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**THE EUROPEAN UNION'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY:
DIVERGENCE OF UNDERSTANDINGS ACROSS MEMBER STATES AND
ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATION**

MA Thesis

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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ABSTRACT

Being present in the European Union's (EU) strategic documents and commonly used in political statements, "strategic autonomy" has become one of the latest catchphrases in European security and defence discourse. The ambiguous nature of this concept has led to concerns that it *may* have different meanings among the EU member states and the lack of common understanding *may* hamper the practical cooperation working towards this end. Informed by constructivist theorising on meaning-making across national contexts and the notions of constructive/destructive ambiguity, this thesis seeks to substantiate the debates on European strategic autonomy by providing empirical insights to it.

The aims of this study are twofold. Drawing on original data from 23 expert interviews, first, in order to establish the empirical picture of the diversity of meanings of the notion of EU strategic autonomy, it maps out the national understandings of the concept in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and Estonia. Second, in order to assess the implications of the multiplicity of interpretations for cooperation, the study then explores how the actors themselves perceive the issue of diverging understandings in the context of practical cooperation taking place in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework.

As regards to the multiple understandings of the concept of strategic autonomy, the findings of this study show that the core meaning of it is similar for all the analysed member states, that being "Europe's capacity to act as Europe in security and defence related matters". However, divergences emerge in relation to more reflective issues, such as aiming for self-sufficiency or seeing gradual capability development as an end in itself; the degree of exclusivity implied by this ambition; and whether a European drive in the direction of autonomy is perceived as a potential threat to transatlantic values.

In terms of the impact of the multiplicity of interpretations on practical cooperation, the second key finding of this study suggests that the ambiguity of the notion of strategic autonomy is not necessarily hindering to practical cooperation that is taking place in the EU frameworks aimed to support this ambition. Rather, the policy-makers across the member states perceive the cooperative action itself as something that leads to more clarity and eventually helps to pinpoint the collective understanding of the goals to be achieved.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CARD – Coordinated Annual Review on Defence

CFSP – Common Foreign and Security Policy

CSDP – Common Security and Defence Policy

EDF – European Defence Fund

EI2 – European Intervention Initiative

ESDP – European Security and Defence Policy

EU – European Union

EUGS – European Union Global Strategy

MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MoD – Ministry of Defence

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PESCO – Permanent Structured Cooperation

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, the European security and defence cooperation has gained new momentum. A milestone was reached in 2016 with the new Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS). The document was released during a time of notable shift in European strategic thought driven by a number of internal and external pressures. Internal factors included the Brexit vote and the changed political dynamics in many European states, feeding into rising public demands for security (see Tocci, 2016, 2017). Externally, the Europe was not only witnessing continuous instability at its borders, but also rising tensions in the relationships of the West with Russia and China, as well as transatlantic strains (see also Alcaro et al., 2016). All of it took place in a strategic environment increasingly dominated by new security threats and general volatility. These developments led the EU to make the promise of picking up a greater responsibility for the security of its member states with a focus on capacity building and developing better response to crises. In doing so, a renewed emphasis was put on the idea of strategic autonomy.

The concept of strategic autonomy has made its appearance in the debates surrounding the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) before, prominently at least since the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration, where the notion that “the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action” was conceived (Franco-British St. Malo Declaration, 1998, 2). Yet, never has it drawn as much attention as now. With this attention has also come a notable amount of confusion. According to the EU Global Strategy: “An appropriate level of ambition and *strategic autonomy* is important for Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders” (EUGS, 2016, 9, emphasis added). While this goal undeniably carries an important message, it does not offer much clarity. Fast-forward a couple of years, several new defence initiatives and countless political statements, some more controversial than others (see e.g. Maas, 2018; Macron, 2018) and the ambiguity surrounding the term has only increased. Dissatisfied with this state of affairs, scholars and policy-makers alike are trying to define the concept of “strategic autonomy” (e.g. Mauro, 2018; Varga, 2017), but for the time being its meaning remains elusive.

In the broadest possible sense, the EU itself has defined strategic autonomy in terms of ability to “act alone when necessary and with partners whenever possible” in matters of security and defence (European External Action Service, 2018). In some more detail, the Global Strategy highlighted the importance of the industrial component for strategic autonomy and further proposed developing a comprehensive defence strategy that would determine the tasks, capabilities requirements, and priorities of the member states that should form the basis of the Union’s renewed defence ambitions (EUGS, 2016, 45). The focus on capacity-building has later been backed up with several new initiatives, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). In academic circles, “strategic autonomy” is commonly referred to through its three dimensions: political (decision-making), operational (action), and industrial (capabilities) autonomy (e.g. Arteaga, 2017; Kempin and Kunz, 2017). More recently, the proposed definitions of “strategic autonomy” have expanded well beyond the dimension of defence policy, and encompass the EU’s capacity for autonomous action in the entire spectrum of foreign and security policy (Lippert et al., 2019).

The abovementioned documents and academic debates help to understand the direction that the EU has taken (or should take according to the EU policy-makers) in order to become a more capable actor in the field of security and defence. In spite of those broad lines of meaning of “strategic autonomy”, the overall picture still remains fragmented. This is because, as the observers have noted (see e.g. Bartels et al., 2017; Drent, 2018; Puhl, 2018), different member states understand the notion of strategic autonomy differently. Given the openness of the term to divergent national interpretations, the prospect of reaching a common understanding of this strategic objective at the EU level becomes highly questionable. As a result, the prospects of practical cooperation towards this end may be equally put in doubt (Mauro, 2018, 27; Puhl, 2018, 2). While the discussions about the diverging understandings of the concept of strategic autonomy and the practical implications of this multiplicity of interpretations are present, the empirical reality remains largely unexplored. This both in terms of what those multiple national understandings of the goal of European strategic autonomy are (where do they diverge and where do they overlap) and whether the lack of a shared understanding in fact poses a substantial obstacle to practical cooperation aimed to achieve this objective.

Addressing the existing gap in research, this thesis seeks to explore the following two questions. First, what are the meanings given to the term “strategic autonomy” by the EU member states? And second, how do the divergent understandings of “strategic autonomy” among the EU member states affect their practical cooperation to achieve this goal? Whereas the first question allows to establish the empirical reality of the member states’ interpretations of strategic autonomy, the second, building on the findings of the first, then allows to investigate the practical implications of the aforementioned plurality. With regard to the impact of the multiplicity of understandings of the notion of strategic autonomy on EU defence cooperation, this question is explored in an open-ended manner, arguing that the mere fact that the same linguistic concept can have multiple divergent meanings among different state actors is neither good nor bad *a priori* with regard to practical cooperation. This open-ended theoretical perspective is informed by two different strands of literature, one of which suggests that cooperation can be hindered by normative divergence and under-conceptualisation of collective goals (e.g. Tardy, 2018), while the other explores the notion of constructive ambiguity, which refers to the deliberate use of open language with the aim to leave room for national interpretations and foster cooperation (e.g. Rayroux, 2013).

In order to answer the proposed research questions, this study carries out two main research tasks. First, it maps out five different national understandings of the notion of strategic autonomy by exploring the cases of France, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and Estonia. The case selection takes into consideration the Atlanticist – Europeanist divide in strategic cultures in order to capture the widest possible range of the divergent interpretations of “strategic autonomy”. The comparison of the five cases seeks to give indication how sharp is the contrast between the national understandings of the concept of strategic autonomy, simultaneously serving as a reference point to the second part of the empirical analysis. The second half of the empirical part then investigates the member states’ perceptions about the implications of those multiple interpretations for cooperation, focusing on the case of PESCO as the most telling example of a platform for cooperative action aimed at European defence capability development and political integration. Without aiming to establish a strict causal relationship between the divergent understandings of strategic autonomy and levels of cooperation, the analysis instead provides initial insights into effect on cooperation – as perceived by the actors themselves.

The data used in this research relies on expert interviews. In total, 23 government officials and policy analysts across the five country cases were interviewed to provide an empirically-grounded account on the topic. Being directly involved in the process of generating and articulating the meanings given to “strategic autonomy” and present in the arenas of practical cooperation, interviewing decision-makers offers original insights that are not available elsewhere. A set of analytical categories were defined based on the conceptual underpinnings of this research to analyse the gathered data. The divergent national understandings of “strategic autonomy” were explored and compared to each other focusing on the following aspects: the defining elements of strategic autonomy, exclusivity and inclusivity as it relates to strategic autonomy, realisation of strategic autonomy, and the fit of this ambition into the current regional security architecture. The matters concerning the impact of the multiple understandings on practical cooperation within the PESCO framework were examined based on the experts’ assessment of PESCO as a tool facilitating strategic autonomy, their perceptions about the interplay between ambiguity and cooperation, and what they identified as the main fault lines that divide the member states.

The remainder of this thesis is divided into five sections. The first Chapter lays out the theoretical framework of the study. Drawing on constructivist research on meaning construction and literature on strategic culture, it puts forward an account of divergent understandings, how come different states interpret the same strategic objective in significantly different ways. Then, the Chapter proceeds by discussing the effect of this multiplicity of understandings on cooperative action. The second section of the study describes the research methodology utilised. The general description of the research design is followed by an overview of data collection. The third Chapter, representing the bulk of this study, presents the analysis of how the notion of strategic autonomy is understood in five EU member states: France, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and Estonia. The fourth section then explores if the divergence of national interpretations of the EU’s defence goal of strategic autonomy has had any significant negative effects on the cooperation taking place within the PESCO framework. Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion on the research findings.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section lays out the theoretical grounding of the study by addressing two key issues. First, it explores the emergence of diverging national understandings of specific security and defence goals even if they are in principle defined by a common denominator (i.e. a concrete term, or agreed upon set of priorities). This is done by combining insights from the literature on critical constructivism, which assigns meaning an important role in world politics, with a framework of strategic culture. Second, it considers the practical implications of the multiplicity of understandings for security cooperation. In doing so, two different strands of literature are discussed, one of which suggests that cooperation can be hindered by the under-conceptualisation of collective goals, while the other introduces the notion of constructive ambiguity, which refers to the deliberate use of open language with the aim to facilitate cooperation. The theoretical discussion departs from a purely conceptual starting point, then moving towards the EU-specific context.

1.1. Meaning Construction and Context Plurality

At the most basic level, “strategic autonomy” is simply a word; a linguistic concept; a signifier that has no meaning in itself. Poststructuralist scholars in particular have pointed out that all meaning is in principle undetermined and never objective (see Torfing, 1999). Instead, it is “decided” or “articulated” by social actors, be it individuals, communities, or states, and always context-specific (Milliken, 1999, 229). From a constructivist perspective, it is the unique discursive context of background knowledge and experiences that shape the actors’ understandings of linguistic concepts that mark different norms, ideas and goals (Wiener, 2017, 114). This background may be cultural, institutional, social or otherwise. As such, it follows that state-level interpretations of the same linguistic concept differ across international borders (Ibid.). Literature has exemplified these dynamics more extensively in the case of international norms and polysemy of institutions (e.g. Costa-Buranelli, 2015; Wiener, 2008, 2014). The same logic is arguably at play in the case of EU defence cooperation and the common pursuit by member states of “strategic autonomy” at the EU level.

As indicated above, two aspects are central to the multiplicity of meanings: divergent interpretive contexts and the inherent openness of language. In regard to international relations, this manifests itself as a contextual duality of national and international interpretive backgrounds. More specifically, internationally validated concepts, whether it be norms or strategic goals, and their meanings are agreed upon in global/regional elite communities but interpreted, negotiated and applied in diverse domestic contexts (see Wiener, 2008). This dynamic helps create a fit with local customary beliefs, but carries with it the potential for misunderstandings at the international level (Wiener, 2017, 114). Returning to the specificities of defining the meaning of “strategic autonomy”, it therefore can be argued that being a strategic objective that is part of the EU security and defence discourse, the concept already comes with a degree of context-specific meaning. However, in as much as concepts at the international level are dependent on domestic level interpretation (what Wiener calls “cultural validation”), the divergent national understandings of this concept are largely dependent on diverse national interpretative contexts – which for strategic issues can be defined as strategic culture.

Most conceptualisations of strategic culture are quite broad, incorporating references to ideas, norms, attitudes, beliefs, historical experiences and collective memories, as well as patterns of behaviour, habits, and traditions (Gray, 1999; Heiselberg, 2003; Johnston, 1995; Longhurst, 2004). Despite the absence of a common definition, most of those who use the term tend to agree that strategic culture is rooted in the early or formative experiences of the state, whereas ahistorical and material variables such as technology, institutional setup, or relative capabilities are of secondary importance (Johnston, 1995, 34). However, geography, for example, can play a significant role in the development of a state’s strategic culture, under the condition that its importance for strategic choices has been passed on from one generation of decision-makers to the next. Therefore, what matters here are the historical experiences of geography or other material conditions that have gradually evolved into persistent beliefs that affect strategic thinking (Snyder, 1977, 8). Strategic culture as the sum of the aforementioned formative experiences and ideational predispositions can therefore be pinpointed as the “interpretive context” that shapes the actors’ understandings of strategic objectives, such as EU strategic autonomy.

Along those lines, Johnston (1995, 45) defines strategic culture as an ideational milieu that consists of “shared assumptions and decision rules” that frame collective conceptions

of the social, organisational and political surroundings. These presumptions focus attention on certain features of events and behaviour, mark down the red lines that shall not be crossed, identify the priorities and secondary issues, essentially functioning like a “lens of interpretation”. By being transplanted into this cultural context, strategic issues, or security and defence concepts thereof, acquire a specific meaning. As such, notions like “collective defence”, “cooperative security”, “utility of military force”, or “strategic autonomy” are given divergent meanings across state borders. For example, a country with an established tradition of self-reliance and independence as the defining element of its strategic culture can be expected to have a different understanding of the aforementioned concepts compared to a state whose security has historically been built upon strong partnerships. What is considered to be a political principle by one, can easily be interpreted as a measure of last resort by the other. Where one sees contradiction, the other can argue for complementarity. Hence, seemingly the same security objective becomes open to multiple meanings.

With the development of CSDP, the notion of strategic culture is now often invoked also in the context of the EU. On the one hand, there are rather convincing arguments made regarding the dynamics of Europeanisation in the field of foreign and security policies of the EU member states that allow to speak about a *convergence towards* a shared strategic culture (Hill and Wong, 2011; Meyer, 2005; Riemer, 2005). This process by means of providing a single interpretative context for strategic issues, could potentially lessen the issue of multiple interpretations of the same strategic concept at the EU level. Other scholars, however, contend that the differences among national strategic cultures in Europe are large and persistent, therefore the member states are still far away from establishing a shared understanding about to what common security and defence should entail and how far the EU should go in this field (Lindley-French, 2002; Rynning, 2003; Tardy, 2007). Here, this study follows the latter view – at least to the extent that national strategic culture/interpretative context is still dominant. This indicates that with continuing dominance of national strategic cultures, meanings given to specific strategic objectives at the EU level remain divergent and iterative social interaction is not necessary conducive to the shared interpretation.

While in principle it would not be incorrect to say that the EU’s starting point is one in which there are 28 states with different strategic cultures, it is analytically somewhat

incomprehensible. Instead, the pattern of strategic cultures in the EU can be thought of as a nuanced mix of similarities and differences, or clusters. More specifically, Howorth (2002, 90) has outlined six types of divergences in EU member state national security cultures: allied/neutral, Atlanticist/Europeanist, professional power projection/conscript-based territorial defence, nuclear/non-nuclear, military/civilian instruments, large/small states and weapon providers/consumers. These divergences capture the most significant variations in the EU member states' security-cultural backgrounds, covering a wide range of issues from strategic orientations to matters related to relative military power. As such, these six cultures provide six distinctive interpretative contexts for meaning-making/cultural validation of EU level strategic concepts.

While all the six divergences can be expected to account for the different understandings of “strategic autonomy”, the decisive divide can be considered to be the one between Atlanticists and Europeanists. There are multiple reasons to it. First and foremost, the current regional security architecture undeniably positions the notion of strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the US and NATO (see e.g. Howorth, 2018). This ties directly into the stark contrasts between the assumptions about the appropriate institutional architecture for the security arrangements of the continent, key partnerships and preferred formats of cooperation that all remain central to defining European strategic autonomy as a strategic objective. Second, the Atlanticist – Europeanist divide has been identified as one of the key fault-lines throughout the development of the CSDP (Jonson, 2006, 67), reflecting the fragmented views of the overall meaning of this project now of which the goal of strategic autonomy is part of. Therefore, meanings of “strategic culture”, national-level interpretations, can be expected to vary primarily according to this divergence. The focus on the Atlanticist-Europeanist divide will be relevant mainly in respect of the case selection in the empirical part of this study

Departing from this principle of openness of language and context plurality, this thesis argues that the notion of European strategic autonomy being open to divergent national understandings is inevitable. The EU broad definition of strategic autonomy as the capacity to “act alone when necessary and with partners whenever possible” in matters of security and defence (European External Action Service, 2018) that has been backed up with an increased focus on capability development leaves a significant amount of room for varied national interpretations. Even if all the member states would agree that the idea

of strategic autonomy is capacity-driven and/or action-oriented, many unanswered questions prevail. This because the EU level conceptualisation by itself does not specify what strategic autonomy as a strategic objective *means*, nor unequivocally specify behavioural prescriptions. Defining this meaning and its practical implications at the national level requires cultural validation, which translates into answering questions, such as: What should “strategic autonomy” entail? How to best achieve this goal? How does this ambition relate to core transatlantic values? As a result, diverging interpretations can be expected across different strategic cultures. This multiplicity of understandings feeds into ambiguity, and *vice versa*.

1.2. Cooperation in the Field of Security and Defence: Hindered by Conceptual Ambiguity or Not?

After exploring the notion of diversity in national interpretations of a single linguistic concept, the question that arises is that why does it even matter? Or to put it differently, what are the practical implications of the multiple understandings? This is not only an abstract theoretical question, but directly connects to the ongoing debates on the ambiguity of the notion European strategic autonomy (e.g. Drent, 2018; Mauro, 2018). Several authors have highlighted the link between collective action dilemmas and conceptual ambiguity – the phenomenon that was discussed in the previous section – i.e. that linguistic concepts that refer to norms, ideas or specific strategic objectives do not have the same meaning for different state actors (Checkel, 2001; Risse, 2000; Tardy, 2018). While there is a broad agreement that cooperation between social actors requires a degree of “common knowledge”, or a collective supply of interpretations, the literature remains divided on whether this shared understanding rests on precision or ambiguity, and whether the multiplicity of interpretations should be “governed away” or left to be resolved naturally as the meanings of linguistic concepts are put into use. The following discussion explores both ends of this argument, focusing on the specifics of EU security and defence cooperation.

It has become a frequent claim that within the field of security and defence integration, the notion of “substantial rationality” alone does not explain state behaviour (Jonson,

2006, 245) and cooperative action is often hampered precisely by normative splits (Krotz and Maher, 2011, 565). Conceptual ambiguity can be seen as a reflection of those divergences. As explained in the previous Chapter, when presented with a policy goal in a form of a linguistic concept, each state is inclined to translate it into its own strategic language; define the meaning of the concept based on national background knowledge and experiences. Divergent interpretations, in turn, bottom-up from national to international level, subsuming a range of meanings under a common term result in the ambiguity of the concept. This, however, has potentially a negative effect on the prospects of cooperation, as the states lack a common ground for action (see e.g. Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Instead, disagreements and conflicts are expected to arise because the actors do not only diverge on the interpretations of the policy objective but also disagree over prescription of which action should follow. Hence, the claim that having a shared understanding about the issue at hand is a precondition for cooperation. Without such common interpretation, practical cooperation can be significantly hampered.

This argument appears to be highly relevant in respect of the European security and defence project. Cornish and Edwards (2005, 818) have noted that the fact that EU member states diverge on both their interpretations of the virtues of military force and on the appropriateness of the EU as a security actor poses a significant challenge to the development of the ESDP (now CSDP). Similarly, exploring the issue of *under-conceptualisation* as it relates to the CSDP, Tardy (2018, 133) argues that it is precisely the fact that the member states do not have a common understanding of the term “defence” in the EU context that continues to hinder the development of an effective internal cooperation in this area. While some states see it mainly as a socialisation process through capacity development, others opt for a more proactive approach, setting the focus on conducting operations (Ibid.). Divergent interpretations of the ends and means of the same objective lead to a situation where the member states are simply pulling in different directions. Tardy specifically highlights the discussions on PESCO framework, and the contrast between the exclusive, mission-oriented vision put forward by France and the more inclusive approach of Germany in which socialisation of EU member states around joint projects was an end in itself (Ibid., 134). This exemplifies that, in the context of EU defence cooperation, the absence of clear meaning of the goal might render attempts at practical cooperation futile.

Yet, there is also an alternative approach that suggests that the notion of openness to interpretation (or under-conceptualisation) when defining collective strategic goals is not always incidental and also not necessarily obstructive. On the opposite, the use of open language and blurry terms, such as “strategic autonomy”, can often be purposive in order to circumvent the issue of non-compliance. To further elaborate on this somewhat controversial idea, the concept of constructive ambiguity¹ becomes useful. Defined as “the deliberate use of ambiguous language on a sensitive issue in order to advance some political purpose” (Berridge and James, 2003, cited from Rayroux, 2013, 387), this strategy can be, in fact, used to foster cooperation between social actors, including states. The logic behind this claim is that ambiguous concepts leave room for preferable national interpretations. This creates an illusion that the “offer on the table” is something that each individual actor wants, therefore creating more space for reaching agreements and engaging in cooperative action. However, it is important to be aware that the “constructive” element refers to the *immediate* advancement of a political goal, hence this strategy does not offer any guarantees on how the achieved cooperation will work out in the long term (Mitchell, 2009, 323).

In the context of the EU, constructive ambiguity is mostly called upon in situations where national preferences are diverse and the EU’s legal basis not binding, good examples being defence and energy policies (Jegen and Mérand, 2013), or arms export control (Hansen, 2015). When it comes to the development of the CSDP, then Stanley Hoffmann (2000, 197) has noted that France and the UK giving different meanings to “autonomy” during the 1998 bilateral Saint-Malo actually helped to initiate the EU’s security and defence policy as such. The use of constructive ambiguity can also be exemplified by the lack of a clear strategic purpose in the so-called “Headline Goal”, varying national interpretations of the “Petersberg tasks”, and the content of the 2003 European Security Strategy (Rayroux, 2013, 388). It appears that loosely defined strategic objectives are anything but unusual in the context of EU security and defence cooperation. Linguistic ambiguity can often be the most effective tool in accommodating the diverse interests of the member states. As such, it also addresses the “Atlanticism vs. Europeanism” struggle

¹ Authors working within a rationalist paradigm have examined a similar phenomenon under the notion of “incomplete contracting”. See e.g., Hofman, S. C. (2011). “Why Institutional Overlap Matters: CSDP in the European Security Architecture”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 49 (1): 101–120.

that has proven to be one of the most fundamentally divisive aspects of the entire CSDP process. From this strand of literature which emphasises the potential of ambiguity to foster cooperation follows that unclear meaning does not only not hinder practical cooperation, but it may in fact facilitate it.

Following the discussion on the two contrasting views on the relationship between ambiguity and cooperative action, this thesis argues that openness to interpretation, reflected in the sense that linguistic concepts that signify strategic objectives do not unequivocally have just one meaning, is neither good nor bad *a priori* with regard to practical cooperation. This means that the effect that the multiplicity of meanings at national level given to a linguistic concept at the international level has on cooperative action to pursue this objective is not pre-determined – it can be both, negative or positive. Whether the divergent interpretation across state actors culminate in obstacles to cooperation, or whether it forms the basis of finding shared organising principles for collective action depends on how this multiplicity is accommodated as the cooperation proceeds over time. In principle, there is always room for reaching a reasoned consensus among the state actors, be it by utility-maximising action, rule-guided behaviour, or engaging in argumentation and persuasion (see Risse, 2000; Wiener, 2014). Hence, multiple meanings given to a word, norm, idea, or a goal are not necessarily something that need to be “governed away” by specification and reaching a common definition. In fact, this is often impossible or even counterproductive. Rather, the divergent interpretations can be expected to “even out” as the meaning of the concept is enacted in context-specific settings.

Returning to the issue of defining the meaning of “strategic autonomy” at the EU level, this study suggests that even if the multiplicity of national interpretations of this term may appear problematic on a conceptual level, it may not be so for practical cooperation. On the one hand, there is a possibility that different visions about the essence of the goal of strategic autonomy and the method to be applied hinder the cooperation aimed to achieve this strategic objective. On the other hand, however, there is a chance that the ambiguity of this concept has made it easier for the member states to engage in the various initiatives that have been launched with hopes to enhance the EU’s capacity for autonomous action in security and defence affairs, therefore fostering cooperation instead. The latter option does not mean that there are no practical disagreements between the member states, but

it allows to suggest that it is possible to overcome them as the social interaction taking place within the various frameworks of cooperation feeds into the collective supply of interpretations. Whereas both options are theoretically possible in the case of EU strategic autonomy and cooperation, this is simply an empirical question – this study set out to explore.

2. METHODOLOGY

The following section gives an overview of the methodological considerations of this study. First, it discusses the overall research strategy used in order to answer the proposed research questions: What are the meanings given to the term “strategic autonomy” by the EU member states? And second, how do the divergent understandings of “strategic autonomy” among the EU member states affect their practical cooperation to achieve this goal? In doing so, the aspects of case selection as well as the limitations of this study are discussed. Then, the Chapter proceeds by providing a more detailed insight into the matters related to data collection and conducting the expert interviews. Finally, the analytic procedure of integrating within-case and across-case analysis is summarised.

2.1. Research Design

The aim of this research paper is to explore the divergent understandings of the concept “strategic autonomy” among the EU member states and their effect on the practical cooperation to achieve this goal. As such, the research project is designed as a comparative study with an additional component focusing on the issue of cooperative action. More specifically, the first part of the analysis addresses the research puzzle by investigating the interpretations of the notion of strategic autonomy in five EU member states: France, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and Estonia. The result of this comparison serves as a reference point for the second half of the study, which takes a look at the member states’ perceptions about the implications of those multiple interpretations for cooperation, focusing on the case of PESCO.

The comparison of the five different national interpretations of the idea of EU strategic autonomy is central to this study. The case selection builds upon the Atlanticist – Europeanist divide of strategic cultures (see Chapter 1.1.), which is used as an account for divergent understandings of strategic autonomy. This principle for case selection is used to structure the analysis and assure the optimal diversity of the possible meanings given to the concept of strategic autonomy. Rather than a binary differentiation between the two strategic cultures, the divide is viewed as a *spectrum* of inclinations in national

strategic cultures (Figure 1). Based on secondary literature, the most pronounced positions on the each end of the spectrum are identified (the Netherlands, France).² In addition to the extreme positions, a “mid-way” case of Germany is added in order to substantiate the positions along the spectrum. Third, the aspect of neutrality will be separately taken into account, hence the case of Finland. Finally, the case of Estonia is included mainly from a local policy-relevant perspective, but it also exemplifies another Atlanticist state. While the case selection is based on states’ location on the Atlanticism – Europeanism spectrum, subsequently the sample is expanded to include variations across other divergences in EU member state strategic cultures, as defined by Howorth (2002, 90) – allied/neutral, professional power projection/conscript-based territorial defence, nuclear/non-nuclear, military/civilian instruments, large/small states and weapon providers/consumers – to further depict the multiplicity of national understandings of “strategic autonomy” as they are shaped by diverse interpretive contexts.

Besides seeking to map the divergent meanings given to the notion of strategic autonomy, the thesis also explores the practical implications of this multiplicity of understandings for the practical cooperation to achieve this strategic objective. In this part of the empirical research, the dynamics of cooperation within the PESCO framework will be analysed. The focus will be set on PESCO mainly for two reasons. First, described as “a driver for integration in the field of defence”, the EU itself considers PESCO to be a crucial mechanism to “reinforce the EU’s strategic autonomy” (European External Action Service, “PESCO”, n.d.). Second, with 25 member states participating, PESCO is currently the most inclusive *platform for action* aimed at incentivising EU internal cooperation in the field of security and defence. More specifically, the PESCO framework includes two components: legally binding commitments and projects. Binding commitments are pledges made by member states in the field of defence spending, capability development, and availability and interoperability of forces. Simultaneously, a number of cooperative projects (34 as of May 2019) have been launched by PESCO members, from training activities to cyber enablers (“About PESCO”, n.d.). Hence,

² Traditionally the strong Atlanticist position would be associated with the United Kingdom, but due to their ongoing process of leaving the EU, this study excludes this case.

PESCO is found to be the most suitable case to study the drivers and pitfalls of cooperation aimed to support the goal of EU strategic autonomy.

It is important to note that the second half of this study comes with two significant limitations. First, PESCO as well as all the other initiatives launched to support the EU's ambition of becoming a more capable security and defence actor are still very new and in early stages of their implementation phase. Hence, it is difficult to draw any far-reaching conclusions regarding the eventual success of the cooperative action taking place within those formats. However, it is possible to say whether at this stage member states perceive the lack of a shared understanding of the set goals to be a substantive obstacle for their cooperation. Second, this study relies on expert interviews as means to collect empirical data. As such, the information gathered about the dynamics of cooperation and the obstacles that the member states have encountered within the PESCO framework reflects how those issues are assessed and interpreted by relevant decision-makers and policy experts from each of the five member states included in the research. Therefore, the findings cannot be treated as "hard facts", but rather as initial insight into the effects of conceptual ambiguity on cooperative action.

Taking those limitations into consideration, the analysis of the issue at hand remains largely exploratory. This means that this study does not aim to establish a strict causal relationship between the multiple understandings of strategic autonomy and the levels of cooperation among the member states within the key initiatives aimed to achieve this objective. Rather, it seeks to give indication whether the ambiguity surrounding the EU's ambition of strategic autonomy poses any problems to the practical cooperation at all. And if so, then what are the most notable fault lines that have emerged from the divergent interpretations of this strategic goal and can now be seen to affect the process of putting it into practice.

2.2. Data Collection

In order to capture the national understandings of the notion of EU strategic autonomy, as articulated and distributed by relevant decision-makers, and the perceptions about the implications of those diverse interpretations for cooperation taking place within the

frameworks aimed to achieve this strategic objective, expert interviews were used as the main tool to collect up-to-date and comprehensive data. Cohen et al. (2007, 29) note that interviewing is “a valuable method for exploring the construction and negotiation of meanings in a natural setting”. In many ways, this is where the focus of this study lies. Being part of the process of generating the meanings given to “strategic autonomy”, government officials and policy experts are also expected to best communicate it to the outside. Similarly, interviewing decision-makers offers valuable insight into the arenas of practical cooperation. Furthermore, as the discussions and policy formation related to the objective of the strategic autonomy of the EU are still very much ongoing, the issue is not extensively covered neither by policy documents nor public statements.³ Hence, expert interviews allowed to uncover information that is not accessible elsewhere.

In total, 23 interviews were conducted over the time period of February to March 2019. The distribution of the expert interviews across the five cases was the following: France – five; the Netherlands – four; Germany – five; Finland – five; Estonia – four. The principles of purposive sampling were followed as the aim was to find interviewees who are “information rich” (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, 98). The expertise on the topic was ascertained by the interviewees’ currently held professions. The target group consisted of officials from three key institutions: national Ministries of Defence (MoD), Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and Permanent Representations to the EU. Additionally, foreign and security policy experts from think tanks were included in the target group as they are often more accessible than high-level officials, but still carry sufficient expertise on the issue, being able to articulate the national understandings of strategic autonomy and the practical developments related to achieving this objective.

The goal was to conduct at least 20 interviews. The target list of interviewees consisted of 30 names. It was not possible to schedule an interview with nine persons in the original target group. Two persons who declined the invitation to be interviewed gave suggestions as to people from similar backgrounds with whom the researcher was able to conduct the interviews. On all occasions, the reason for declining the invitation to participate in the

³ France is an exception here as the 2017 Review of Defence and National Security already included a separate section on building European strategic autonomy. Yet, even there the national viewpoint provided remains rather general. There have also been some joint declarations that briefly touch upon the concept, such as the 2018 Franco-Finnish statement on European defence. However, none of those documents allow to unfold the complex national understandings of the notion of strategic autonomy of the EU.

research project was lack of time. 19 interviews were conducted in English, while Estonian was used with four respondents. 16 interviews took place over the phone, five in person, and two via Skype. The average duration of the interviews was 45 minutes. The respondents were asked for their permission to record the interviews only for the use of the researcher. As a result, 22 of the 23 interviews were recorded. Audio recordings were destroyed after the interview had been transcribed. A list of the conducted interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

A semi-structured interview format was chosen for the research as it is a good way to collect focused and readily comparable data, but it also leaves room for exploring new ideas as they may emerge from the interviews, allowing less restricted discussions on the issue. All the respondents were informed about the main issues to be discussed in the interview beforehand. Only when requested, the interviewees received a full list of preliminary interview questions prior conducting the interview. The interview questions were divided into two sections. The first set of questions focused on the national understandings of “strategic autonomy”, exploring the characteristics, perceptions, and practical issues associated with the concept. The second half of the interview questions investigated the effect that the multiplicity of meanings given to strategic autonomy has on practical cooperation to achieve this goal. Here, the focus was on the performance of PESCO as one the major steps taken towards the objective of strategic autonomy. The same list of questions was used for all the respondents. For the interviewees from Estonia, the original set of questions was translated from English to Estonian. The preliminary questions for the semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix 2.

Measures were taken to assure the transparency of the interview procedure and protect the confidentiality of research participants. The interviewees received a consent form with information about the research project and the interview procedure itself. This document explained the purpose of the study and all the technicalities concerning the interviews. It was ensured that all interviewees remained anonymous and their responses could not be linked to their identity. The interview consent form can be found in Appendix 3.

2.3. Integrating Within-Case and Across-Case Analytic Strategies

The research puzzle of this study heavily relies on the necessity of understanding the individual cases in their own context, but also developing a synthesis that captures the variation across cases. Drawing on Ayres et al. (2003) and Yin (1994), an integrative strategy of within- and across-case analysis was utilised to enable the researcher to interpret the issue of divergent understandings of “strategic autonomy” both through its parts and as a whole, such that it would be possible to recognise individual accounts in a more generalizable way. Not being a one specific method, the strategies of integrating within- and across-case analysis are rather flexible and more often than not unique to a particular research project (Ayres et al., 2003, 882). Yet, the key element across all the different approaches is the identification of themes, or analytical categories, that provide the general structure for the research findings. Those key categories provide the foundations for case-specific descriptions as well as capture differences across the cases. Some themes may be concept-driven, i.e. based on previous knowledge, such as a theory, prior research, or an interview guide; others are developed during the analysis (Ayres et al., 2003, 880).

The main analytical categories for this study were generated in a concept-driven way, based on the interview questions and theoretical underpinnings of the research project. For the section focusing on the divergent national understandings of “strategic autonomy” those were: (1) the defining elements of strategic autonomy; (2) exclusivity and inclusivity; (3) realisation of strategic autonomy; and (4) fit into the current regional security architecture. Whereas the guiding themes on the issues of practical cooperation within the PESCO framework were: (1) facilitating strategic autonomy; (2) ambiguity and cooperation; (3) fault lines. The identification of the main analytical categories was followed by an immersion in the collected data. First, all interviews were read to develop an overall understanding of how the notion of strategic autonomy and the efforts made to realise this goal are perceived among the policy experts and decision-makers from each of the five member states included in the study. In doing so, the data was also checked for any missing main analytical categories. None of those were identified. Then, the focus was set on each single country case. Within each case, significant statements were identified and organised by themes. The findings from all the interviews within one case

were compared to each other and general country-specific conclusions were drawn. Finally, the essential findings were compared across the five country cases. A general overview of the analytic strategy can be found in Table 1, whereas Table 2 explains more specifically the procedure of identifying and categorising significant statements within each country case.

Table 1. Within- and Across-case Analytic Strategies Applied in the Study

Strategy	Analytic Focus	Outcome
Concept-driven structuring of the analysis	Interview guidelines; conceptual basis	Main analytical categories
Analytic immersion in all interviews	Within all cases	Sense of the general understandings of the issue; checking for missing categories
Immersion in each interview	Within each case	Identification of significant statements
Organisation by themes	Set of significant statements within each case	Essential findings
Comparison of the essential findings	Across cases	Identification of the main differences and similarities between the cases

Table 2. Identification and Categorisation of Significant Statements

Analytical category	Description
MEANING OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY	
The defining elements of strategic autonomy	Statements that open up the essence of the notion of strategic autonomy. Includes references to its key components, e.g. operational capabilities, industrial base, shared mind-set/strategic thinking etc.
Exclusivity and inclusivity	Statements that either refer to strategic autonomy as a “European project” or discuss the role of strategic partnerships. Includes the issue of third party participation in the EU defence initiatives.
Realisation of strategic autonomy	Statements that discuss concrete steps that should be taken to fulfil the ambition of strategic autonomy. Includes references to specific capability gaps and current political shortcomings.
Fit into the current regional security architecture	Statements that discuss the relationship between the goal of strategic autonomy and NATO-centric security architecture. Focus is set on the issue of complementarity.
PESCO AND COOPERATION	
Facilitating strategic autonomy	Statements that assess the effectiveness of PESCO in contributing to the goal of strategic autonomy. Takes into consideration both, capability development and enhancing political integration.
Ambiguity and cooperation	Statements that indicate whether the plurality of understandings of the notion of strategic autonomy have had any practical implications for the cooperation among the member states.
Fault lines	Statements that refer to any practical issues and dividing points between the member states that have emerged during the implementation phase of PESCO. Differentiation is made between merely technical concerns and issues that result from conceptual disagreements between the member states.

3. THE DIVERGENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OF THE EU

In the following this study proceeds with an analysis of French, Dutch, German, Finnish, and Estonian understandings of the notion of EU strategic autonomy. This is done by focusing on the following themes: the defining elements of strategic autonomy; the aspect of exclusivity and inclusivity; the best means of achieving this objective; and how strategic autonomy is seen to fit into the current regional security architecture. As such, the country-specific descriptions take into consideration some of the most practical questions linked to the strategic autonomy of the EU, from its essence to the realisation of this goal. Furthermore, the four core issue areas are expected to best capture the contrasts between the different interpretations of the concept among the EU member states across the Atlanticist – Europeanist divide in their national strategic cultures.

3.1. France: Strategic Autonomy as a Political Principle

What should “strategic autonomy” entail?

Much of the French interpretation of the concept “strategic autonomy of the EU” starts from the acknowledgement that Europe as a whole needs to be more united in its strategic thinking. Something that all the government officials from France highlighted was that to be strategically autonomous means having a shared understanding of the surrounding security environment and developing common practices on how to operate in it. Ability to know, interpret, characterise and predict is considered to be the key for the EU to make decisions and act with autonomy. In many ways, the French policy-makers see a common European *strategic culture* as one of the prerequisites for European strategic autonomy (Interview 4FR; Interview 1FR). This approach to the notion of strategic autonomy is also reflected in the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EI2) – a joint project set up outside both the NATO and EU frameworks for enhancing military interactions between the most capable and willing European countries – that all the interviewees highlighted as one prime examples of the direction in which Europe should be moving in order to reinforce strategic autonomy. For France, therefore, strategic autonomy is a matter of a

mind-set that is not restricted to the developments taking place only inside of the EU structures.

While ideational groundings of the EU strategic autonomy are important for Paris, at the heart of the French understanding of this strategic objective lies the notion of autonomy in action. As noted by one of the interviewees: "We really have this operational focus in our thinking of strategic autonomy. Without the actual ability to act independently and carry out operations everything else becomes much less meaningful." (Interview 1FR). The operational dimension of the EU strategic autonomy is discussed in rather concrete terms in Paris. That both in relation to occasions when the EU has to act independently out of necessity, but also when autonomous action serves the interests of Europe. Some examples that the interviewees brought up as scenarios in which the EU needs to be able to respond without assistance from NATO and the United States include: a terror attack against an EU member state, an attack against an EU member state that is not a member of NATO, and a hybrid conflict that may not fall under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty (Interview 1FR; Interview 3FR). Beyond this, the interviewees also found that it is crucial for the EU to enhance its capability to carry out missions promoting stability in its wider neighbourhood, expanding to peace enforcement if needed (Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR).

As indicated above, the level of ambition that France has regarding the operational capabilities of the EU are high. All the interviewees agreed that this autonomy also assumes the availability of those resources necessary to complement military engagements and facilitate disengagement. As one of the respondents noted "autonomy in action can really happen if you rely on the capabilities of others" (Interview 3FR). In this respect, there is a shared understanding in Paris that building a solid, coherent European industry is crucial for the strategic autonomy of the EU. However, the French are also aware of the complexity of this ambition. All the interviewees agreed that issues with demand management and harmonisation as well as dependencies on the US are difficult to ignore. One of the government officials further elaborated (Interview 5FR):

We regard the preservation and development of the European defence-industrial base as critical to ensuring our ability to deliver defence; to be strategically autonomous. It may pose some challenges in the short-term. Like...let's say the Americans' willingness to cooperate. But in the long-term the European countries

will become more capable also as allies. Yes, it is important to do more in that area. And, yes, I believe that we are better allies when we have our own industrial base.

Enhanced industrial independence is therefore integral part of the French interpretation of strategic autonomy.

In conclusion, with regard to the defining elements of European strategic autonomy, the French understand the notion as the ability to act without depending on the capabilities of third parties. This independence in action is seen to rest equally on a common European strategic thinking (situational awareness) and appropriate material means (technology, equipment) to carry out operations.

Exclusivity and inclusivity as it relates to the notion of strategic autonomy

A clear message that came across from all the interviews was that favouring a culture of strong European unity in decision-making and action, and even more so increased self-reliance, the French interpretation of strategic autonomy implies a notion of exclusivity. For the decision-makers in France, it seems to be a common sense that the steps that are taken in order to pursue the goal of the strategic autonomy of the EU must be European at least, as they most likely cannot always be strictly restricted to the EU members only. A good practical example to illustrate this mind-set is how the French approach the issue of third party participation in the EU defence initiatives. All the interviewees agreed that third party involvement should be exceptional as overt openness is simply seen to contradict the essence of strategic autonomy. As articulated by one of the government officials (Interview 5FR):

In our view, any type of third party involvement in the EU initiatives should remain exceptional and remain regulated in very strict basis. It is all part of strategic autonomy. If you involve other states in the same way as the EU members...there is then just no point in having European strategic autonomy. It just...it just does not make sense. I mean, I am just formulating what I think is a common sense reflection.

All the interviewees highlighted that the overall logic behind this more exclusive thinking is that European strategic autonomy as such revolves around the idea of lessening reliance on third countries. Therefore, the practical steps taken to achieve this goal should never recreate or add new dependencies.

Yet, the French policy-makers are aware that not all the member states are speaking the same language with them. The interviews clearly showed that there is a feeling in Paris that their approach guided by the principle of European preference is often misinterpreted by their partners in the EU as an attempt to achieve absolute autonomy (Interview 1FR; Interview 3FR; Interview 4FR). This, however, is not how the decision-makers in France themselves see it. Quite the opposite, all the interviewees univocally stressed that in Europe, partners are essential, both from the viewpoint of the EU as well as individual member states. As one of the French officials elaborated (Interview 4FR):

The French know very well that the strategic autonomy as such goes only to a certain degree. And then...then there come areas where we simply are dependent on our partners. Of course, the US is the most important one here. The French do not overstretch strategic autonomy...not our national one, neither that of Europe. I believe that no one in Paris has the understanding that strategic autonomy can be absolute. The question here is the level of ambition that we have. We in Europe have to figure out where this ambition is. It is about doing more on our own, but not cutting ties with others.

A concluding thought that emerged from the interviews was that much like the autonomy of a nation state, the strategic autonomy of the EU should be seen as a political principle in sense of being a sovereign and capable actor (Interview 1FR; Interview 5FR). The policy-makers further noted that this also means that when a national strategic autonomy is underpinned by national ownership of essential defence and security capabilities, then the strategic autonomy of the EU requires a European “ownership” of the developed capabilities (Interview 5FR). Yet, as mentioned above, the French understanding of “Europe being more, and doing more” (Interview 4FR) does by no means imply isolation or rejection of partnerships.

The means of achieving strategic autonomy

The French policy-makers have identified a wide range of steps necessary to put the idea of strategic autonomy in practice. In the long run, European strategic autonomy is seen to rest on a common doctrinal corpus, a credible joint military capacity as well as efficient shared budgetary means (Interview 1FR; Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR). All the interviewees noted that the gap between the wish for strategic autonomy and the reality of available resources is most significant in the context of military capabilities. Some of the shortcomings that the interviewees brought up as issue areas that need to be addressed

include: high-end spectrum forces and sufficient enabling capabilities in areas such as intelligence and strategic reconnaissance, as well as interoperable and networked command and control systems (Interview 2FR; Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR). As all those improvements require notable financial resources, all the French policy makers stressed that increased defence spending is inevitable. In addition to the material means, all the interviewees also shared an understanding that fostering a common strategic thought is crucial for achieving strategic autonomy. In the French point of view, the steps that should be taken with this regard include strengthening situational awareness and further developing intelligence sharing practices both within and outside of the EU structures (Interview 1FR; Interview 3FR; Interview 4FR).

All the interviewees noted that France also supports the optimal use of the new EU defence initiatives as means to foster strategic autonomy. As such, both PESCO and EDF are believed to be highly important tools to facilitate the development of capabilities that are the foundation of autonomous action in defence and security. However, a common thread that ran through the interviews was that those initiatives could be used at a higher level of ambition than now (Interview 4FR, Interview 5FR). More specifically, the interviewees noted that the projects launched within the PESCO framework should be more focused, and above all, address the operational needs of European armed forces (Interview 3FR; Interview 5FR). All in all, however, there is a shared understanding in Paris that the EU's new "defence package" is a step in the right direction and the success of those initiatives in facilitating strategic autonomy is more a matter of political will than technicalities. Or, as put by one of the interviewees: "The mechanisms are there, but the Europeans need now to accept the need to pick up more responsibility. It is a question of stepping up our game." (Interview 4FR)

But what about ideas, such as the European army? Much ambiguity still surrounds this ambition. While the interviews showed that the French clearly see developing a credible joint operational capability as an important step for achieving European strategic autonomy, it is not always seen as a "European army" in its strictest sense. Some decision-makers perceive the notion of a European army more as a figurative presentation of the French ambitions regarding a united and capable Europe in the field of security and defence (Interview 1FR; Interview 5FR), for others this objective binds together a vision of strong and interoperable national forces (Interview 4FR). One of the French

government officials further noted: “We do not want to build strategic autonomy around things that are difficult, nearly impossible to reach. We don’t believe in the possibility of a European army as such. What we believe in is a stronger Europe in defence.” (Interview 5FR). As such, it can be concluded that at least in this stage, the idea of a European army is there for the French to inspire, rather than to be an actual tool towards strategic autonomy.

To summarise, with regard to means of achieving strategic autonomy, the French stress three key elements: ensuring adequate financial resources to deliver on defence, meaning increased defence spending; addressing capability gaps and therefore also making the best use out of the new EU defence initiatives; and fostering a common European strategic thought by developing intelligence sharing practices.

Fit into the current regional security architecture

A clear message that came across all the interviews was that, in the viewpoint of France, strategic autonomy of the EU in no sense means competition with NATO and that no parallel structures are to be created. Instead, the interviewees univocally stressed, transatlantic relations will become more robust in the long term, as the Europeans assume greater financial and operational responsibility for their own security. However, the policy-makers in Paris also noted that this increased responsibility must not be understood not so much as a response to American demands of fairer burden sharing, but more as an action made indispensable by the changed strategic environment in which Europe finds itself today (Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR). In more practical terms, all the interviewees highlighted that the developed capabilities that lie at the heart of European strategic autonomy will benefit both the EU and NATO. As summarised by one of the interview respondents: “This fear of competition or duplication between European strategic autonomy and the transatlantic alliance is much more conceptual than present in practice. It is mostly a matter of good planning. In fact, the two are complementary if anything.” (Interview 3FR).

While France does not question the importance of NATO in the regional security architecture, there is also no denial in the fact that transatlantic breaches play a role in the need for the strategic autonomy of the EU. When it comes to Europe and the US

specifically, all the interviewees noted that there is a growing feeling in Paris that the two sides do not see eye to eye on the politics of international security. As expressed by one of the interviewees: “Europe is not moving away from the US. That is the US that is moving away from us. And this means that we have to be more self-sufficient. We do not want to the US to disengage. Not at all. But we cannot just hope that they won’t.” (Interview 4FR). This shift is seen more as a result of long-term structural changes in the US foreign policy (i.e. an increased focus on China) than simply a reflection of the current Administration (Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR). As such, in France, the quest for European strategic autonomy is considered to not only be politically legitimate but in many ways inevitable response to the changed strategic environment.

In conclusion, from the perspective of France, the notion of European strategic autonomy does not contradict with the current regional security architecture. In the French understanding, Europe doing more for its defence should not be seen as something to challenge NATO or the US. Rather, this increased European drive in defence should be seen as a reflection of the increasingly complex security landscape where taking more responsibility for your own needs is a must rather than a choice.

Summary: The French understanding of strategic autonomy

From the viewpoint of France, a member state with strong Europeanist inclinations in its strategic culture, the strategic autonomy of the EU should be seen as a political principle in sense of being a sovereign and capable actor in the field of security and defence. This means that Europe must be able to decide and act in its best interests without depending on the capabilities of third parties. This independence in action is seen to rest equally on a common European strategic thinking and appropriate defence capabilities, both of which are currently facing significant shortcomings that need to be addressed. While the French policy-makers acknowledge that strategic autonomy is always relative, the main aim of this objective should always be lessening dependencies. Hence, from the French viewpoint, the practical steps taken towards strategic autonomy (e.g. collaborative capability development) should first and foremost be about Europeans doing more together and not rely on the input of third parties. In the French interpretation, there is no contradiction between the strategic autonomy of the EU and a strong transatlantic alliance. The fears of decoupling and duplication are considered to be more conceptual

than practical. If anything, the need for a more autonomous Europe in defence is seen to be a reflection of the changed strategic environment in which the divide between the US and Europe has increased, not *vice versa*.

3.2. The Netherlands: Strategic Autonomy as “Better”, Not “More” Europe

What should “strategic autonomy” entail?

The concept “strategic autonomy” is approached with caution in the Netherlands. All the interviewees noted that the reference to “autonomy” is considered to be an unfortunate choice of words and the Dutch policy-makers would rather follow the proposition made by Finland to talk about “strategic responsibility” instead (see also Chapter 3.4). However, going beyond the words themselves, the Dutch understand “strategic autonomy” mainly as a capabilities-driven concept that refers to Europe’s ability to act in its best interests, but also allows for greater burden-sharing between Europe and the United States. This message came across all the interviews. The Dutch policy-makers further noted that European strategic autonomy is in many ways also about good judgment and pragmatism – it is important not only to be able to act, but to act wisely (Interview 1NL; Interview 3NL). This also means that maintaining strong strategic partnerships goes hand in hand with strategic autonomy (Interview 3NL; Interview 4NL). All the interviewees had a common understanding that from the viewpoint of the Netherlands, strategic autonomy as such should primarily be defined along the lines of improving European defence posture rather than seeking autonomy in the sense of greater independence.

Several interviewees themselves noted that in The Hague, the debate on the strategic autonomy of the EU is considered to be a politically delicate issue that should be handled without making any promises that are impossible to fulfil or that simply do not serve the interests of the member states (Interview 2NL; Interview 3NL; Interview 4NL). One Dutch official further elaborated: “For us having a discussion on what do different elements of strategic autonomy mean is already very important. In a way it is a case of the journey being more important than the destination.” (Interview 4NL). Hence, it can be said that the Dutch vision of the defining elements of this concept is still in the making.

Nevertheless, in their overall thinking, the policy experts in the Netherlands have also adopted the three widely recognised dimensions of strategic autonomy, these being the political, operational, and industrial autonomy. Along the lines of political decision-making, all the interviewees noted that, from the Dutch point of view, the EU does not have any big issues with autonomy. Therefore, European autonomy is already considered to be present in this area. The elements of autonomy in action and autonomy in defence-industrial matters, however, could be improved (Interview 1NL; Interview 2NL; Interview 3 NL).

While all the interviewees agreed that ability to act as Europeans is an integral part of strategic autonomy, there is also a shared understanding in the Netherlands that the notion of strategic autonomy should not entail the EU changing its operational profile. From the Dutch perspective, matters related to collective defence shall always remain in the realm of NATO (Interview 1NL, Interview 3NL). Similarly, all the interviewees noted that engagement in large-scale peace enforcement operations is not believed to be something that the EU could achieve in the mid-term, if ever. As one of the interviewees elaborated: “For us, European strategic autonomy does not mean self-sufficiency in operational matters. It is unrealistic. Rather we should be thinking about bettering our game.” (Interview 2NL). While the Dutch political elites are pragmatic with regard to the operational ambitions that the strategic autonomy of the EU should encompass, all the interviewees confirmed that a *stronger* European defence-industrial base is something that cannot be overlooked in relation to strategic autonomy, as “it is difficult to talk about being stronger in action if you yourself do not have the means to act upon” (Interview 3NL). However, the Dutch policy-maker prefer to not delve too deep into this topic, as the general message that came across the interviews was once again that Europe should remain pragmatic in its ambitions (Interview 2NL, Interview 3NL).

To conclude, from the viewpoint of the Netherlands, the notion of strategic autonomy is considered to be mainly about being *better* Europe, not *more* Europe. It refers to the gradual process of defence capability development that would allow the EU to be a more reliable security actor and also a stronger strategic partner. For the Dutch policy-makers, “strategic autonomy” is about improvement not self-reliance.

Exclusivity and inclusivity as it relates to the notion of strategic autonomy

The sense of exclusivity that the concept “strategic autonomy” is seen to carry is one of the main concerns for the Netherlands. All the interviewees stressed that security issues that Europe faces today require an inclusive approach, full stop. In the Dutch understanding, this means working together with different strategic partners across different cooperation formats (Interview 3NL, Interview 4NL). From the perspective of the Netherlands, “strategic autonomy” should therefore never imply exclusivity. On the opposite, the ambition of a more capable EU in security and defence affairs can only happen in cooperation with other strategic players. A similar thought was put forward in all the interviews (Interview 4NL):

For us, for the Netherlands, being able to act as the European Union in our view always happens in close cooperation with our partners outside of the European Union. I think that this is an important...maybe sometimes a bit of a distinction compared to how the concept of strategic autonomy is being discussed in some other member states. It is about being able to work together with NATO, but also bilaterally or multilaterally with other partners outside of the EU. Our idea is that for Europe to be stronger, or more autonomous along those lines, working together with other countries also benefits the EU cooperation internally.

On a more practical level, this strong belief in inclusivity results in a liberal approach to opening up EU defence initiatives to third parties. All the interviewees noted that the Netherlands has been vocal about this issue within the EU and firmly stands its ground. The Dutch policy-makers see no contradiction in the notion of strategic autonomy and cooperating with partners from outside of the EU. Rather, the third parties are believed to bring added value by offering resources that the EU or its member states themselves are lacking of (Interview 3NL, Interview 4NL). Hence, there is a shared understanding in The Hague, that the regulations on third party involvement in the EU frameworks should be limited. This was something that all the interviewees were very clear about.

To summarise, “openness” remains a key word in the Dutch definition of strategic autonomy, even if it sounds somewhat contradictory. From the viewpoint of the Netherlands, the notion of a more capable Europe in security and defence can only happen together with partners and allies.

The means of achieving strategic autonomy

Achieving strategic autonomy of the EU, or preferably picking up greater strategic responsibility is seen as a gradual process in The Hague. All the interviewees indicated that the Dutch support a more conservative approach in fostering strategic autonomy that seeks to update the existing CSDP by crafting modest improvements and fine-tuning the initiatives that have already put in place. Another more specific element that was stressed by all the Dutch government officials was that the Netherlands firmly believes in making the best use out of the wide toolbox of instruments that the EU has, including different diplomatic measures, as means of enhancing strategic autonomy. From the Dutch point of view, strategic autonomy should therefore “rely on the strengths of the EU, not seek to redefine its nature” (Interview 1NL). The general understanding in the Netherlands is that in the current stage of the EU ambitions it is the process of developing compatible approaches regarding the nature and focus of the various EU defence initiatives that must be the priority (Interview 4NL):

This topic of strategic autonomy and all the defence initiatives that the EU as implemented, all of them are still very new even for the EU member states and the Union itself. (...) We are still building on these different building blocks and trying to figure out exactly what it is. I like to compare it to a scenario where we are building a house, it is not quite done yet – there is a roof, but a lot of things are still missing. But we are already living in it.

While the Dutch policy-makers may not have defined a “grand strategy” how to realise the goal of strategic autonomy, there are some key areas that are considered to be crucial in developing European defence capabilities that serve this objective. First and foremost, all the interviewees pointed out the need for European states to substantially and durably increase their defence spending. This is considered to be important not only with regard to the ambition of strategic autonomy, but a wider range of defence commitments that Europe has (Interview 2NL; Interview 3NL). Second, several interviewees noted that the EU must continuously prioritise investments in defence-industrial research and development as well as procurement. The new EU initiatives, such as EDF, are highly relevant in this regard (Interview 1NL; Interview 3NL; Interview 4NL). PESCO is also considered to be an important tool for European capability development as it allows to target some of the most immediate shortcomings in a cooperative way. An area that is

definitely a priority for the Netherlands in this regard is military mobility (Interview 2NL; Interview 3NL). Finally, some of the Dutch government officials specifically referred to boosting resilience and protecting critical infrastructure both inside and outside of the EU borders as a key to ensuring Europe's ability to be a capable defence actor (Interview 1NL; Interview 2NL).

While the Dutch political elites support the prospect of a consistent development of Europe's civilian and military capabilities as means of achieving strategic autonomy, overly courageous visions are not something that are dealt with in The Hague. Some ideas that have emerged from the debates surrounding the concept, such as the "European army", are viewed in a rather negative light in the Netherlands. None of the interviewees believed in the benefit of this type of means. As stressed by one of the Dutch officials: "A European army as such, and I know that it has been also described by much longer phrasing, is something in which we don't believe in. So, we don't even have to start thinking about how would you do something like that. It is not seen as feasible or even possible here in the Netherlands." (Interview 2NL). All in all, there was a shared understanding among the interviewees that the goal of strategic autonomy must rely on realistic means.

To conclude, with regard to means of achieving strategic autonomy, the Dutch policy-makers highlight the need to identify European vulnerabilities and capability gaps and find the best solutions to address them across the different institutional and multilateral formats of cooperation. For the Netherlands, it is the process of gradual capability development that matters more than strategic autonomy as an end in itself.

Fit into the current regional security architecture

Something that all the interviewees stressed was that for the Netherlands, it is extremely important that the strategic autonomy of the EU does not come at the expense of NATO and a strong transatlantic relationship. As noted by one of the Dutch officials: "The vision of a very Europeanised regional defence as such, this is something that we do not see. Mainly because it would most likely result in diminishing the centrality of NATO, which we strongly believe in." (Interview 2NL). From the viewpoint of the Netherlands, it is clear that the notion of "autonomy" as such may trigger alarm on both sides of the Atlantic

(Interview 1NL; Interview 3NL). Hence, it is considered to be crucial to have a clear common message to the US and NATO as a whole about the EU's efforts of becoming a more reliable actor, and therefore also a stronger partner, in the field of security and defence. All the interviewees also noted that in light of the EU's higher level of ambition in defence related matters it is critical to avoid any type of duplication or impractical use of resources.

At the same time, the Dutch policy-makers also acknowledge that the strategic interests of the EU and the US may not always be the same. Something that all the interviewees pointed out is that being a strategically *responsible* rather than an autonomous actor does not mean that the transatlantic allies must undertake all operational activities under the same flag. It has never been the case. However, there is an agreement in The Hague that EU and NATO initiatives, as well as bilateral, multilateral and regional ones should always be envisaged as parts of one coherent project (Interview 3NL; Interview 4NL). The Dutch firmly believe that the principle of complementarity is not only a key of achieving strategic autonomy, but the goal of strategic autonomy should be pursued in a way that it would further improve the aspect of complementarity (Interview 1NL):

NATO really is the cornerstone of our defence policy and it remains this. We also see that in terms of complementarity and in terms of cooperation between NATO and the EU there is still quite a lot that could be improved. There are things that NATO is traditionally very good at. There are also instruments and measures that are only available for the EU. For example, if it comes to resilience building, the EU is most definitely a more capable actor to carry out this type of task. The idea of strategic autonomy, we think that it should foster this goal of better complementarity.

To summarise, from the Dutch perspective, the objective of European strategic autonomy does not contradict the current regional security architecture only when it is handled with care. There must be a conscious effort made to ensure that no transatlantic breaches will be created while pursuing increased European defence and security integration. Self-sufficiency and simply stronger EU in security and defence are not the same, and it is the latter that the Netherlands is opting for.

Summary: The Dutch understanding of strategic autonomy

For the Netherlands, notably the Atlanticist counterpart, achieving strategic autonomy, whether it be at the EU level or in Europe as a whole, is not defined by the finality of this project. From the viewpoint of the Netherlands, strategic autonomy should be defined along the lines of improving European defence posture not as much as seeking autonomy in the sense of self-sufficiency. In the Dutch understanding, the notion of a more capable Europe in security and defence can only happen together with partners and allies. Becoming strategically autonomous is considered to be a matter of adapting to the current strategic environment and addressing the capability gaps by making the best use out of all the diverse formats of defence cooperation that are available, rather than crafting a new defence identity for the EU. From the viewpoint of the Netherlands it is indeed possible to pursue the goal of strategic autonomy in the way that it would complement the transatlantic alliance, however, a conscious effort must be made by the Europeans to stay clear in their messages and realistic in their ambitions in order not to create any breaches with our key strategic partners.

3.3. Germany: The “Both/And” Approach to Strategic Autonomy

What should “strategic autonomy” entail?

The German interpretation of the concept of strategic autonomy lies somewhere in between high ambitions and pragmatic cautiousness. On the one hand, there interviewees highlighted that European defence must gain in political significance and strategic autonomy goes hand in hand with that (Interview 3DE; Interview 4DE). Efficiency, coherence and credibility of Europe in the military field are considered to be increasingly important. This idea also fits into the German desire for multilateralism and enhanced European integration (Interview 5DE). On the other hand, however, Germany remains careful in its words. Several interviewees stressed that the notion of responsibility remains the key driving force behind Germany’s approach to European security and defence affairs (Interview 1DE; Interview 2DE). Hence, the strategic autonomy of the EU is still not framed as a “strategic objective”, but rather as a commitment that should serve the

interests of Europe itself, but also benefit its partners (Interview 2DE; Interview 4DE). Therefore, from the viewpoint of Germany, the development of European civilian and military is believed to strengthen Europe not only internally but also externally.

While the idea of a stronger and more capable Europe in defence is supported by Germany, the concept “strategic autonomy” itself is still met with indecisiveness. As further elaborated by one of the interviewees: “The term “strategic autonomy” is very new in Germany. It has never been featured in strategic documents. It really is something that is not very common to Germans.” (Interview 5DE). “How to go far enough without going too far?” appears to be one of the key questions that Germany itself still seeks to answer when defining the essence of the strategic autonomy of the EU. At times, it seems that Germany’s ambition to redefine European defence is as high as it gets, as several interviewees underpinned the notion of strategic autonomy with references to the “Army of the Europeans”, meaning better coordinated and mutually reinforcing national armies, or “European Defence Union” that put the emphasis on operational capability (Interview 3DE; Interview 4DE). From a more practical perspective, however, the German understanding of “strategic autonomy” is simply about European unitedness in action in the field of foreign and security policy, both together with its partners and alone when necessary (Interview 1DE; Interview 2DE; Interview 5DE).

What stands out in the German approach to strategic autonomy is its highly institutionalised nature. The EU – from the German perspective – clearly is the most important framework for the strategic autonomy of Europe (Interview 1DE; Interview 2DE; Interview 5DE). All the interviewees agreed that the EU specifically offers a stable, permanent structures for cooperation and capability development that are considered to be essential preconditions for strategic autonomy. Technically speaking, Germany also believes that an enhanced defence-industrial dimension of Europe is a relevant part of strategic autonomy, but there is also a clear understanding that it is a controversial issue where certain dependencies are simply there to stay (Interview 2DE, Interview 3DE; Interview 5DE). So, once again, the focus for Germany is not on aiming for self-sufficiency, but rather more united Europe in the field of security and defence. In many ways, the Germans consider the mere existence of the CSDP as a sign that there already is a degree of autonomy in European defence (Interview 3DE; Interview 4DE).

To conclude, for Germany, being a strategically autonomous Europe means having the appropriate structural foundation and capabilities, both civilian and military, to act together as Europe in the field of security and defence. Being framed as a matter of responsibility, this enhanced capacity is believed to be a commitment made to Europe itself as well as to its partners.

Exclusivity and inclusivity as it relates to the notion of strategic autonomy

From the German perspective, the strategic autonomy of the EU clearly is a “European project”, so to speak. All the interviewees highlighted that the notion of strategic autonomy rests on the idea of strengthening the European Union and fostering integration. With this focus on European unitedness, the German policy-makers believe that the steps taken to enhance security and defence cooperation have to be as inclusive as possible inside of the EU (Interview 1DE; Interview 4DE; Interview 5DE). Meaning, getting all the member states around the same table is considered to be crucial part of fostering strategic autonomy (Interview 3DE; Interview 5DE). As such, the German thinking stays in line with the approach successfully pressed for with the inclusive PESCO format. One of the interviewees further elaborated: “We cannot think individually. We have to think over the borders. And only if we work together as the European Union, then we can stand as one voice in this increasingly challenging strategic environment. We need to be more united than ever.” (Interview 4DE).

However, when it comes to the wider picture of European defence, then Germany most definitely wants to avoid exclusivity, or even more so, isolation. All the interviewees stressed that being strategically autonomous and working together with important strategic partners should never become “this or that” question. In practice, however, finding an appropriate appears to be somewhat difficult for Germany. This, mostly in the context of the different EU defence initiatives. When it comes to the principles of third party participation in the EU initiatives, the decision-makers in Germany remain internally divided. The interviews revealed that there are different opinions among the policy-makers. One of the two dominant narratives suggests that there has to be a clear differentiation between the EU member states and non-members (Interview 1DE; Interview 4DE). The main fear here is that giving third parties something that should be reserved to the members will eventually weaken the EU, hence also its autonomy. The

other narrative, however, argues that if one really wants to strengthen the EU as a defence actor, there has to be room for third party participation, otherwise the cooperation will simply happen outside of the EU framework (Interview 3DE; Interview 5DE). Of course, post-Brexit UK remains one of the key issues in those debates (Interview 5DE). All in all, however, it seems that Germany as a whole is moving towards adopting a more pragmatic position on this question (Interview 2DE):

It is very important that within PESCO, third-party states that we want to keep at our side have the ability to participate in projects in a clearly regulated, yet not overly complicated way. Those countries bring in knowledge, methods, and new ways of thinking. Therefore we are open in our approach. At the same time, there are definitely some projects in which your goal is to gain some level of independence. Then one would look very carefully what partners, if any, to involve. Most likely this issue requires some decisions to be made simply on case by case basis. It is a delicate balance.

To summarise, the quest for strategic autonomy and the wider European integration process go hand in hand in Berlin. As such, from the German perspective, the strategic autonomy of the EU is about bringing Europe together without building any walls around it.

The means of achieving strategic autonomy

While the support for increased EU defence capacity is definitely there, the debate on practical action to be taken in order to foster strategic autonomy seems to go around in circles in Germany. While pressing for integration and more political coherence, Germany displays little ambition to actively shape the military dimension of the CSDP. Instead, much of the German focus is set on various institutional challenges. All the interviewees highlighted that the EU's institutional framework in its current form no longer accommodates all of the Union's needs, especially when it comes to Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). From the viewpoint of Germany, the ambition of strategic autonomy cannot be achieved without overcoming these type of institutional shortfalls (Interview 1DE; Interview 5DE). One of the proposals that several interviewees highlighted is taking decisions by majority voting rather than unanimously in CFSP/CSDP that is believed to improve the EU's capability to respond rapidly and credibly to external developments (Interview 1DE; Interview 3DE; Interview 4DE).

In Germany, there is a shared understanding that strategic autonomy should not rest only on military capabilities and vertical defence integration. All the interviewees noted that achieving the objective of strategic autonomy also depends on deeper horizontal integration of various domains of European power, ranging from diplomacy and economic policy, to humanitarian aid and internal security policy. As one of the German officials noted: “The EU should embrace its uniqueness and not try to fit into the “military shoes” of NATO. Becoming strategically autonomous is not only a matter of hard defence.” (Interview 4DE). That, however, does not mean that Germany does not consider EU military capability development as an important step towards strategic autonomy. On the opposite, all the interviewees stressed that the capability to act is always dependent on material means. As such, all the interviewees also noted that the new European initiatives, such as EDF and PESCO are highly welcomed. The latter one in particular is seen as a huge success story in Berlin that could potentially not only address capability gaps but foster political cohesion in the CSPD, both of which are important with regard to fostering strategic autonomy (Interview 1DE; Interview 5DE).

The interviewees also noted that achieving strategic autonomy also requires a deeper European integration in the area of defence industry. Working more closely together when it comes to developing, procuring and operating military-technological systems is seen as an important step in securing a more capable Europe in the field of security and defence (Interview 2DE; Interview 3DE; Interview 5DE). However, the Germans find it difficult to ignore the distinctive character and specificity of the defence market and the dependencies on the US (Interview 3DE; Interview 5DE). Hence, the aspect of strengthening the European defence-industrial base as a step towards strategic autonomy is still discussed in a relatively generic matter in Germany. All the interviewees shared an opinion that initiatives, such as EDF are very much needed for Europe to become a more effective and autonomous defence actor, but no one in Germany wants to make any promises on the level of ambition that the EU should have in the field of defence industry.

In conclusion, it can be said that from the German perspective, the most important steps towards European strategic autonomy include addressing the institutional shortcomings of the CSDP, fostering European integration not only in the field of defence but also in the domains of soft power, and focusing on capability development while making the best use out of the new EU defence initiatives. As such, the German focus is very much on

integrative matters, or as noted by one of the German officials: “If we have the political will, the rest will follow.” (Interview 2DE).

Fit into the current regional security architecture

For Germany, European strategic autonomy is not something that seeks to reshape the current regional security architecture. All the interviewees stressed that within its preferred multilateral context, NATO remains the key institution for European defence policy. The Germans believe that moves towards more autonomous EU in the field of security and defence should not be discussed in the context of “for or from the United States” (Interview 3DE), but rather as a response to the changed strategic environment and Europe’s own needs. Yet, a message that came across from all the interviews was that if done well, then the EU’s growing defence capabilities could result in a transatlantic dynamic based on cooperation rather than dependence. The decision-makers in Berlin believe that this would be greeted as a positive development on both sides of the Atlantic. This argument also refers to the so-called “comprehensive approach” to security and defence operations, ensuring the harmonisation and complementarity of the EU and NATO frameworks, that several interviewees pointed out as the direction in which European defence as a whole should move (Interview 2DE; Interview 4DE). As such, from the perspective of Germany, the notion of European strategic autonomy does not really challenge the transatlantic relationship.

However, much like the French, the Germans also believe that there is an increasing gap between the strategic interests of Europe and the US, much of it being influenced by the “Trump-factor” (Interview 1DE; Interview 3DE; Interview 5DE) Hence, strategic autonomy is in many ways considered to be “a necessity” (Interview 1DE). One the German government officials further noted: “There is a need for Europe to become strategically more capable, but not in a way that this is something that is building a wall in between the transatlantic alliance, or between the Americans and Europeans. But we really have to decide where do we want to be able to act as Europeans if nobody else has an interest in acting.” (Interview 3DE). As already indicated above, this uncertainty towards the US does not mean that Germany questions NATO’s centrality to the European security architecture. Rather, the Germans policy-makers believe that the

security environment in which Europe finds itself has changed, and strategic autonomy is a reflection of European countries needing to adapt (Interview 3DE; Interview 4DE).

To conclude, there are two very similar narratives that best summarise the German thinking on how the European quest to strategic autonomy relates to the regional security architecture: “becoming more European while remaining transatlantic” (Interview 5DE), or “thinking European and planning transatlantic” (Interview 4DE). This means that for Germany, an increased European drive in defence remains always complementary to NATO.

Summary: The German understanding of strategic autonomy

For Germany, being a strategically autonomous Europe means having the appropriate structural foundation and capabilities, both civilian and military, to be a reliable actor in the field of security and defence. As such, it is considered to be a principle that serves the interests of Europe but also benefits its partners. From the German perspective, the ambition for strategic autonomy and wider European integration are deeply interlinked. Enhanced defence cooperation is considered to be the key for achieving strategic autonomy and, at the same time, the mere ambition of strategic autonomy itself is believed to bring Europeans closer together. Along those lines, the most important steps towards European strategic autonomy, from Germany’s point of view, include addressing the institutional shortcomings of the CSDP, fostering European integration not only in the field of defence but also in the domains of soft power, and capability development while making the best use out of the new EU defence initiatives. Despite the German focus on strategic autonomy as a “European project”, it is not something that is meant to challenge the transatlantic partnership. Rather, Germany sees a stronger Europe in defence and a strong transatlantic alliance as complementary.

3.4. Finland: Calling for Strategic Responsibility Instead

What should “strategic autonomy” entail?

In Finland, the notion of strategic autonomy is perceived in a rather uncomplicated manner as a capacity to act independently when the circumstances demand so (Interview 1FI; Interview 2FI, Interview 4FI). From the Finnish perspective, this capacity is seen to rely on both, material means (i.e. equipment and finances) and solidarity between the member states. Or as summarised by one of the interviewees (Interview 4FI):

Our understanding in Finland is that “strategic autonomy” means, or should mean, that in the long term the EU should be capable of dealing with emerging crisis and problems in its wider neighbourhood and within its borders by European means if necessary. A schoolbook type of example of this would be what happened in Libya in 2011. And in that case Europe really lacked this capacity. We lacked the means and the willingness.

For Finland, therefore, European strategic autonomy remains mainly a capability-driven and action-oriented goal.

In Finland, the term “strategic *autonomy*” as such, however, is not seen as the best fit to describe the direction in which European defence should move, as all the interviewees noted that they would prefer to talk about “strategic *responsibility*” instead. From the viewpoint of Finland, this notion better “captures the complex reality of today’s strategic environment” (Interview 3FI). More specifically, this means a responsibility to protect European interests, responsibility to promote peace and stability not only within but also outside of its borders, and a responsibility to be a reliable strategic partner (Interview 2FI; Interview 3FI; Interview 4FI). Yet, the Finnish policy-makers also believe that as the concept is already there, it is not wise to get stuck in the wording, but rather focus on what this means in terms of practice (Interview 1FI; Interview 5FI). From the viewpoint of Finland, the new EU defence initiatives is a good indication of that (Interview 1FI).

Even if the Finnish policy experts and practitioners differentiate between strategic autonomy and responsibility, their thinking of the concept still revolves around the three key dimensions of autonomy in decision, autonomy in action, and a better secured European defence-industrial base (Interview 1FI, Interview 3FI, Interview 4FI). However, rather than aiming for independence in those areas, from Finland’s point of

view, the focus for Europe should be on improvement. This was something that all the interviewees stressed. The Finnish also believe that the strategic autonomy of Europe goes beyond that of the EU. The interviewees univocally found that there should be a synergy between all the different institutional, multilateral, and bilateral cooperation formats that eventually serve Europe's security and defence interests. As such, the strategic autonomy is always seen to be relative, whether one talks about the ability to carry out operations or European defence-industrial base. Several interviewees noted that there are only so many areas in which Europeans could even think about self-sufficiency, hence from the Finnish perspective, "strategic autonomy is more about smart thinking and credibility" (Interview 4FI).

To conclude, the Finnish policy-makers define European strategic autonomy in terms of Europe's capacity to act (more) independently to serve its interests, particularly in terms of defence and security, but also to be a reliable partner. From the viewpoint of Finland, the notion remains always relative and should not refer to self-sufficiency in its strictest sense, but rather capture improvement and enhanced credibility.

Exclusivity and inclusivity as it relates to the notion of strategic autonomy

All the interviewees highlighted that from the Finnish viewpoint, the EU's quest for strategic autonomy should not by any means imply exclusivity. The Finnish political community believes that this is also something that must be clearly communicated to the outside, to Europe's strategic partners: "We are very much calling for positive messaging here that does not exclude anyone, but still at the same time allows to develop EU's capabilities. We have to be considerate in our words and in our actions" (Interview 1FI). As already noted before, Finland sees both strong internal and external cooperation as an important part of developing EU's defence capabilities. As such, all the interviewees had a common understanding that strategic autonomy of the EU is not something that can happen in isolation. One of the Finnish government officials further elaborated: "We think that "strategic autonomy" can actually also be, let's say a tool or a principle to recognise complementary partnerships and foster stronger practices of cooperation. After all, it is not only making the EU a more capable actor, but also a more credible actor." (Interview 3FI). "Complementarity" as such is one of the key words that all the

interviewees stressed as an important element in Finland's approach to the objective of strategic autonomy.

Along those lines, all the interviewees also noted that none of the EU defence initiatives should exclude collaboration with third countries. One of the government officials specifically stressed that “the EU will risk becoming inwards-looking and self-sabotaging its efforts of becoming a more capable defence actor, if it excludes collaboration with close partners outside the Union, such as Norway, UK, the United States and Canada” (Interview 2FI). From the Finnish perspective, this type of cooperation will rather bring added value to the projects launched under the EU initiatives and therefore also support the goal of strategic autonomy (Interview 2FI; Interview 4FI; Interview 5FI). The Finnish also believe that a more open approach will help to ensure that the projects will be carried out inside of the EU frameworks and not taken out in order to accommodate the non-EU partners (Interview 3FI). Overly exclusive nature of the EU initiatives is therefore seen as counterproductive in Finland. As such, all the interviewees agreed that the guidance for third party participation should be flexible and leave room for maneuver for the project groups themselves to adapt appropriate rules on case by case basis.

To conclude, in terms of exclusivity and inclusivity, the Finnish policy-makers understanding of the notion of strategic autonomy is prone to the latter. In the viewpoint of Finland, none of the European defence ambitions should come at the expense of strong partnerships. Rather, the goal to be a more capable actor in security and defence should foster strong cooperation within and beyond the EU.

The means of achieving strategic autonomy

The Finnish policy-makers firmly believe that the EU defence cooperation, and CSDP as a whole, that form the basis of European strategic autonomy must be developed in line with the EU Global Strategy and foundations laid down by the Lisbon treaty (Interview 1FI; Interview 2FI; Interview 5FI). The documental basis, instruments, and initiatives that are already in place within the EU framework are seen to be the key tools to be used in order to address the capability gaps of Europe and enhance strategic autonomy. All the interviewees noted that CARD, PESCO, and EDF are steps in the right direction. The general understanding in Finland is that the EU member states should now concentrate

on implementation and reaching results. Something that all the interviewees stressed is that from the Finnish perspective, the possibility to achieve strategic autonomy depends mainly on the political will of the member states. This means the will to increase defence spending, the will to launch meaningful projects that help to overcome the capability shortfalls, and the will to engage in more ambitious collective action in the CSDP (Interview 1FI; Interview 4FI; Interview 5FI). The Finnish decision-makers also recognise that this willingness is not easy to find and the process of capability development always takes time (Interview 4FI):

It seems that what the EU as an organisation can do is now done. It is really up to the member states now to carry out these things which they have committed to when joining those new defence initiatives, such as PESCO. So, the implementation of these things is now in the European capitals and let's see if there is, if there is enough willingness to make it happen.

Several interviewees noted that one of the main obstacles to achieving strategic autonomy is the fact that European defence landscape is currently characterised by lack of cooperation and interoperability (Interview 3FI, Interview 5FI). Hence, the Finnish policy-makers believe that higher coordination at the EU level, which is already slowly taking shape, could also “revitalise European defence landscape” (Interview 3FI) and foster strategic autonomy. However, the interviewees also stressed that for Finland, European strategic autonomy does not rest only on the cooperation taking place among the Europeans themselves (Interview 1FI; Interview 3FI). Complementary partnerships are believed to be the key in fulfilling European security and defence ambitions. The interviewees specifically highlighted that from the viewpoint of Finland, it is crucial to have strategic discussions with the necessary institutions inside of the EU as well as with NATO and key strategic partners, such as the US, that will ensure that capacity development that is central to European strategic autonomy is pursued in a harmonised way that will benefit all the parties involved in the regional defence landscape (Interview 3FI; Interview 4FI).

Lastly, all the interviewees highlighted that from the perspective of Finland, the EU's strategic autonomy, or that of Europe's that of, does not rely only on military capabilities. On the opposite, the Finnish policy-makers believe that the EU should be as comprehensive as possible in its approach to fostering strategic autonomy and seek improvement across various domains of hard and soft power. (Interview 1FI; Interview

3FI; Interview 4FI). The key areas that the interviewees pointed out as priorities included: responding to hybrid threats, military mobility, resilience building, creating arrangements for security of supply, and continuing efforts to improve the EU's civilian crisis management toolbox (Interview 1FI; Interview 2FI; Interview 5FI). The overall logic of the Finnish viewpoint was well summarised by one of the government officials: "...in today's security environment, the ability to decide autonomously and act autonomously goes beyond military equipment and I think that here in Finland we all agree that the areas in which the EU can be the leading actor for stability and security are not so much about hard defence." (Interview 3FI).

To conclude, with regard to means of achieving strategic autonomy, the Finnish policy-makers highlight the need to develop European capabilities in line with the EU's renewed documental basis and defence initiatives. Enhanced defence cooperation within the Union but also with strategic partners outside is seen to be the key here. From the viewpoint of Finland, the collective action and capacity development that fosters strategic autonomy should be comprehensive and go beyond the domain of hard security.

Fit into the current regional security architecture

All the interviewees stressed that Finland fully recognises the centrality of NATO in European defence and European strategic autonomy should never become something that contradicts with that. The interviewees univocally pointed out that Finland in particular has a strong interest in an effective and results-oriented strategic partnership between the EU and NATO. As such, the common message that came across all the interviews was that from the Finnish perspective, European strategic autonomy should always be complementary to the transatlantic partnership. Furthermore, the interviewees highlighted that in light of the increased focus on defence in the EU, it is crucial to guard against the potential risks of overlap (Interview 3FI; Interview 4FI). There is a common view in Helsinki that it is possible to avoid duplication of tasks, structures and unnecessary bureaucracy, if there is a pragmatic approach and realistic assessment of each organisation's competencies, capabilities and mandates (Interview 2FI; Interview 3FI; Interview 4FI). In this respect, for Finland, "more EU in defence does most definitely not mean less NATO" (Interview 3FI).

One of the Finnish government officials further elaborated (Interview 4FI):

NATO remains the cornerstone for defence in Europe. The EU is not becoming another collective defence organisation as NATO already does that. And whatever the EU does, on the side of, let's say hard military defence, it should be carefully coordinated and harmonised with the ongoing work in NATO, so it does not create extra work for NATO countries, or take away resources from NATO goals. On the contrary, it should always aim for the same objectives. Within those parameters, we think, there is a lot that the EU can and should do on a very broad range of issues.

The fear of the quest for European strategic autonomy hindering the EU-NATO relations seems to be less prevalent in Finland than in some of the strong Atlanticist member states of the EU. Several interviewees pointed out that the word “autonomy” may simply be misleading, but the thinking behind this increased responsibility does not contradict the transatlantic partnership in any way (Interview 1FI; Interview 3FI). However, the Finnish government officials also stressed that even if it is only a matter of communication, it is important to ensure that European strategic autonomy is not presented as something “...from or against the NATO and the US” (Interview 4FI). There is a feeling in Helsinki that it really is the language that has been harmful when outlining the defence ambitions of the EU, not the strategic objective of strategic autonomy itself. As summarised by one of the interviewees (Interview 3FI):

We really have to explain to the other side of the Atlantic that what we are doing is also gaining them. The initial strategic communication really has been poor. Actually, whatever Europe is doing at the moment, is exactly that what the US has from the beginning wanted – to put more effort to our own capabilities. And this matters a lot.

To conclude, “complementarity”, not “competition” – that is how the notion of strategic autonomy is perceived from the Finnish perspective in relation to the regional strategic architecture that rests on the transatlantic partnership. From the viewpoint of Finland, a stronger Europe goes hand in hand with a stronger NATO.

Summary: The Finnish understanding of strategic autonomy

Finland, representing a neutral member state, understands strategic autonomy mainly as a notion that is based on the idea of increased European responsibility in security and defence. This means a responsibility to protect European interests by European means, responsibility to promote peace and stability not only within but also outside of the

borders of the EU, and a responsibility to be a capable strategic partner. From the Finnish perspective, the key to achieving this autonomy is developing European capabilities across the various domains of hard defence as well as resilience building, military mobility, responses to hybrid threats and civilian crisis management. This capability development seen to be rest equally on enhanced cooperation within the EU, but also with strategic partners outside of the Union. In Finland's view, strategic autonomy is always something that should remain complementary to the strong transatlantic partnership. As such, the Finnish policy-makers believe that more EU in defence does not mean less NATO, rather stronger Europe means also stronger NATO.

3.5. Estonia: Strategic Autonomy as Picking up Our Share of the Burden

What should "strategic autonomy" entail?

From the viewpoint of Estonia, European strategic autonomy means developing greater capacity and capability "to be a more reliable rather than an independent defence actor (Interview 2EE, translation by the author). All the interviewees stressed that for Estonia "strategic autonomy" is not so much an end in itself, but it is the process of improving European defence posture that should be central to this notion. The policy-makers in Estonia agree that the idea of strategic autonomy entails a political, operational and industrial dimension, but the interviewees also univocally noted that in all those areas, European focus should be on increased efficiency and making additional contributions for eliminating main shortcomings, not on doing things alone. As one of the interviewees further noted: "Going it alone should always be seen as the last resort for Europe" (Interview 3EE, translation by the author). From the Estonian perspective, therefore, "strategic autonomy" as an ambition is always relative (Interview 1EE; Interview 4EE) and happens in conjunction with strong partnerships (Interview 1EE; Interview 2EE).

A key question that Estonian decision-makers take into consideration when discussing "strategic autonomy" is: To do what? (Interview 1EE; Interview 3EE; Interview 4EE) There is a clear understanding in Estonia that EU should by no means overstretch its mandate and the aim of strategic autonomy must not be redefining the foundations of European defence. All the interviewees highlighted that collective defence, for example,

is be far beyond the EU's reach and should remain strictly in the realm of NATO. However, this perspective does not imply that there are no areas in which the EU should have an increased capacity to act. For example, when it comes to stabilising the EU's wider neighbourhood, all the interviewees found that there is a shared understanding among the Europeans that it is one of the critical issue areas where the EU has to be more capable. Yet, the interviewees also noted that in Estonia's view, reaching a point where the EU would actually be able to carry out and sustain large-scale military operations is not realistic in near future, if ever (Interview 1EE; Interview 3EE). As one of the government officials concluded: "For us this is a simple fact." (Interview 1EE, translation by the author). As such, there is a consensus in Tallinn that strategic autonomy in terms of relying only on Europeans means in defence action is an unreachable wish

All in all, the message that came forward in all the interviews is that Estonia would prefer to avoid any far-reaching discussion around the idea of European strategic autonomy as a concept that implies self-sufficiency or rests on grandiose visions about the "rebirth" of European defence. If anything, the common understanding in Estonia is that Europe's focus should remain on being a responsible actor in the field of security and defence (Interview 1EE; Interview 2EE). All the interviewees also noted that this responsibility does not mean that the EU, or Europe in general, should take new obligations that it is most likely unable to fulfil. Not at all. Rather, from the viewpoint of Estonia, it means that Europe should bear the responsibilities it has already committed to, as those are "multiple and demanding enough" (Interview 1EE, translation by the author). This includes European countries stepping up their defence spending, the continuing efforts of stabilising its wider neighbourhood, as well as delivering on the recently launched EU defence initiatives (Interview 1EE; Interview 2EE; Interview 3EE). For Estonia, therefore, "...the notion of strategic autonomy in many ways remains linked to picking up our share of the burden." (Interview 2EE, translation by the author).

To conclude, Estonia defines European strategic autonomy in terms of developing greater capacity and capability to be a more reliable defence actor that can better care for its interests, but also be a strong strategic partner. For Estonia, the notion of strategic autonomy should not, and realistically cannot, imply self-sufficiency, whether it be operational or defence-industrial. Rather, it means seeking improvement.

Exclusivity and inclusivity as it relates to the notion of strategic autonomy

Several interviewees noted that from the Estonian perspective, the notion of “strategic autonomy” is seen as somewhat troublesome mainly because the first question that would usually follow this term would be: Autonomy from whom? (Interview 1EE; Interview 2EE). All the interviewees stressed that creating any dividing lines between the EU and its strategic partners, is unacceptable for Estonia. Therefore, if there is anything that Estonia wants to avoid with the notion of European strategic autonomy it is the sense of exclusivity, both on a conceptual and practical level. In Estonia’s view strengthening the EU in the field of security and defence should not be seen strictly as a European project (Interview 2EE, Interview 3EE). Yes, increased European cooperation is central to strategic autonomy, but all the interviewees agreed that in their view it can only happen together with strategic partners from the outside. One of the interviewees further elaborated: “Effective cooperation with its partners has never been optional for the EU. It is necessary, almost obligatory. The key partners obviously include NATO and the US. And now, now when we are moving forward in the area of defence, we must make sure that we move together with those partners.” (Interview 2EE, translation by the author).

From the viewpoint of Estonia, the EU should always remain pragmatic in its actions (Interview 3EE; Interview 4EE). All the interviewees shared the understanding that overcoming the defence capability gaps that Europe has is impossible when working alone. This also means that Estonia supports a flexible approach on the issue of third party involvement in the EU defence initiatives, including PESCO projects. Several interviewees noted that cooperation with partners, such as the US, post-Brexit UK, or Norway will be added value, would it be in terms of sharing technological solutions or offering expertise on best practices (Interview 1EE; Interview 3EE). The policy-makers in Estonia all share the opinion that the conditions to be set for third parties to participate in the EU defence projects should therefore not be too rigid. As one of the interviewees noted, it would simply be “short-sighted” (Interview 1EE, translation by the author). Much like the other supporters of the more inclusive approach, Estonians also believe that overly strict rules on third party participation will result in the cooperation taking place out of the EU frameworks, which would make initiatives like PESCO much less meaningful and eventually ambush the idea of strategic autonomy (Interview 1EE; Interview 2EE; Interview 4EE).

To conclude, from the perspective of Estonia, strategic autonomy is not exclusively a “European thing”. In Estonia’s view, a stronger Europe in defence will always also benefit our partners, and benefit *from* our partners. Or, as summarised by one of the Estonian government officials: “We are not ‘dealing’ with defence only inside of the EU. It will never be the case. We really have to be open-minded in all the developments that are currently taking place” (Interview 2EE, translation by the author).

The means of achieving strategic autonomy

In Estonia’s view European security and defence ambitions, including strategic autonomy, depend on the availability of adequate resources. All the interviewees univocally stressed that question of defence spending remains central in this context. The general understanding in Estonia is that there is not much room for talking about a more capable Europe in defence, whether it be in the context of the EU or NATO, if the European states do not support their promises with appropriate levels of spending on defence. As articulated by one of the interviewees: “We should firstly focus on the promises and commitments that we have already made and make sure that we are actually fulfilling those. Stepping up the defence spending is simply unavoidable here. Only after that we can think about taking more responsibilities or aiming for something like strategic autonomy. It sounds like a simple first step towards a stronger Europe in security and defence affairs, but often the simple things are the hardest.” (Interview EE1, translation by the author).

From the perspective of Estonia, what logically follows the appropriate expenditure on defence is capability development. As such, Estonia’s thinking is in line with the overall understanding that in order for the EU to be more capable to act based on its security interests it needs appropriate material means. All the interviewees noted that developing strategic enablers as well focusing on issues, such as military mobility and interoperability, are crucial steps to fulfil European defence goals. The new EU cooperation initiatives that seek to support these objectives, such as PESCO and EDF, are thus welcomed in Estonia. The interviewees shared the opinion that projects that address Europe’s shortcomings and foster cross-border defence industrial cooperation, integration, consolidation and investments are all seen in a positive light. Yet, the interviewees also stressed that Europe must remain realistic in ambitions and a full

spectrum of high-end capabilities will most likely remain out of reach for the EU (Interview 1EE; Interview 3EE). Rather, Estonians would prefer to think of capability development as “a gradual process that aims for improvement of European defence” (Interview 2EE, translation by the author).

There is also a shared understanding in Estonia that in the end the achieving strategic autonomy, or simply a more capable Europe in defence and security will depend on the willingness of the EU member states. All the interviewees shared the opinion that there simply is not any common European security and defence policy, not to mention European strategic autonomy, if the member states will not make it happen. As one of the policy-makers noted: “Even if the EU is able to foster defence cooperation in terms of capability development it does not automatically mean that the European states are willing to put those capabilities into use.” (Interview 2EE, translation by the author). In Estonia’s view, strengthening European solidarity and common strategic thinking is therefore also a crucial part of moving towards strategic autonomy (Interview 1EE; Interview 4EE). What remains somewhat open-ended is, where the unity should derive from. While cooperation taking place in the EU frameworks is seen to reinforce it (Interview 1EE; Interview 2EE), all the interviewees mentioned that the common European mind-set will also benefit from other multilateral formats of cooperation taking place outside of the EU structures.

To summarise, with regard to means of achieving strategic autonomy, the Estonian understanding highlights three key elements: increased European defence spending, capability development that takes into consideration both, the needs and available resources of Europe, and fostering a common European strategic thought by enhanced defence cooperation within and beyond the EU framework.

Fit into the current regional security architecture

For Estonia, NATO is the cornerstone of European security architecture and this must remain unchanged. All the interviewees were very clear about this aspect. As such, there is a concern in Estonia that too overt a European drive in the direction of autonomy could fuel US isolationism. One of the interviewees specifically noted: “There would be very legitimate questions from the US: ‘If you are seeking autonomy...then we can go home,

right?.' That's exactly what we don't want." (Interview 3EE, translation by the author). Hence, from the Estonian perspective it is crucial to ensure that the increased European defence integration would not result in contradictions with the transatlantic alliance. Several interviewees highlighted that some of the statements made by European leaders about the goal of European strategic autonomy have been nothing else than harmful (Interview 1EE; Interview 3EE; Interview 4EE). One of the examples that the interviewees brought up were the references to a European army that is considered to simply send off "a completely wrong message" (Interview 1EE, translation by the author). From the perspective of Estonia, the objective of strategic autonomy "fits" into the current security architecture only if both planned and communicated with care. Or as one of the Estonian officials put it (Interview 2EE, translation by the author):

We have to understand that each act of communication has two sides. We have to be practical both in our words and in our actions. We simply cannot cut our ties with the partners that we need.

On a more practical level, however, Estonia supports the idea of the Europeans doing more for their security and by that also strengthening the transatlantic partnership. All the interviewees noted that the debates on fairer burden sharing have been present for a long time and it is not only the current US Administration that has been vocal about this issue, thus in a way the notion of pursuing strategic autonomy could be a response to this need to do more. One of the interviewees further elaborated: "The US has always pushed for Europe to be less dependent, not to free-ride, and to shoulder more of the burden in terms of security. So, in this sense, sure we are actually trying to do much of what the US has been asking for over the years." (Interview 1EE, translation by the author). As pointed out by several interviewees, developing certain critical capabilities for the EU to be less reliant on the US is definitely not a negative thing (Interview 1EE; Interview 4EE). On the opposite, if planned wisely, it is believed to be beneficial to both parties involved (Interview 1EE). Along those same lines, all the interviewees agreed that overarching principle for Estonia is that the capability development taken within the EU should always complement not contradict NATO. However, the question that prevails among the Estonian decision-makers is: "Should these steps of doing more and better be carried out under the name of strategic autonomy?" (Interview 3EE, translation by the author).

To conclude, in the Estonian understanding strategic autonomy, defined as increased European defence capacity, *can* be something that strengthens the transatlantic alliance. However, this means that the Europeans themselves have to be clear and realistic in their words and actions.

Summary: The Estonian understanding of strategic autonomy

In the Estonian understanding European strategic autonomy refers to developing greater capacity and capability to be a more reliable defence actor that can better care for its interests, but also be a strong strategic partner. For Estonia, the notion of strategic autonomy does not imply self-sufficiency, rather it is the process of becoming more efficient and responsible in security and defence related matters that counts the most. From the perspective of Estonia, strategic autonomy cannot be exclusively a European project. The developed capabilities that lie at the heart of this notion are seen to be a *benefit to* and *benefit from* cooperation with key strategic partners. With regard to means of achieving strategic autonomy, the Estonian understanding highlights three steps: increased European defence spending, capability development that takes into consideration the needs and available resources of Europe, and fostering a common European strategic thought by enhanced defence cooperation within and beyond the EU framework. From the viewpoint of Estonia, strategic autonomy can be something that strengthens the transatlantic alliance as this ambition remains interlinked with Europeans picking up their part of the burden. However, this is possible only if the Europeans do not get lost in recklessness and overt drive towards autonomy.

3.6. Discussion: Where Do the Differences Lie?

When we compare the five different national interpretations of the notion of European strategic autonomy, what stands out is that the point of departure is rather similar for all the member states, meaning that “strategic autonomy” is first and foremost understood Europe’s capacity to act as Europe in security and defence related matters. In their thinking, the member states have to a large degree also adopted the commonly referred to three dimensions of strategic autonomy: ability to decide, to carry out operations, and to

secure one's defence-industrial base. As such, all the member states also share the opinion that strategic autonomy can only be achieved if Europe puts more effort in addressing its capability gaps and further enhances defence cooperation within and outside of the EU framework. Therefore it can be said that the differences in the national interpretations of "strategic autonomy" are not as big as one could initially expect. Yet, the devil is in the details. The member states do not diverge on technicalities, but rather on visions about the finality of the objective of strategic autonomy and the consequences that come with it. Is it about more Europe, or simply better Europe? If there is more Europe, does this mean that there is less room for our strategic partners? If there is less room for our strategic partners, what does it mean for European security?

Taking a step further from those abstract questions, it can be argued that the national understandings of the notion European strategic autonomy diverge mainly on three issues: whether the aim of this goal is to become a self-sufficient actor in the field of security and defence or is the process of gradual capability development and deeper integration an end in itself; the degree of exclusivity implied by "strategic autonomy"; and is this ambition perceived as a potential threat to transatlantic values and the current regional security architecture. Here, it is possible to see a clear distinction between Europeanist states, such as France, whose ambitions are higher, emphasis on the European "ownership" of the developed cooperation frameworks and capabilities stronger, and concerns about the increased European drive in defence hindering the transatlantic partnership smaller, opposed to the Atlanticists, such as the Netherlands and Estonia, for whom it is the other way around. Albeit for different reasons, Germany and Finland appear to be somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. Between those three main points of divergence there is room for some twists and turns. For example, the German understanding of strategic autonomy being strongly linked to the wider European integration process, the Finnish stressing the aspect of responsibility, or the French focus on shared European strategic culture as one of the key enablers of strategic autonomy.

To conclude, the comparison of the five country cases shows that "strategic autonomy" as a linguistic concept, but also as a strategic objective, does not have a single objective meaning across different EU member states. However, these divergences do not mean that there are no overlaps. The picture of similarities/differences is more nuanced. In this sense, we are talking about different interpretations of the same thing, not of completely

different things. The need for a more capable Europe in defence really is not questioned by anyone. Instead, the key divergences that stand out in the national interpretations of strategic autonomy revolve around different levels of ambition and different fears. Whereas this Chapter has established the empirical reality of divergent national interpretations of the notion of strategic autonomy, the following Chapter turns to the practical implications of this multiplicity and explores whether divergent meanings of EU strategic autonomy across member states negatively affect practical cooperation in this direction.

4. FROM DIVERGENT INTERPRETATIONS TO PRACTICAL COOPERATION: THE CASE OF PESCO

The following section analyses whether the multiplicity of national understandings of the notion of European strategic autonomy that stem from the ambiguity of this concept pose a substantial problem for cooperation aimed to achieve this goal, as perceived by the policy-makers in the member states themselves. In doing so, the focus is set on PESCO as one of the most telling examples of a platform for cooperative action to facilitate the development of European defence capabilities and contribute to deeper political integration in the areas of security and defence.

PESCO as a tool facilitating strategic autonomy

What stands out from the conducted expert interviews is the fact that all the respondents across the five country cases consider PESCO to be a platform that in principle supports the goal of strategic autonomy. That despite of the differences in their interpretations of the meaning of “strategic autonomy” as a concept. All the policy-makers and experts shared the opinion that PESCO provides a flexible tool to facilitate collaborative development of capabilities and therefore also enhance political willingness to be more united in security and defence affairs. As previously illustrated by the comparison of the five national understandings of the notion of strategic autonomy, at the basic level, these two aspects are considered to be a prerequisite to strategic autonomy in all the member states.

In fact, it appears that even if ambiguous and open to interpretation, the goal of strategic autonomy has brought the member states closer together within the PESCO framework. Member states that have always strived for more European action in the field of security and defence, and also have higher ambitions regarding European strategic autonomy, find confidence from PESCO that their partners in the EU are now thinking more similarly to them and with enough political will the cooperation fostered within these type of initiatives can lead to tangible results (Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR). As noted by one of the French government officials (Interview 4FR):

The fact that the EU is finally making more efforts to address capability gaps and preserve the European defence-technological base is of course regarded in a

positive light in Paris. We have always supported that. And the implementation of initiatives like PESCO allows to think, and it really is our hope, that most our European friends understand as well as we do that the security environment has changed and we have to adapt. The steps that we are taking now can be a beginning of a real meaningful change.

At the same time, the member states that remain somewhat more cautious about the increased European drive in defence see benefit in the flexibility of the new initiatives and consider PESCO to be an important first step towards gradual improvement of European defence posture and taking more responsibility (e.g. Interview 2NL; Interview 1EE, Interview 3FI). For example, one of the Dutch interviewees noted (Interview 1NL):

It is important to start from somewhere. PESCO addresses many key issues in terms of capability development and bettering defence cooperation. For us it is also very much about taking strategic responsibility that is very much needed for everything and everybody.

These findings support the claims made in the literature on constructive ambiguity (e.g. Hoffmann, 2000; Rayroux, 2014), indicating that the ambiguous goal of strategic autonomy allows member states to project their ideas into the concept and gather the potential supporters together under a specific cooperation format that each state actor then also perceives to fit their expectations of practical action prescribed by their interpretation of the given goal. As such, ambiguity is actually conducive to cooperation.

However, this openness to interpretation comes with limits as a certain gap is still expected to prevail between the nationally validated expectations and the reality of the established cooperation initiatives. This can be well illustrated by the case of France and E12 as an alternative arena for action that all the French interviewees highlighted as of high importance for France. As described in the Chapter 3.2., the French understanding of European strategic autonomy puts emphasis on operational capacity as well as shared strategic thought. Since PESCO may fall short on the French ambitions, i.e. it does not fully accommodate its vision of strategic autonomy, France then also pursues its aims elsewhere. Similarly, the member states that understand “strategic autonomy” more as a gradual process of capability development and are sceptical towards the idea of self-sufficiency as it is often perceived to be linked to isolation, carry this interpretation with the potential to pull back from PESCO if it proves to be too much. As noted by one of the Dutch interviewees: “We see European defence cooperation one step at a time, and well...I would not put my money on it, but there could be a day when the Netherlands

says: ‘No, we are doing this, but we are not going any further’.’ (Interview 3NL). Neither of those factors mean that cooperation taking place in the PESCO format is doomed to failure. Rather, it means that cooperation built upon ambiguous strategic objectives always remains vulnerable to the multiplicity of interpretations.

To conclude, from the perspective of the analysed member states, PESCO as a tool rather than an end in itself is seen if not directly lead to then at least support the goal of European strategic autonomy, or increased strategic responsibility, however it is defined. In fact, it appears to be the ambiguity of the goal of strategic autonomy that has helped to foster EU defence cooperation in institutionalised formats, such as PESCO. Ambiguity, however, always has its limitations: when cooperation proceeds contradictions *may* arise between what the state actors want and what they are actually offered in the collective setting.

The member states’ perceptions about ambiguity and cooperation

One of the government officials from Estonia noted: “Diversity of visions is part of the EU by design.” (Interview 2EE, translation by the author). No one in the interviews really questions this fact. The decision-makers all around Europe are well aware that “strategic autonomy” as a concept can mean many different things to many different people and to many different member states (e.g. Interview 4DE; Interview 3NL; Interview 5FR). However, even if the member states do not have a shared understanding of the exact meaning of “strategic autonomy”, there still is a common ground to be found in a belief that Europe should simply do more for its security. Meaning that, the broad overarching goal may already be sufficient even if a more precise goal is not clearly defined. A thought that echoed through many interviews across the five cases was well articulated by one of the officials from the Netherlands (Interview 4NL):

I think that the fact that “strategic autonomy” is a blurry term that can be understood in many ways is definitely also felt here in Brussels at the moment. But the overall observation, which I believe is even more relevant, is that if we approach “strategic autonomy” as a concept and try to come up with a common definition, or a common understanding what it means, I think that we can already predict at the beginning that it is not possible. But I would also say that it is not necessarily something that is a huge issue. Sure, we have to discuss our ambitions with each other and try to find some more focus. However, what matters more is the action that we are taking. When we look at the practical developments that are currently taking place with the new EU defence initiatives, you cannot really say that the member states are not moving in the same direction.

Even if “strategic autonomy” as an ambition does not strike with clarity and the member states themselves perceive that it lacks a common understanding, then PESCO as a framework is instead believed to bring some structure to the European defence ambitions and in realising the goal of strategic autonomy, however defined. Interviewees from all the five member states shared the opinion that the fact that the member states are finally together behind the same table and the EU has an institutionalised setup for defence cooperation is already a win on its own. The policy-makers stressed that the actual experience of doing defence projects together, getting familiarised with the PESCO mechanisms, communicating and learning from each other will help to bring more focus to the European defence goals and along those lines also feed into the collective understanding of strategic autonomy at the EU level (e.g. Interview 4DE; Interview 2EE; Interview 2FR; Interview 4NL). Or, as noted by one of the Finnish government officials: “Ultimately, we will define “strategic autonomy” by our action. The initiatives that we have launched now – PESCO, CARD, EDF – I think that those are already a good example of what strategic autonomy should entail, or mean. So, also for our partners, it is maybe the most important thing to show what we mean by it all by practice.” (Interview 1FI).

With regard to practical developments taking place at the PESCO framework, several government officials noted that the first two rounds of PESCO projects have been mainly about exploring the ground and having something “to take home for your government” (Interview 1DE; Interview 4DE; Interview 2EE; Interview 3FR; Interview 3NL). There are, however, a couple of projects that are commonly viewed as potential success stories that well represent the renewed European defence ambitions, one of them being the EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core (EUFOR CROC) and the second Military Mobility (Interview 1DE; Interview 2DE; Interview 1EE; Interview 3FI; Interview 4FI; Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR; Interview 1NL; Interview 3NL). All in all, all the member states seem to share the opinion that it remains to be seen where PESCO will lead to in terms of acquired capabilities, but there definitely is potential to the framework and at this stage the policy-makers are not overly concerned about the member states moving in completely different directions (e.g. Interview 3DE; Interview 5FR; Interview 4NL). With regard to the impact of divergent interpretations of “strategic autonomy”, this then means that effective cooperation is possible in spite of the openness of the goal to multiple understandings.

Another common thread that ran through the interviews is that much of the concerns that the member states perceive to hinder the cooperative action within the PESCO framework are political rather than dependent on the divergent understandings of the goal of European strategic autonomy. Some of the key problem areas that the interviewees brought up were: the guiding principle of national sovereignty in security and defence related matters that makes it difficult to hand over the decision-making powers, national defence-industrial interests that at times may not be in line with broader European interests and lack of willingness to increase defence spending in many European states (Interview 5DE; Interview 1EE; Interview 4FI; Interview 1FR; Interview 3NL). The interviewees noted that overcoming these issues is mainly a matter of political will, but the peculiarities of security and defence policy and the overarching question of national self-interest make it rather difficult.

In conclusion, it can be said that from the perspective of the member states the cooperation taking place within the PESCO framework does not appear to suffer under the ambiguity of the goal of strategic autonomy that it is supposed to support. Rather, the cooperative action itself is believed to bring more clarity about the direction in which the member states are willing to move together. These findings of the analysis then again support the argument that divergent understandings of a specific strategic objective are not necessarily hindering to cooperative action and it is social interaction that plays the key role in overcoming collective action dilemmas.

Fault lines

While the decision-makers are not perceiving the ambiguity of the goal of strategic autonomy that PESCO should serve as a substantial obstacle to practical cooperation among the member states, the interviews revealed certain issue areas where the different national visions about the objective of European strategic autonomy have resulted in disagreements. Rather than set-in-stone obstacles to cooperative action, these problems should be viewed as fault lines that *may* cause the cooperation to fail if not managed with care.

The first point of fracture concerns the **strategic horizon of PESCO**, meaning if this cooperation format should rather be goal-oriented or open-ended. More specifically, this

refers to the issue of capability development in the absence of a common agreement of what the EU will do with these capabilities. As noted in Chapter 3.6., one of the aspects on which the member states diverge in their understandings of “strategic autonomy” is whether it is about aiming for self-sufficiency and EU operational capacity, or is the gradual capability development and increased defence integration already an end in itself. Whereas France has undeniably the highest ambitions in this regard, the other four countries included in the study are more focused on the process that could eventually lead to strategic autonomy rather than the end-goal itself. As such, from the viewpoint of France, PESCO should be used at a higher level of ambition and the capability development projects should first and foremost address the operational needs of Europe in the full range of scenarios (Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR). At the same time, the Netherlands, Estonia, Finland, and also Germany, remain more open-ended in their approach (Interview 2EE; Interview 4DE; Interview 1FI; Interview 5FI; Interview 3NL).

While this divergence of visions has not manifested itself as an outstanding issue in the current early stages of cooperation, it may pose obstacles in the following rounds of PESCO projects, as the interviewees themselves also noted that more focus is required (Interview 2DE; Interview 4DE; Interview 2EE; Interview FI1; Interview FR5; Interview 3NL). Some key capabilities are relevant regardless of the missions that will or will not be conducted, but there are also several areas where clarity on finality is needed, such as high-end warfare or strategic enablers. Collision of different ambitions can make it more difficult to launch projects that as a sum will please everyone and lead to tangible results. Or as some of the policy-makers themselves noted, “...a situation where you have agreed on the direction in which Europe should ahead in defence-related matters, but some want to move significantly faster than others becomes often very difficult to manage.” (Interview 3FI). Therefore, member states reaching a reasoned consensus on the strategic horizon of PESCO remains important in order to ensure the success of cooperation.

There is, however, another unresolved question that has proven to be a significant issue already now, that being the **third party participation in PESCO projects**.⁴ As the analysis of the national interpretations of “strategic autonomy” in Chapter 3 illustrated,

⁴ The current set up of PESCO stipulates that member states may invite third countries to take part in projects to which they can bring substantial added value, but the more specific conditions remain undefined.

the issue of exclusivity and inclusivity as it relates to the notion of European strategic autonomy is one of the key aspects on which the member states diverge on. To recapture the member states' positions: Out of the five countries included in the study, France is the only one that has a clear preference for strict regulations on third party participation to keep in minimal. Germany faces internal divisions on the issue, but seems to have gradually adopted a more pragmatic approach and prefers to avoid overly rigid rules on third party participation. The Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia are all strong supporters of an inclusive approach that would allow third parties to participate in the projects in a rather flexible way. In relation to the notion of strategic autonomy the main division point between the two logics of approaching this issue is: "lessening dependencies vs. added value".

Several interviewees noted that this question of third party participation really is one of the main concerns in Brussels at the moment and little progress has been made with finding a consensus on the regulations (Interview 4EE, Interview DE2; Interview 2FR; Interview 3NL). The supporters of the inclusive approach, in particular, are extremely concerned about the outcome of this disagreement. The main argument from their side is that if the rules for third party participation will become too rigid, then the cooperation will simply be taken outside from the PESCO framework and the entire attempt for increased defence cooperation within the EU becomes meaningless (Interview 1EE; Interview 4FI; Interview 3NL). For example, one of the interviewees articulated the Dutch perspective as follows: "If it is too hard in PESCO to work with relevant partners, if it becomes too complicated, then we will just do it outside of PESCO. We will do it in the old-school way in bilateral or multilateral settings. Like we always did, you know. If we cannot get the right people around the table within the EU frameworks then we will just take it out." (Interview 3NL). At the same time, countries like France do not believe in recreating and reinforcing the capability dependencies as it is seen to contradict the overall logic of Europe becoming more autonomous in its security and defence (Interview 4FR; Interview 5FR). For France, therefore, inclusivity becomes problematic instead.

The issue of third party participation in PESCO projects clearly illustrates how divergence of interpretation can be contentious and hinder cooperation. This finding is in line with the scholarship on "destructive ambiguity" that contends that multiplicity of interpretations and lack of a shared understanding of the goal to be achieved is

problematic to collective action. Now, the question is: how to overcome this obstacle. Returning to literature on conceptual plurality and cooperation, one of the arguments there is that the key to solve these type of issues are argumentative processes of deliberation and true reasoning that, when successful, lead to a reasoned consensus or a common understanding (Risse, 2000, 9). This claim also supports the insight offered by the interviewees that the goal of strategic autonomy, or simply the efficiency of the established defence initiatives, is largely dependent on the political will of the member states themselves (e.g. Interview 4DE; Interview 4FI; Interview 5FR). With respect to the interplay between ambiguity and cooperation, this then suggests that while multiplicity of interpretations can hinder cooperation, overcoming this issue is still not necessarily a matter of strategic goals having one definite meaning.

To conclude, the two fault lines concerning the strategic horizon of PESCO and third party participation can be partially seen to be embedded in the divergent national understandings of the ambition of strategic autonomy. However, as already noted earlier in this Chapter, from the viewpoint of the policy-makers themselves, the main division lines are considered to be more political than conceptual. Hence, overcoming those issues also appears to be more of a matter of political will than conceptual clarity.

Summary: Divided in understandings, (almost) united in action?

In the light of the analysis, it is precisely the ambiguous goal of European strategic autonomy that has kick-started the new EU defence initiatives, including PESCO. With their own understandings in mind what does this concept and the ambition behind it mean and how far one can go with it, the member states got behind the same table and are now trying to make it all work. The multiplicity of interpretation, however, comes with limits as a certain gap is still expected to persist between the national expectations and the reality of the established international cooperation initiatives.

The ambiguity of the concept “strategic autonomy” has not gone unnoticed for the member states. Nevertheless, and this is one of the key findings of this analysis, the policy-makers and experts across EU member states perceive the member states to be less divided in their actions than they are in their words. All in all, the goal of strategic autonomy being open to multiple interpretations it is not seen to be destructive to

cooperative action. This by no means implies that the member states do not consider more focus in cooperation to be important. Yet, clearer focus in action is not believed to depend on a single definite meaning of “strategic autonomy”, but rather on communication as such. If anything, the decision-makers affirm that the practical cooperation taking place within the PESCO framework and other EU/European defence initiatives is an integral part of moving towards a collective interpretation of the goal of strategic autonomy.

Whilst the ambiguity of the European defence ambitions is not perceived to be a decisive obstacle to the cooperative action, it does not mean that the implementation phase of PESCO has not faced any problems. Inclusivity/exclusivity and the appropriate strategic horizon – the fault lines that have followed PESCO from the very first stages of developing this framework are still very much present. In respect of the strategic horizon, what differs are the levels of ambition. When the question of inclusivity was formerly discussed in relation to bringing together the EU member states themselves, then now the focus has shifted on third party participation. This issue appears to be even sharper than the one of strategic horizon as the negotiations in Brussels have been going on for a while with little progress in sight. To a degree, these differences can be seen to result from different understandings of the goal of strategic autonomy. However, from the viewpoint of the policy-makers themselves, what may play even a bigger role are political and industrial hurdles on national sovereignty and economic interest.

To conclude, in spite of (or perhaps owing to) the ambiguity of the goal of strategic autonomy the cooperative action taking place within the PESCO framework has been relatively successful so far. No tangible results cannot be seen yet as it simply takes time, but the member states remain united in their hopes for the cooperation to deliver. Furthermore, it is also hoped that the collective action and communication taking place in the framework of the EU defence initiatives will gradually help to pinpoint the collective understanding of the means and ends of strategic autonomy at the EU level.

CONCLUSION

After its appearance in the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the concept of strategic autonomy has drawn significant attention in academic and political circles alike. As this goal strikes with its ambition rather than clarity, there are concerns about the notion of strategic autonomy being understood differently across the EU member states, which equally puts in doubt the prospects of practical cooperation towards this end. However, the empirical reality has so far remained largely unexplored. This, both in terms whether and to what extent the divergent interpretations of the objective of European strategic autonomy are actually there, and what are the practical implications of those potentially multiple understandings for defence cooperation aimed to achieve this goal. Informed by constructivist theorising on meaning-making across national contexts and the notions of constructive/destructive ambiguity, this study sought to substantiate the existing debates on European strategic autonomy by providing empirical insights to it.

Based on 23 expert interviews with government officials and policy analysts across five EU member states, the study first mapped out the national understandings of the concept of strategic autonomy in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and Estonia. In doing so, it sought to establish the empirical picture of the diversity of meanings. The case selection took into consideration the Atlanticist – Europeanist divide in strategic cultures in order to capture the widest possible range of the divergent interpretations. The comparison of the five cases then served as a reference point to the second half of the empirical research that explored the member states' perceptions about the effect of the multiplicity of interpretations on cooperation, focusing on the practical developments taking place within the PESCO framework.

Two key findings emerged from the analysis. First, at the conceptual level, the EU member states indeed understand the notion of strategic autonomy somewhat differently, as the diverse interpretive contexts (strategic culture) shape the meanings given to this strategic objective. However, while the differences in national interpretations are there, they are not insurmountable. At the most basic level, all the analysed member states understand the notion as Europe's capacity to act as Europe in security and defence related matters, both together with its partners or alone if so needed. In their thinking, the member states have to a large degree also adopted the commonly referred to three

dimensions of strategic autonomy, those being the political, operational, and industrial dimension. The disagreements, however, emerge in relation to the means and ends of the goal of strategic autonomy, that being: whether the aim of it is to become a self-sufficient actor in the field of security and defence or is the process of gradual capability development and deeper integration an end in itself; the degree of exclusivity implied by “strategic autonomy”; and whether a European drive in the direction of autonomy is perceived as a potential threat to the transatlantic partnership. Here, it is possible to see a clear contrast between the Europeanists (e.g. France), whose ambitions are higher and concerns smaller, and the Atlanticists (e.g. the Netherlands) for whom it is *vice versa*.

While these findings support the argument that “strategic autonomy” as a concept do not have a single definite meaning and the diverse background experiences of the member states allow to interpret it differently, the divergence should not be overstated. In terms of the interplay between the EU level and domestic level understandings, it seems that there might be a “core” meaning to the notion of strategic autonomy – capacity for autonomous action – which actually is shared, but there is also a “shell”, referring to issues, how to get there, why to get there, and what comes with it, on which there is disagreement among the member states. For the ongoing debates on European strategic autonomy, this suggests that rather than assuming that different member states are talking about completely different things when they are referring to the notion of strategic autonomy, it would be more correct to say that they are actually talking about the same thing with different levels of ambition and different concerns in mind. In other words, the member states agree on *some* aspects of strategic autonomy, but disagree on *others*, resulting in a nuanced picture of divergence.

When it comes to the impact of the multiplicity of understandings on practical cooperation, the second key finding of this research suggests that despite the degree of conceptual ambiguity, the member states have still been relatively successful in fostering cooperation that in principle supports the idea of strategic autonomy. In the context of PESCO, the decision-makers are not perceiving the ambiguity of the strategic goals that it should serve as hindering to practical cooperation, rather the cooperative action itself is perceived as something that leads to more clarity and eventually helps to pinpoint the member states’ collective level of ambition. In fact, it appears that the ambiguity of the objective of strategic autonomy has helped to facilitate EU defence cooperation in

institutionalised formats, as its openness to interpretation has allowed potential supporters to project their ideas into the concept and get behind the same table. Ambiguity, however, always comes with limitations: when cooperation proceeds contradictions often arise between what the state actors expect based on their understandings of the goal to be achieved and what they are actually offered in the collective setting. This dynamic is to some extent already present in the PESCO framework, as the member states diverge on the strategic horizon of PESCO (open-ended vs. goal-oriented) and third party participation in PESCO projects. While those issues can be seen to reflect the divergent national understandings of strategic autonomy, overcoming them at this stage is a matter of political will rather than conceptual clarity.

For the debate about whether conceptual ambiguity is conducive or hindering to cooperation, these findings suggest that it can be either or both. A common thread that ran through the interviews conducted for this research is the idea that words are important, but in the end actions matter more. Or to put it differently, whereas there can be conceptual ambiguity, this does not necessarily hinder practical cooperation. Instead, it can facilitate it as the idea behind ambiguous terms, such as “European strategic autonomy”, is essentially to inspire state actors to work together. Yet, none of that is to say that the different levels of ambition and often also different concerns that stem from the divergent understandings of the objective of strategic autonomy do not pose any challenges to cooperative action. The EU’s track record on defence integration as such shows that more often than not they do, leading to political hurdles and long negotiation processes. However, as the openness to interpretation is inherent to language and context plurality unavoidable, the policy-makers – at the national and EU level alike – should not focus on governing the conceptual ambiguity away, but rather find ways to operate under the conditions of multiplicity of interpretations by means of argumentation, deliberation, and persuasion.

Taking into consideration the limitations of this study, several directions exist for future research. While the sample of five member states included in this study was carefully compiled to reflect diversity, other cases (in particular from Southern Europe) would help to further support the findings on the divergent understandings of the concept “strategic autonomy”. Similarly, the research on the impact of divergent interpretations on practical cooperation would benefit from studying other cases of defence cooperation formats

besides PESCO. This could also mean expanding the scope beyond the EU defence initiatives and including other multilateral European defence cooperation formats as subjects for analysis. Finally, as the EU defence cooperation moves forward, it would also be interesting to see if the ambition of strategic autonomy maintains its relevance, or is it simply a concept/idea that is à la mode for this season.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: List of Interviews

FRANCE			
Code	Affiliation	Interview format	Date
1FR	European Council on Foreign Relations, think tank	Telephone	21.02.2019
2FR	Permanent Representation of France to the EU	Telephone	26.02.2019
3FR	Permanent Representation of France to the EU	Telephone	26.02.2019
4FR	Ministry of the Armed Forces	Telephone	08.03.2019
5FR	Ministry of the Armed Forces	Telephone	26.03.2019
THE NETHERLANDS			
Code	Affiliation	Interview Format	Date
1NL	Permanent Representation of the Netherlands to the EU	Telephone	08.02.2019
2NL	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	In-person	22.02.2019
3NL	Ministry of Defence	Telephone	01.03.2019
4NL	Permanent Representation of the Netherlands to the EU	Telephone	01.03.2019
GERMANY			
Code	Affiliation	Interview Format	Date
1DE	Ministry of Defence	Skype	01.02.2019

2DE	Permanent Representation of Germany to the EU	Telephone	12.02.2019
3DE	Ministry of Defence	Telephone	19.02.2019
4DE	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	In-person	23.02.2019
5DE	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, think tank	Skype	08.03.2019
FINLAND			
Code	Affiliation	Interview format	Date
1FI	Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU	Telephone	14.02
2FI	Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU	Telephone	25.02.2019
3FI	Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU	Telephone	28.02.2019
4FI	Ministry of Defence	Telephone	01.03.2019
5FI	Finnish Institute of International Affairs, think tank	Telephone	05.03.2019
ESTONIA			
Number	Affiliation	Interview format	Date
1EE	Ministry of Defence	In-person	18.02.2019
2EE	Permanent Representation of Estonia to the EU	Telephone	07.03.2019
3EE	International Centre for Defence and Security, think tank	In-person	07.03.2019
4EE	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	In-person	15.03.2019

I: MEANINGS OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

- (1) From the perspective of your country, what are considered to be the most important steps that the EU should take to better care for its security?
- (2) What does strategic autonomy of the EU entail? Thinking about it along the lines of its three main dimensions – decision-making, operations, industry – where should the EU level of ambition be?
- (3) How can the goal of strategic autonomy be best achieved? Are there any specific areas that should be focused on, e.g. more equal defence spending, developing high-end defence capabilities, formation of an European army etc.?
- (4) If the EU would achieve this goal of strategic autonomy, how would it affect the relationship between Europe and the United States? How does the idea of strategic autonomy fit into the current regional security architecture?

II: PRACTICAL COOPERATION (main focus on PESCO)

The EU has taken several steps aimed to support the process of closer cooperation in security and defence. These include PESCO, CARD, and the European Defence Fund.

- (5) How important do you see each of them for achieving strategic autonomy? Are they in principle supporting this goal or are there still some key issue areas that are not addressed by the current initiatives?
- (6) So far, how effective has PESCO been in fulfilling the high hopes that it has been surrounded with?
- (7) Are there any practical issues that have arisen during the implementation phase of the PESCO framework, or notable disagreements between the member states?
- (8) What is the position of your country on third party involvement in the EU defence and security initiatives, including PESCO projects? How does this decision interact with the overall goal of achieving strategic autonomy?
- (9) In your assessment, have the divergent understandings of „strategic autonomy“ among the member states resulted in any type of obstacles for practical cooperation within the PESCO framework? If so, then how?

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

The European Union's Quest for Strategic Autonomy: Divergence of Understandings across Member States and Its Implications for Cooperation

Dear Sir or Madam,

You are being invited to participate in the research project “*The European Union's Quest for Strategic Autonomy: Divergence of Understandings across Member States and Its Implications for Cooperation*”. The study is carried out by the second year graduate student Elina Libek from Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies of the University of Tartu as part of her final thesis. The research project is supported by the Estonian Ministry of Defence. The information provided in this form is to help you decide whether you would like to take part in this study.

Aims and implications of the research: This research will focus on the ongoing debates about deepening security and defence cooperation within the European Union (EU). The key concept explored in this study is idea of “strategic autonomy”, the meanings given to it among the EU member states and their practical implications. As a result of the deteriorating security environment of Europe, the EU has become increasingly vocal about the need for an increased capacity in the areas of defence and security. The initiatives taken in this regard often revolve around the goal of "strategic autonomy". Different EU member states, not to mention third parties, such as the U.S., however, seem to have a rather different understanding of what this greater autonomy should entail. The question explored in this research is: How do the divergent understandings of strategic autonomy among the EU member states affect practical cooperation to achieve this goal? The aim of the research project is to engage with theoretical debates related to meaning creation and security cooperation, and to offer policy-relevant insight into the matters of European security integration.

Procedures of the research: Should you agree to participate, it will take approximately 45 minutes of your time to be interviewed by the researcher from the University of Tartu. During the interview you will be asked to answer questions about your perceptions related to the meanings of “strategic autonomy” in the context of the European Union and the current state-of-the-art of practical cooperation aimed to achieve this goal. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure that the researcher has an accurate record of the discussion. If you prefer not to be audio-recorded, please let the researcher know. Audio recording will be destroyed after the interview has been transcribed. The researcher will ensure protection of personal data and secure processing and storage of the gathered empirical material as outlined below.

Appendix 3: Interview Consent Form (continued)

Anonymity and confidentiality of personal data: Measures will be taken to protect the confidentiality and privacy of research participants. Interviewees remain anonymous and their responses will not be linked to their identity. Participants are free to withdraw from the project at any time and may skip a question if they feel uncomfortable giving an answer. The only person who will have access to the audio file and the transcription of the interview is the principal researcher from the University of Tartu, and any other person or agency required by law.

Rights of research participants: You can choose not to participate in this study or withdraw your participation at any time during or after the research begins. Refusing to be in this study or deciding to discontinue participation will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of Tartu. Should you encounter problems as a direct result of being in this study, please contact the principal researcher listed at the end of this consent form.

Informed consent: Agreeing to the interview means that you have read and understood this consent form, you have had your questions answered, and you have decided to be part of the research study.

You are not expected to directly benefit from participating in this research study except for insight you might gain through answering the interview questions. If you are interested in obtaining a summary of research findings, please let the researcher know. If you have any additional questions before or during the study, you should talk to one of the contacts listed below. You will be given a copy of this document for your own records.

EUROOPA LIIDU PÜÜD STRATEEGILISE AUTONOOMIA SUUNAS: LAHKNEVUSED LIIKMESRIIKIDE ARUSAAMADES JA SELLE MÕJU KAITSEKOOSTÖÖLE

Elina Libek

Resüme

Sõnapaar “strateegiline autonoomia” on viimase paari aasta jooksul leidnud ühtviisi laialdast kasutust nii Euroopa Liidu (EL) strateegiadokumentides kui kohaliku poliitilise eliidi väljaütlemistes. Selle mõiste ebamäärasest laadist johtuvalt on tavapäraseks muutunud väide, et EL-i liikmesriigid omistavad “strateegilisele autonoomiale” väga erinevaid tähendusi. Ühise arusaama puudumine “strateegilise autonoomia” tähenduse osas on omakorda küsimärgi alla seadnud selle eesmärgi saavutamiseks vajaliku praktilisele koostöö võimalikkuse. Antud diskussioonidele tuginedes oli käesoleval uurimistööl kaks keskset eesmärki: Esiteks, kaardistada, kuidas tõlgendavad erinevad EL-i liikmesriigid mõistet “Euroopa strateegiline autonoomia”? Teiseks, uurida kuivõrd on antud kontseptsiooni ümbritsev arusaamade paljusus osutunud probleemiks EL-i raamistikus aset leidvale kaitsekoostööle, mis peaks strateegilise autonoomia kui eesmärgi saavutamist toetama?

Uurimistöös seati fookuse alla mõiste “strateegiline autonoomia” tähendus viies liikmesriigis: Prantsusmaa, Holland, Saksamaa, Soome ja Eesti. Juhtumite valikul lähtuti liikmesriikide strateegilise kultuuri erisusest atlantisismi ja kontinentalismi spektrumil. “Strateegilise autonoomia” mõiste erinevate tõlgenduste mõju praktilisele koostööle uuriti EL-i alalise struktureeritud koostöö raamistiku (*Permanent Structured Cooperation – PESCO*) kontekstis. Sealjuures asetati rõhk sellele, kuidas liikmesriikide poliitikakujundajad ise tajuvad arusaamade mitmekesisuse mõju koostööle. Uuringu algandmete kogumiseks viidi läbi kokku 23 ekspertintervjuud valitsusametnike ning julgeoleku- ja kaitsepoliitika eksperdiga viiest uurimistöösse kaasatud liikmesriigist.

Mis puutub “strateegilise autonoomia” erinevatesse tõlgendustesse, siis selle uurimistöo tulemused näitavad, et mõiste peamine tähendus on kõikides analüüsitud liikmesriikides sarnane, viidates Euroopa iseseisvale tegutsemisvõimekusele julgeoleku- ja kaitsepoliitika küsimustes. Sealjuures on liikmesriikide poliitikakujundajad paljuski

omaks võtnud analüütikute ja akadeemikute poolt välja toodud strateegilise autonoomia kolm peamist dimensiooni: poliitiline, operatiivne ja kaitsetööstuslik autonoomia. Lahknevused liikmesriikide arusaamades “strateegilise autonoomia” tähenduse osas kerkivad esile aga mõnevõrra reflektiivsemate küsimuste osas: kas “strateegilise autonoomia” lõppesmärgiks peaks olema Euroopa iseseisvus oma julgeoleku tagamisel või on järkjärguline kaitsevõimekuse arendamine juba eesmärk omaette, kuidas paigutub strateegilise autonoomia ambitsioon Euroopa koostööpartnerite suhtes (eksklusiivsus/inklusiivsus) ja kas Euroopa püüdu strateegilise autonoomia suunas nähakse kui potentsiaalset ohtu transatlantilistele väärtustele.

Samaaegselt näitab selle uuringu teine peamine järeldus, et strateegilise autonoomia mõiste ebaselgus ei takista tingimata EL-i raamistikes toimuvat praktilist koostööd, mille eesmärk on seda toetada. Pigem tajuvad liikmesriikide poliitikakujundajad ühistegevust kui midagi, mis toob enesega kaasa suurema selguse ja aitab lõpuks kindlaks määrata liikmesriikide kollektiivse arusaama seatud eesmärkide tähendusest. See leid annab alust arvata, et olgugi, et oma olemustelt hägune, on “strateegilise autonoomia” mõiste aidanud kaasa liikmesriikide sama laua taha toomisele. Nüüd on peamiseks küsimuseks see, kuidas leida tasakaal erinevate ambitsioonide ja paljuski ka erinevate murekohtade vahel. Siinkohal aga on võtmesõnaks poliitiline tahe, mitte niivõrd “strateegilise autonoomia” üheselt mõistetav tähendus.

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