement CSDP and to achieve the goals set forth in it and to achieve strategic autonomy, but where does this impetus for the domestic will come from? This thesis argues that it is the changing international system that is pressuring the EU leaders to promote strategic autonomy.

Constructivism

Constructivism is one of the newest theories in International Relations and it challenges both realism and liberalism on some of their core assumptions. Constructivism says that "the world is of our making" which challenges the realist view that you can´t change things (Flockhart, 2016:80). A key insight of constructivism was the inclusion of the social element of human activity and that it must be front and centre for understanding states behaviours. The focus on normative structures such as knowledge, rules, beliefs, and norms, constructs according to constructivist, states identities and interests (Barnett, 2016:147). Adrian Hyde-Price (2004) writes about how different strategic cultures exists in the EU, for which the formative years was the second world war and the ensuing Cold war, different experiences of the war led to different strategic cultures in the EU. For instance, German strategic culture is special because as one of the most powerful countries in the EU it sees itself as a civilian power because of its history of defeat after the second world war, and the rejection of militarism. Therefore, they see CSDP as a vehicle for it to establish an alternative platform to NATO where it can negotiate and enforce principles of mandate, missions, and means that allow Germany to maintain its authenticity according to Berenskoetter & Giegerich (2010). Meyer (2011:677) writes that:

> *Norms within the context of strategic culture can be conceptualized as beliefs about what is appropriate, legitimate, or just regarding the goals and modalities concerning the use of force.*

Anderson & Seitz (2006) argues that CSDP is a way to foster a common identity and to help nation-building in the EU to solidify a common European identity. We have had a Common European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) since 1998 (changed to Common Security and Defence Policy with the Lisbon Treaty), and still, we are searching for a common strategic culture. In 1999 in the Presidents conclusions, they stated that *"the Union 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"*, this has not really come to fruition. Since the first CSDP mission in 2003 in Bosnia and Herzegovina there have been 35 mission altogether and most of them are civilian in nature. If the constructivist argument that CSDP is a way to foster a common identity and solidify a common European identity, we should already be seeing a larger capacity for autonomous action, since that has been a shared focus since the start.

Constructivism is often called social constructivism alluding to the role of social processes of interaction helps us create shared knowledge of how the world works (Flockhart, 2016:84). Neorealist claim that the anarchic international system shapes how states behave, and the influential paper by Alexander Wendt (1993) said that "anarchy is what states makes of it", it is the shared norms and ideas that thru socialisation shapes and dictates how leaders perceive threats. This shows the profound difference between constructivism and the mainstream international relations theories. It is hard for 27 nation states with different histories and different geographies to come to an agreement on security and defence, member states in the south worries more about influx of migration and the stability of MEAN region. Whereas the Nordic countries are more worried about Russian and Chines influence. The strategic compass that the EU is working on will define the EUs security and defence ambitions and try to build a common European strategic culture. If it is successful in creating a single European strategic culture and socialisation process manages to convince leaders into believing that strategic autonomy is the right thing for the EU to stive for, then one can argue for the merits of constructivism in explaining the EUs quest for strategic autonomy.

Neorealism

Neorealism or structural realism on the other hand is a systemic theory which means that it is focused on the international system, it´s explanatory powers are focused on the systemic level rather than the individual actor level of liberalism (Hyde-price 2012:18). Neorealism is a deductive top-down theoretical framework that views the international system as anarchic, meaning that there is not one overarching power to control the other states in the system. In addition to the anarchic international system neorealist consider differentiation of units i.e., sovereign states, and distribution of capabilities as the most important aspects of the international system. Given that the EU is not a sovereign state and only has the powers that the sovereign states that make up the membership of the EU is willing to give it, it can be difficult for neorealist to explain the EUs strive for strategic autonomy.

Neorealist think that the relative distribution of power is the key to understanding war and peace, alliance politics and the balance of power (Dunne & Schmidt, 2017:108). Posen (2006:153) argue that balance-of-power against the US is the best way to understand the EUs CSDP and strategic autonomy. The EU is still deeply dependent of the Americans and NATO for their defence and all EU member countries that are members of the alliance have increased their contribution to the alliance (NATO, 2020). Since NATO is such an important part of the EUs security policy and is likely to remain that way it is hard to explain EUs strive for strategic autonomy from a neorealist perspective. All but six EU countries are full members of NATO and the rest of the non-member countries are NATO partners cooperating in the partnership for peace framework. How can you balance against yourself as a member of the transatlantic alliance?

The autonomous action and resources that the CSDP gives the EU is nowhere near to be a serious balance-of-power act against the USA. A slightly more nuanced version of balance-of-power argues that the EU by enhancing its military capabilities is in a better position to influence the US. The "influence motive" as Art (2006:182) calls it, is in his mind a clear case of balancing, with the EU having more power and influence vis-à-vis the USA, and by deliberately pooling and integrating their resources they are creating a more powerful and effective European military force. All of the military missions that the EU has undertaken has

been on a UN mandate, which means that the US as a member of the security council has approved of the missions, that makes the case of balancing against the US harder.

But CSDP also gives the EU the means to act autonomously in cases where the US is not interested and to take a larger security burden in the EUs geopolitical neighbourhood, this gives the US more freedom to act in other theatres.

The anarchic international system is a self-help system and that affects the way states interact. Posen (2006:153) writes that in a system like that states must look after themselves to survive, and to do that military power is of the essence either through internal means or through alliances.

The structure of the system will also affect how states interact, Kenneth Waltz (1979:71) the founder of neorealism says that after the second world war the international system change from a multipolar system to a bipolar system with USA and the Soviet Union as the great power change the politics among European states in a qualitative way. After the cold war we arguably ended up in a unipolar system with USA as the most powerful actor in the system. This change would according to neorealism mean that there would occur a balancing-of-power against USA, one can make the argument that China and Russia are trying to balance against USA with their "strategic partnership". President Putin said recently that you can´t rule out a military alliance between Russia and China (Isachenkov, 2020, October 22). But one cannot make the argument that the EU is balancing against the USA because they are so closely aligned thru NATO.

Neorealism is an excellent analytical tool when one analyses change across the system but as Waltz (1979:71) admits it cannot analyse what happens inside the states. Therefore, this theory fails to address the leader, state, and international level that this thesis seeks to examine to answer why at this moment in time the EU is pushing for more strategic autonomy.

Since neoclassical realism is a multilevel framework it is important to mention that the traditional theories can partially explain the strive for strategic autonomy.

Theory – Explaining neoclassical realism.

That is where neoclassical realism tries to correct the balance between the systemic and the particular (Wohlforth, 2016), neoclassical realism began as an attempt to solve the puzzles that realism could not account for, to fill the gaps within structural realism if you will. Neoclassical realism includes factors like perceptions of state leaders and how they view the distribution of capabilities, state-society relationship, and state identity (Dunne & Schmidt, 2017:109). Neoclassical realism incorporates key insight from the traditional mainstream theories, by doing that it deepens and broadens the analysis.

A critique that neoclassical realism has against structural realism is that states don´t always change mechanically to the changing international environment as balance-of-power theories implies. There are four especially important factors that can obstruct in this*:*

> *the ability of leaders to perceive systemic stimuli correctly, the lack of clarity in the international system, the problem of rationality, and the difficulty of mobilizing domestic resources"* (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016:20).

These factors lead to states making policy decisions that is not always tailored to the external environment like structural realism would imply. Leaders are human after all and as humans the way they process information is fraught with biases, especially when the information at hand is incomplete or contradictory. The same can be said about rationality, leaders do not always react rationally to systemic stimuli. And to make things worse, the international system does not always send clear messages about threats and opportunities (Ripsman et al 2016:22-23).

Neoclassical realism is a much more comprehensive analytical tool for analysing international politics than liberalism and realism, it combines the international system level with the domestic level institutions. It takes neorealism as it´s starting point, that states respond to the constraint and opportunities of the international system when conducting their foreign and security policies (Ripsman 2011) and expands on neorealism's parsimonious assumptions and adds individual and domestic level factors. Neoclassical realism has four broad categories of intervening unit-level variables*, leaders' images* is linked to the leaders set of core beliefs and how different cognitive constrains affect the leader's decision making. *Strategic culture* is

defined here as rules and norms, worldviews, and shared expectations which through socialization and institutionalization becomes entrenched beliefs and constrain a states behaviour. *State-Society relations* is defined by Ripsman et al (2016:70-71) *"as the character of interactions between the central institutions of the state and various economic and or societal groups"*. (Ripsman et al 2016:61-67-71)

There are three different variants of neoclassical realism that utilizes different variables, these are called Type 1, Type 2 and Type 3 and focus on different aspects of the different unit-levels. This thesis will be using a type 2 variant because it has a scope of months to years which is the timeframe of the analyse.

Type 1 acknowledges the empirical observations that show that states sometimes respond inconsistently to systemic pressures, but that they tend to conform to the pressure over time (Ripsman et al 2016:26). This is exactly what has happened in the case of China, political leaders in the EU have been so focused on the economic relationship with China that it just ignored all the signals that pointed towards a future security problem was rising. An important intervening variable in neoclassical realism is the beliefs that individual domestic leaders matters because everybody has different cognitive biases and political ideologies that affect how they process information (Ripsman et al 2016:61), which leads to the fact that political leaders can take radically different decisions, based on their norms, beliefs, prior experiences, and values.

Instead of balancing against China, what we see is what Schweller (2004:168) calls underbalancing, which means that a state does not balance in the proper way or in an inefficiently way against a competitor. Schweller (2004:169) list four variables that explain variations in state responses to threats: *"elite consensus, government or regime vulnerability, social cohesion, and elite cohesion."* When you have a strong elite consensus and social cohesion it is much easier to form a strong foreign policy and balance against threats, and conversely a weak or fragmented elite consensus/ elite cohesion vis a vis social cohesion will result in a state that cannot respond appropriately to external threats.

Type 1 variant maintains that the international system sends clear signals, but the messages get construed thru the imperfect perception of the leaders and the troubles of domestic politics. Either the leaders misunderstand the signals, or they are prevented to properly act by domestic political opposition (Ripsman et al 2016:28). Neoclassical realism also takes time

into consideration in its analysis, type 1 works on the short time scale of days to weeks. During a crisis when a quick decision is needed the leader has the greatest potential to influence the policy, after time the leader's ability to control the policy diminishes as more actors becomes involved in decision making (Ripsman et al 2016:91).

Type 2 variant of neoclassical realism has bigger aspirations than trying to explain anomalies in the behaviour of states, rather it assumes that it can help explain a broad range of foreign policy choices and grand strategic adjustments. If the leaders are not presented with a crisis moment and the international environment does not present a clear and present danger, the choices states make under these conditions may have more to do with the worldview of the leader, the strategic cultures of the states they lead, the nature of the domestic political constraints (Ripsman et al 2016:29).

Type 3 variant has a far longer timeframe in its analysis, in the short to medium term neoclassical realism is an approach to study foreign policy and grand strategy. Over the medium to long term, it becomes an approach to study international politics. Since it takes a long time for the grand strategics of great powers to affect the other great powers in the system, it stands to reason that the systemic outcomes of their interaction take decades to reshape the international structures (Ripsman et al 2016:88).

If type 1 worked on short time scope of weeks to months, type 2 extends the timeframe to the short-to-medium term which is defined in months and years but not decades because that is the purview of type 3 (Ripsman et al 2016:83).

A systemic variable that distinguishes neoclassical realism from structural realism is clarity. Clarity from the signals and information that the international system presents the stats with. Ripsman et al (2016:47) argue that clarity is made of three components:

> *the degree to which threat and opportunities are readily discernible, whether the system provides information on the time horizon of threats and opportunities and whether optimal policy options stands out or not.*

A key unit-level variable in neoclassical realism is the strategic culture of states, in this thesis we will focus on the strategic culture of Germany and France. Because of historical reason their strategic culture is quite different from each other. German strategic culture is for historical reason a more pacifist than other powers of the same

size, their Nazi past, and the atrocities that they committed during the second world war still has a large effect on how the leaders view German military power. Germany defines itself as a civilian power promoting multilateralism, institutions-building, and through national and international norms it tries lower the use of force in international relations (Maull 2000). Their strategic culture makes it easier to pledge support to an EU initiative than investing it directly into its own warfighting capabilities even though German military expenditure has been going up in recent years, as SIPRI shows between 2018-2019 their military expenditures rose by 10% to reach 50$ billion.

France with its long history of carry out foreign policy decisions with military means, has a strategic culture that is profoundly different from the German one. As an old colonial power France has had it military abroad for centuries to protect French civilians in its colonies and to protect its interests. According to Hellman (2016:24) a fundamental part of French doctrine is to remain a strong military power and to guard their great power status. France obsession with remaining a great power has led them to criticize the unipolar world that emerge after the cold war and has often called for the emergence of a multipolar world (Smith & Rynning 2018:37).

Method and material

This thesis will be applying a qualitative content analysis, which is a method of analysing written, verbal, or visual communication in this case it will be an analysis of EU policy documents, statements made by influential EU leaders and defence white papers from Germany and France. The policy documents are selected because the represent the will of the governments of Germany and France and EU global strategy is an especially important policy paper that sets out the EUs core interests and principals, this makes it an important document to analyse.

Qualitative content analysis is an excellent method for analysing texts and interpreting it´s meaning (Elo, Kääriäinen & Kanste, 2014). Systematic investigations are a way to bring clarity and systematise meaning in texts, this is done by highlighting and by making essential aspects of the content understandable (Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson, Towns & Wängnerud 2017:213). To help us answer our research question we will be using a couple of specified questions to the texts, it will guide our reading of the material and help us answer our research question of what factors are behind the sudden strive for strategic autonomy and how to best answer it theoretically. Esaiasson et al (2017:216) writes that a qualitative content analysis is more than a summery of the text, it is a story you tell with the help of your chosen text and analytical tools.

The treats the faces the EU are many raging from organized crime, international terrorism, cyber-attacks to climate change, these are all addressed in the various documents that are the basis for this thesis and are serious problems that needs to be dealt with. But they are not reasons enough for the EU to strive for strategic autonomy, there are already international cooperation on most of the issues and there is no reason for the EU to have strategic autonomy to fight climate change or international terrorism.

This thesis has chosen four different case studies for exemplifying how the changing international system creates pressure on the EU which in turn has led to the strive for strategic autonomy in security and defence. The cases are a belligerent Russia, shifting American priorities, brexit and the rise of China. All these cases create systemic pressures on the EU in different but significant ways.

Esaiasson et al (2017:216) writes that some general framing of questions to the text is important to help us navigate the different texted being analysed and help us to tell our story. The thesis will be using a couple of questions as a tool to parse out the most relevant aspects of the texts.

- How are the different case studies represented? Are they a problem or opportunity?
- What is the cause of the problems? What are the opportunities?
- How is the international system creating pressures on the EU?

Analysis

The EU is something of an enigma when it comes to international organizations, it is not a nation state and its more than an international organization, it is sui generis that is made up by 27 different nation states. The different member states have different strategical goals and interests and operates in different geographies which leads to different geopolitical concerns and strategic cultures.

 The four different case studies for showing how the changing international system creates pressure on the EU, a belligerent Russia, shifting American priorities, brexit and the rise of China.

Russia

      The first source of concern is a revisionist Russia, it is Europe's main security problem and has been causing trouble for the EU since at least 2008 when it went to war with Georgia (Posen 2020). The war was not the first time that Russia had caused concern in is region, but it was the thing that made the most impression on the leaders in the EU, it forced them to acknowledge Russian military expansion and modernization. In 2014 with the war in Ukraine and the later annexation of Crimea, there was no longer any doubt about Russian behaviour or intention, everybody was now aware that Russia was a revisionist power intent on gaining some of its former superpower status. The German white paper (2016) stated:

> *Russia is openly calling the European peace order into question with its willingness to use force to advance its own interests and to unilaterally redraw borders guaranteed under international law, as it has done in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. (p.31)*

This is something that the EU global strategy also reiterated when discussing the European security order and the importance of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of states. It reads:

> *peace and stability in Europe are no longer a given. Russia's violation of international law and the destabilisation of Ukraine, on top of protracted conflicts*

in the wider Black Sea region, have challenged the European security order at its
core (EUGS, p.33)

This shows how powerless the EU is against Russia even in its own regional neighbourhood, the EU has soft power but lacks the hard military power. If there were any doubt about Russian intentions before the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war with Ukraine, now those doubts are gone, and the clarity of the signal is received loud and clear. Russia has also been accused of using chemical weapons on European territory trying to kill dissidents. The first time it made the headlines was in 2006 with the polonium 210 poisoning of the Russian ex spy Alexander Litvinenko and again in 2018 in Salisbury, UK. This time it was with the extremely poisonous Novichok nerve agent, when two Russian FSB agent tried to kill another ex-Russian spy named Sergei Skripal.

A stated above in the theory section neoclassical realism states that systemic clarity has an important function in the evaluation of threats and opportunities, when there is low systemic clarity the threats and opportunities are remote and less intense, in these situations' unit-level intervening variables play a greater role. The reverse is true when there is high systemic clarity and the threats and opportunities are clear and imminent, that means that the policy choices of states are constrained, and domestic factor are not as important (Baun & Marek, 2019). Russian use of hybrid instruments such as hacking and trying to undermine elections in France and the US is away too murky the water and blur the systemic clarity.

Uncertainty is another factor that must be accounted for, since the signals sent by the international system is not always clear, leaders can face uncertainty in their calculation of the balance-of-power or what intentions other states have. Other factors that impact uncertainty is unit-level factors like leaders' worldview or strategic culture (Ripsman et al, 2016:51). Germany has a long and troubled relationship with Russia. Angela Merkle who was born and raised in the German Democratic Republic, she travelled in the Soviet Union, she speaks the language. Merkle's decision making skills is said to come from her natural science background.

Mushaben (2017:134) writes that before Merkel reacts to a crisis or any important event:

She attempts to discern the main actors, their motives, and interests before
assessing the broader costs, benefits, and risks associated with particular

solutions. Next, she considers the best level for addressing the problem, the most
trustworthy actors, and a promising decision-making structure [] ... She will not
commit to a decision until she has a sense of both the short- and long-term effects
associated with potential solutions.

Even with such a thorough methodology for decision making as Merkle's, German strategic culture can bring back uncertainty on how to react to Russian belligerence. The German defence white paper (2016) highlights Russian troublemaking:

In the course of extensively modernising its armed forces, Russia appears to be
prepared to test the limits of existing international agreements. By increasingly
using hybrid instruments to purposefully blur the borders between war and peace,
Russia is creating uncertainty about the nature of its intentions. (p.32)

Russia has increased their military spending by 175 percent since 2000 to 2019 according to SIPRI, but some researcher argues that the number is much higher than that. By using purchasing power parity (PPP) rather than market exchange rates the rate of military spending in Russia was between a range of 150$ billion to 180$ billion the last five years (Kofman & Connolly, 2019). This massive increase in expenditure has given Russia the ability to fully modernize its ICMB arsenal that will 100% complete in 2024, and the means to operationalize it Avangard hypersonic boost glide vehicle and to deploy 20 regiments of its new Sarmat heavy ICBM by 2027 (Schneider, 2020, 23april).

In the realm of arms control there have are reasons to be concerned in the EU, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty expired august 2, 2019. The only remaining arms control agreement left is the new START which is set to expire in 2021 if it is not extended (Kimball, 2020). All these are bilateral deals between Russia and USA affects Europe, but Europe has no say in it. That the US left the INF treaty without consultation with its close allies speaks loudly about the relationship between the Trump administration and the EU. The US said that Russia was in "material breach" of the treaty and was non-compliant and was forced to withdraw from the treaty (Taheran, 2019, 1 Feb). This episode shows how dependent the EU is on American defence support. Russia is portrayed as a geopolitical challenge for the EU, one that does not hesitate to use military power to redraw the boarder of a European country, something that is a real problem for the EU since it goes against some of its core beliefs.

The influence of the United States of America

The United States of America has for many years been signalling that its security concerns had shifted from Europe and the Middle East to East Asian and the rising superpower China. In 2011 the Obama administration announced it strategic rebalancing toward Asia, in what became known as the pivot to Asia. The pivot entailed a deeper strategic involvement in the Asia-pacific and a lesser military footprint in the Middle East (De Castro 2018:180). As the US national interests in the Middle East diminishes, it is up to the Europeans to fill the gap. The uncertainty about the US role in European security and the Trump administration hostilities towards his European colleagues and when Trump speaking before NATO in 2017 failed to explicit endorse Article 5 about the mutual aid clause, and his refusal to do so has shaken his NATO allies (Gray 2017, May 25). American leaders have at least since 2011 when Robert Gates was President Barack Obamas secretary of defence, berated his European colleagues, when he told them if they don´t increase their investment in defence capabilities the US might not see the point in NATO. The German white paper (2016) sees it as an opportunity for the transatlantic partnership to grow closer and more productive *"the more we Europeans are prepared to shoulder a larger share of the common burden, and the more our American partners engage in shared decision-making"*.

In Europe one of the strongest proponents of European strategic autonomy is the French president Emmanuel Macron, he called NATO brain dead and questioned American commitment to collective defence in an interview with a newspaper (BBC, 2017, November 7).

President Macron mentioned the relationship with the US in his Initiative for Europe speech in 2017, that speech is more known as the Sorbonne speech, when he said that he noticed a *"gradual and inevitable disengagement by the United States"* in European security (Macron, 2017, September 26). Macrons statements about NATO and the US is a subtle way of saying that the EU needs to bolster its own military resources and strive for strategic autonomy.

Trump has also shown disdain for the EU as a whole and even called it a foe. In 2017 Jean-Claude Juncker held a speech at the defence and security conference in Prague where he starkly declared

> *The United States fundamentally changed its foreign policy long before the*
> *arrival of Mr Trump. Over the past decade it has become crystal clear that our*

American partners consider that they are shouldering too much of the burden for their wealthy European Allies.

This realisation led him to say, *"the protection of Europe can no longer be outsourced"* (Junker 2017). This was also something that the French defence white paper (2013) acknowledged:

The United States are cutting back on military spending and partly refocusing their military efforts on the Asia-Pacific region. Consequently, our US allies are likely to become more selective with regard to their foreign commitments. It also puts more pressure on the Europeans to shoulder responsibility for the security issues that concern them most directly. (p.9)

The same sentiment was also echoed in the German white paper (2016):

In past years, the United States has increasingly called on its partners, including in Europe, to take on more responsibility. This trend is likely to continue in view of economic and political developments in the United States. (p.31)

This uncertainty about American protection of Europe has a strong influence on the discourse about strategic autonomy and one of the crucial reasons that the notion of European strategic autonomy has become such an important topic in the European capitals. The American case is both an opportunity and a potential problem, it is an opportunity for the EU to form a closer defence union. But the threat of possibly leaving NATO or not living up to the article 5 cluse is reason for concern.

Brexit

The UK was the EUs biggest defence actor, but with the pro brexit vote on June 23, 2016, the EU lost one of its greatest military contributors, and with Trump being vague on if the US would commit to NATOs article 5 and his constant belligerent approach to his allies. Angela Merkel realized that the one of the most important security actors in Europe were gone with the brexit vote, and that the systemic pressures from the other case studies are so big that even German scepticism towards its military is eroding and is starting to realise that it must shoulder more of a defence burden in the EU.

The UK has a complex history to the EU, and even though Tony Blair was one of the architects of the CSDP and European strategic autonomy, the UK has blocked or delayed proposals of an EU Operational Headquarters, to the funding of the European Defence Agency necessary to launch EU projects and most important the UK was against ambitions expressions of the CSDP (Howorth, 2017).

So, when Brexit happened it gave the other EU countries the possibility to increase their security and defence cooperation, that shows that the EU is committed to strengthening the CSDP and deeper integration overall. This shows that the EU is serious in its attempts at an ever-closer defence union, that the UK was relucted to. And on 8 June 2017 the EU established the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) as a permanent operational headquarters something that the UK was against.

The brexit vote was both a shock and an opportunity for the EU. Shortly after the brexit vote in 2016, the EU launched PESCO to raise cooperation among the member states by committing to invest, plan, develop and operate defence capabilities, something that the UK was sceptical about and that could show that the EU is committed to cooperation and greater security and defence integration. Without brexit it is difficult to see how the EU would be able to pursue strategic autonomy in security and defence, when they where so sceptical about it.

One thing that structural realism has trouble with is to take in consideration leaders' ability and willingness to change policy. According to structural realism Germany should have started balancing long ago as the balance-of-power in the region has been shifting for a time. But it took until 2017 to hear Angela Merkel say during an election speech in 2017,

> *The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over[…] I've experienced that in the last few days. We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands… We have to know that we must fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans* (BBC, 2017).

This was in response to Trump lambasting Europe and the brexit vote, this shows how big of impact the brexit vote and the Trump administration has had on German strategic thinking. These events have resulted in that the leader image of Angela Merkle as a methodical, thoughtful political leader realised that for the EU to remain relevant in the international

system it must have the not only economic muscles but also military muscles and the ability for the EU to act autonomously. Overall brexit was an opportunity for the EU to take meaningful steps towards a deeper security and defence union that the UK had blocked.

The rise of China

The last case is the rise of China, it is the most profound geopolitical challenge of the EU. Not only is China the EUs second biggest trading partner, but China has also invested in strategic assets in the EU, like the port of Piraeus in Greece and investing significantly in engineering companies in Germany. China is also trying to influence international economic governance through the creation of Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) and The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the massive China led infrastructure project is Xi Jinpings effort to realize the chines experience of emphasizing infrastructure development to promote growth and regional cooperation (Huang, 2016).

The rise of China is the most fundamental change in the international system, China will become a peer competition to USA. Chinas rise has been successful because it started as the factory of the world, its economic transformation from the late eighties forward has made the Chinese's economy bigger than the USA if calculated in purchasing power parity (PPP). For a long time, there has been a belief in the west that the more economic successes and openness that China has the faster it will transform into more of a western liberal state, it took until the 19th party congress in 2017 for the elites in the west to realize that China is not changing into a liberal western country, it rather seems to become more authoritarian when "Xi Jinpings thoughts" became enshrined in the China constitution.

When Xi Jinping became the chairman of the Chines communist party in 2012, he discarded Deng Xiaoping's dictate *"hide your capabilities and bide your time,"* and launched his vision of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation, which aims to make China a great power again. In Xi Jinpings speech during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China he outlined The Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, in where a modernization of the military is an important part, to turn the PLA into a world class fighting force that can fight and win (Xi Jinping 2018:16). China has put in a lot of effort to the modernization of the Chinese military. The Chines military expenditure has risen from 32$ billion in 1998 to 239$ billion in 2019 according to Stockholm International Peace

Research Institute (SIPRI, 2019), that makes it the second highest spender, behind the USA. China has claimed a string of island in the South China Sea and even built some man-made islands in the contested seas. The Paracel and spratley islands has airstrips and military installations, and Woody Island hosts cruise missiles a radar system and can deploy fighter jets (CFR, 2020). The EUs strategic outlook paper on China, notes that Chinas military capabilities is a security issue for the EU:

> *China's increasing military capabilities coupled with its comprehensive vision and ambition to have the technologically most advanced armed forces by 2050 present security issues for the EU, already in a short to mid-term perspective* (p.4)

This shift in the balance-of-power is a once in a century occurrence, and it is reverberating through out the international system. China with its 1.5 billion people and massive state sanctioned strive to become a technological superpower with its "Made in 2025" policy (Cyrill, 2018). The program aims to make China leading in ten high technology sectors, such as AI, robotics, electrical vehicles, and the end goal of "Made in 2025" is to make the domestic company self-sufficient. This is a threat to the EU companies that compete in the same segment, like the German "mittelstand" companies that the Chinese have been buying up in the recent years. This complicated relationship with China has led the EU to simultaneously described its relationship with China on three separate levels – partner, competitor, and rival (European Commission, HR/VP, 2019).

This new more realist view of China has also appeared in "EU – China A strategic outlook" document that was released in 2019, where they call China a systemic rival promoting alternative models of government (EEAS, 2019: 1).

Josep Borrell who is the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission means that European strategic autonomy is a process of political survival. He means that the world has change and that the weight of Europe has are diminishing, Europe have gone from 25% of the world GNP thirty years ago to a predicted 11% in another twenty years, Chinese GNP will be around 22% and US at 14% (Borrell 2020, December 3). Basically, he says that the rise of China will affect the international system in such a way that the European Union must be militarily prepared to defend its interests alone if necessary.

The EU and the US will see a relative decline in the share of GNP, as other countries get richer, in what Fareed Zakaria calls the rise of the rest. The German defence white paper (2016:30) also mentioned how the economic, political, and military growth of key states in the international system will lead to increasing multipolarity and a diffusion of power. They note that *"China could account for one fifth of the global economic output by 2030",* and in defence *"China already spends approximately as much as all EU states combined."*

China is a curious case because it represents both an economic opportunity for European companies and a potential rival in global governance and maybe even a military threat.

Pew research shows how the attitude towards China has become more negative in recent years and it has accelerated during this year, it is the Chinese mishandling of the Covid-19 epidemic that started in Wuhan, that has resulted in a massive distrust towards the Chinese leadership. The percent of the population with an unfavourable view if China has increased by 15% from 2019 to 2020 in Germany, now 71% of the population views China unfavourably (Pew research 2020). That the public attitude towards China is so negative makes it easier for the political leaders to get support for harsh policy against China. Right now, the threat the comes from China is economic and technological not military as of yet. But the potential of a military powerful China with its vast resources is pressuring policy makers in the EU to increase their military cooperation.

Conclusion

The research question that this thesis sought to answer was: *What factors are behind EUs sudden strive for strategic autonomy and how can it best be theoretically explained?*

We have demonstrated the strength of combining the different unit-levels in an integrated theoretical framework and how it reveals a broader landscape of analysis which helps us better understand theoretically why there is so much focus on the notion of strategic autonomy. The rise of China is the most significant geopolitical change since the fall of the Soviet Union, and because of the sheer size of the country and its population it will assert its right to political and economic influence in the international system. Right now, China is more of an economic threat to the EU, but the potential military power that China will have in the future is an aspect that the leaders of the EU cannot disregard.

This thesis has shown how the shift in the international system from a unipolar world to a multipolar world where the factors behind the systemic pressures of Russian aggressiveness and the rise of China and together with a more uncertain transatlantic alliance, has led to domestic pressure for more cooperation in CSDP and not from dynamics internal to the EU or from social processes as explained by liberal and constructivist theories. Brexit has also encouraged, and incentivised members states to increase activity in CSDP as a way to ameliorate the loss of the UK but also as a way to increase the integration of the union in "high politic" areas. All these systemic shifts have forced the EU to realize that if it wants to remain an international player it must become more than a normative power, it must also become a military power, with the strategic autonomy to pursue its own interests.

In June 2020, the EU defence ministers launched "strategic compass", which will lay out a new strategy concerning the EUs aims in security and defence policy. It will also try to build a common European security culture, so that everybody agrees on the key threats facing Europe and how to best counter these threats (Scazzieri 2020). In this thesis we argued that the strategic culture of Germany and France as the intervening variables is the most likely variable to influence their respective national defence cooperation.

Assuming that the strategic compass succeeds in providing a strategic culture for all the EU, then there will be less political infighting when it comes to different strategic cultures, then

factors like institutional structures and public opinion can increase in influence as the common security and defence policy cooperation proceeds and deepens.

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