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Franco-German Leadership in the context of European Defence Policy

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Franco-German Leadership in the context of EU Defence Policy: from Brexit to the Strategic Compass

Abstract

Leadership is crucial for the success of a collective actor in reaching common goals. Its relevance is particularly visible in the EU, due to the difficulty in managing and converging a wide range of interests, especially in the intergovernmental field of defence. This article analyses Franco-German transactional leadership throughout the evolution of the EU's security and defence policy, with a focus on the effects of Brexit. By highlighting the concept of leadership in international relations, this study identifies Franco-German actions and strategies within the Common Security and Defence Policy, reflecting on how these have shaped European defence and how Brexit changed existing dynamics. We conclude that France and Germany have led the EU's security and defence project, albeit with limited success, with a shift towards a successful relaunch of EU defence in the aftermath of Brexit, aided by doubts over NATO and war in Ukraine. At the core of that limited success and representing the main obstacle lay diverging interests and strategies.

Keywords: European Union, CSDP, Franco-German axis, Leadership, Defence, Brexit

Many actors influence the European Union (EU) policymaking process, including Member States (MS), the Commission or the European External Action Service (EEAS), among others. This multiplicity means the ability to lead is paramount when trying to achieve a goal requiring the consent of all MS. In this article, we seek to understand how a group of MS can influence and lead the EU's defence policy. We examine the Franco-German leadership and inputs in EU defence with a focus on the effects of the United Kingdom's (UK) exit from the EU (Brexit), anchored in an analysis of documents, speeches, and statements produced by these MS (Bowen 2009: 30) supported by relevant academic literature.

We worked with the level of analysis of the MS because they are the main decision-makers in defence policy. We also opted for working with the 'level of the overall discourse' (Diez 2014: 29), as we are looking primarily at the main narratives made public in the name of these MS. This focus relates to the overall discourse's purpose in shaping the collective actor's identity (ibid.), as it makes up the more visible and public aspect thereof. Yet, due to their interconnectedness, we also consider different levels of collective and individual discourse, as these are difficult to discern when it comes to semiotic production bearing collective authorship (Carta and Morin, 2014: 303-5).

We chose the Franco-German axis due to its undeniable impact regarding defence and other areas (Ackermann 1994; Feldman 1999). This spans from De Gaulle's 'empty chair crisis' and France's national interests in the European integration process (Troitiño 2008; Martins 2013) to the development of the Franco-German partnership amidst German and communitarian changes (Baun 1996) as an example of the *regularised intergovernmentalism* that allowed them to find common ground in many issues despite diverging interests (Krotz 2010: 175; Krotz and Schild 2013). This impact is mostly visible in instances like the French and British impetus at

the 1998 Saint-Malo summit (Shearer 2000) leading to the creation of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) (Ricketts 2017: 30). France and Germany's role in the EU's defence reform was mostly relevant during their Council Presidencies, despite constant struggles for a balance of power (Drake 2001; Krotz 2010). The 2007 German Presidency was key in finding a solution for the rejection of the 2005 Constitutional Treaty (Konig, Daimer, and Finke 2008: 337; Dinan 2008), while Nicolas Sarkozy simultaneously became France's President, marking a shift in the country's commitment to the EU by declaring that 'France is back in Europe' (ibid.: 78). Following the start of Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU's Strategic Compass mimicked this dynamic, as it began with the 2020 German Presidency and concluded with the 2022 French Presidency.

Adding to their historical significance, as the largest EU MS, France and Germany's actions inevitably affect the EU, as both have displayed leadership abilities in many EU policies (Müller and Van Esch 2020a: 1053). Both may be described as regional powers, as they are 'able to stand up against any coalition of other states in the region', are 'highly influential in regional affairs', and may even be considered 'great power[s] on a world scale' (Nolte 2010: 889; Destradi 2010) – considering France's nuclear weapons and Germany's economic weight. This research is relevant due to the historical importance of the case study, its connection to the EU's political process, and contribution to academic debates on EU defence and political leadership.

Without forgetting the role played by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 or the temporary doubts surrounding the transatlantic alliance and NATO's role in EU defence around 2016, our analysis focuses on the period between the Brexit referendum and the launch of the EU Global Strategy (2016) and the launch of the Strategic Compass (2022). This is due to the importance

that the UK-FR-DE cooperation had for the advancement of EU defence (Hofmann and Mérrand 2020; Krotz and Schild 2018) and to the relevance that Brexit had not only in boosting a renewal of EU defence, but also for the Franco-German leadership in this area (Deschaux-Dutard 2019), despite the hurdle of diverging interests and strategic cultures (Deschaux-Dutard 2022; Huntley 2022; Krotz and Schramm 2021).

We begin with an overview of the scholarly debate on leadership. We then analyse the Franco-German leadership in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), focusing on both countries' ability to deepen European integration and influence the participation of other MS in the creation of institutional arrangements and initiatives that have prompted an increment in EU defence cooperation following Brexit. Finally, we discuss the results and present conclusions.

Conceptualizing Leadership

Political leadership, in the case of the EU's fragmented and multi-level system, entails a 'collective and reciprocal interaction among (multiple) leaders and their followers' (Müller and Van Esch 2020a: 1052), while drawing from several dimensions and concepts (Vu 2017: 2). Leadership is connected to power and remains crucial for the success or failure of the international system and international cooperation (Young 1991; Blondel 1987). Leadership is also connected to legitimacy, mostly regarding its success or failure, depending on the leaders' public perception (Buchanan and Keohane 2006) or on the performance of individuals that attempt to lead (Kane and Patapan 2012). Finally, leadership depends on *supply*, *followership* *inclusion*, and overall *influence over policy outcomes* (Bruno and Finzi 2018).

Scholarly literature on EU leadership has also grown recently (Chaban et al. 2013; Héritier and Prakash 2015; Virkkunen 2018), largely focusing on the EU's role in the fight against climate change (Wurzel and Connelly 2011; Parker and Karlsson 2017; Wurzel et al. 2019; Oberthür and Dupont 2021) as well as on the acknowledgement of the complexity of the study of leadership in the EU's 'leaderful' and highly interconnected context (Tömmel and Verdun 2017), which encompasses four theoretical aspects (Müller and Van Esch 2020a). The first is leadership as *hegemony*, characterized by a MS assuming a dominant role, either hesitantly or otherwise (which is often the case of Germany, especially when French support is lacking) in influencing EU policy making (Otero-Iglesias 2017; Schild 2020).

The second aspect is the difficult to prove relationship between leadership and *impact*, whereby e.g., a systematic process-tracing can show how the achievement of concrete successes set out by the purported leader can be an important criterion for the confirmation or reinforcement of said leadership (Schoeller 2020), considering the leaders' specific institutional settings, situational factors, and personal qualities (Tömmel 2019). A leader in the international system purposefully displays strategic direction towards specific goals, seeking change either in a *transformational* (i.e., to alter the course of history) or *transactional* manner (i.e., incrementing policy changes) (Wurzel and Connelly 2011: 12). Transactional leadership is related to the leader's ability to broker and achieve changes on a step-by-step basis, incrementally. Conversely, transformational leadership 'implies bringing about fundamental changes' (Tömmel 2013). In a collectivity, the leader attempts to foster cooperation and coordinate others' actions to achieve common goals (Keohane 2010 cited in Helms 2014: 265). Leaders' role in institutional bargaining is also relevant, i.e., individual actors' attempts to establish rules and arrangements that manage interactions among themselves (Young 1991). Leaders are thus those who, while being supported by others, attempt to direct efforts towards solving common

problems. While impact and achievement does not necessarily equate assured success, it heightens this possibility.

The third theoretical aspect that prevails in the EU leadership debate is leadership as *soft power*. This aspect can focus on *soft purpose*, whereby the act of leading goes beyond the purported leader's self-interest (Müller and Van Esch 2020a: 1061), such as in the case of achieving common goals through collaborative leadership like in the Franco-German case (Müller and Van Esch 2020b). It can also focus on *soft resources*, which encompasses the instrumentalization of informal and non-material resources such as ideas and personality traits (Müller and Van Esch 2020a: 1061). Similarly and complementary to soft resources (Tömmel 2019), *soft process* is also a possible focus in this regard, entailing appealing to followers through persuasion rather than material resources or coercion (Müller and Van Esch 2020a: 1062).

And finally, the fourth theoretical aspect prevalent in the EU leadership debate is leadership in (institutional, *zeitgeist*, domestic, external, political, or other) *context* or *environment* (e.g., Schoeller 2020): the system and circumstances in which they operate to take advantage of opportunities (Swinkels 2020; Cox 1969). So, timing is crucial for a leader's success, and events like internal or external crises can affect their actions,ⁱ representing not only constraints, but also opportunities (Blondel 1987: 8).

Concurrently, *positional resources*, i.e., the available resources and competences that actors possess in decision-making established by institutional arrangements (Héritier and Prakash 2015: 2) are essential in determining the leader's success and being able to establish a winning coalition. Consequently, more or fewer positional resources result in a specific strategy, either

unilateral or one that entails negotiation with others (ibid). This connects to *situational leadership*: the leaders' potential to make a difference depending on the circumstances of their actions (Ikenberry 1996).

Leadership is also behavioural, producing different types of leadership models (Young 1991; Wiener 1995 cited in Helms 2014: 263). Leadership deriving from *hard power*ⁱⁱ and material (economic, military, capital) resources is often classified as *structural* (Young 1991) or *hierarchical* (Vu 2017). In *functional* leadership, leaders stand out through contributions, like devising initiatives or setting a strategy to tackle a common issue while attempting to maintain order and prosperity (ibid.). Here, the *commitment capability* towards neighbouring States through a regional strategy is crucial due to a leader's fundamental role in multilateral cooperation, as we will see regarding the Franco-German axis in the EU (ibid). Other types include *symbolic*, based on political stances without actual policy implementation; *entrepreneurial*, i.e., the negotiating and bargaining in fostering agreements; and *cognitive* leadership, related to the (re)definition of a group's interests (Young 1991).

Ultimately, a leader is an actor who attempts to influence and direct the actions of its partners/allies towards specific goals, usually to solve a shared problem or, as is often the case in the EU, to deepen and foster integration and cooperation.

Franco-German leadership vs. diverging strategic and defence cultures

When evaluating France and Germany's strategic path in European integration, it is unquestionable that 'no other bilateral partnership in the EU can combine similar resources, capability and industrial capacity' (Glegerich 2019: 1). They form a dynamic partnership that,

with common ground and a course of action, can influence EU policymaking in a certain direction. Often, a Franco-German agreement is required for the EU to move forward in a particular policy. However, common positions are hard to find due to national characteristics or an agreement is reached but fails to produce the intended results (Kempin and Kunz 2017: 8). So, before reflecting on Franco-German leadership in EU defence, we must understand each country's strategic views and how these affect their attitudes vis-à-vis the other and the EU, as this influences the results of bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

The main difference in strategic culture is each country's tradition regarding its own role and that of their armed forces in the international system, largely stemming from Germany's civilian power tradition and pacifism that resulted from its Nazi period, and from France's nuclear power status and colonial past. Political institutions and constitutional law set out distinct rules, leading to different approaches. In Germany, the government determines the actions and deployment of the *Bundeswehr* (armed forces), but the *Bundestag* (Parliament) must approve their deployment, according to the constitution. This conveys reluctance towards deployment and use of force (Federal Republic of Germany 2016: 109), while the *Bundestag* adds legitimacy to operations. This restraint stems from Germany's experience in World Wars I and II, resulting in participation in military operations only taking place in multilateral frameworks (Kunz 2018), as ruled by the German Federal Constitutional Court. Moreover, problematic, lengthy, and costly engagements such as that in Afghanistan prompted a review of Germany's troop deployment criteria ahead of the 2021 federal elections (Glucroft 2022).

Conversely, French national security is a Presidential prerogative, according to the constitution. The armed forces' deployment abroad does not (mostly) require parliamentary approval (French Republic 2008: 241-242), because 'the armed forces must be able to engage at very

short notice, across the full spectrum of threats and conflict’ (French Republic 2017: 75). This is intricately connected with ‘strategic autonomy’, or the ‘preserv[ation of France’s] capability to decide and act alone to defend its interests’ (ibid.: 54). This is a vital element for French defence policy and highlights the armed forces’ importance (Glegerich 2019: 2). The use of this terminology in the Strategic Compass debates reflects the French use of leadership as *soft power*, through *soft resources* and *processes* (Müller and Van Esch 2020a: 1061-1062).

This dichotomy is challenging for cooperation because while France is openly willing and able to engage in CSDP, Germany oftentimes appears more reluctant. On the other hand, while France often deploys forces autonomously, Germany is cautious to rely on multilateral deployments in the context of the EU, NATO, or the UN. In fact, both countries’ engagement with NATO has also been different, with (West) Germany having had a profound and prolific engagement with the Alliance as well as a vital connection since its inception, whereas France having withdrawn from NATO’s military structure for several decades starting in the 1960s.

Germany’s reluctance in assuming a hegemonic or leadership role in EU policymaking – especially in the economic sphere, where its leadership is oftentimes recognized while being politically contested – is well documented (Bulmer and Paterson 2013). Still, several studies examining the Franco-German axis in EU policymaking, particularly following Brexit, often refer the probability that Germany will remain/become a hegemon (Krotz and Schild 2018; Krotz 2014; Siddi 2020), thus reflecting the asymmetric nature of this coalition.

Comparing strategic documents, the 2017 French White Paper distinguishes itself from its 2016 German counterpart. France emphasises its ability and priority to intervene militarily abroad more than Germany (French Republic 2017). However, despite not being as willing to engage

militarily, Germany underlines the importance of participating with the EU, NATO, and UN. Moreover, the German White Paper (2016) states that Germany ‘must enable the *Bundeswehr* to deliver effects across the entire operational spectrum and ensure that it is ready and capable’ (ibid: 89), highlighting a need to play a more prominent role in international security and in the EU, where ‘Germany is willing to assume responsibility and leadership as a framework nation in alliances and partnerships’ (ibid: 98).

Despite the relevance of strategic autonomy for France, Germany sees it more prudently, including in the Strategic Compass. Though Germany’s discourse has changed due to events like Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea (Major, Mölling, and Höltnann 2018: 5) or its subsequent 2022 invasion of Ukraine, its strategy regarding the CSDP remains distinct from France’s. France connects its national strategic autonomy to the EU’s, itself idealised by France to build a common EU strategic culture, leading to a competent and credible joint military capability and ‘common budget tools’ (French Republic 2017: 61). Conversely, Germany’s EU defence strategy emphasises greater integration, enhanced defence structures, joint capabilities, and the reinforcement of the EU’s defence industry (Federal Republic of Germany 2016: 73). While France intends to ambitiously transform the CSDP into efficient military interventions and concrete outputs, Germany seeks to heighten integration through capability development.

As stated in the French Senate report on European defence (2019: 71), strategic autonomy includes defence and the industrial, commercial, and digital areas. Both countries agree that the European defence industry is fragmented, causing drastic competition disadvantages and inequalities in the internal market, leading to interoperability gaps among EU MS’ armed forces, paramount for effective military operations (Federal Republic of Germany 2016: 129).

Despite distinct strategic interests, both emphasise the need for ‘Europeanisation’ⁱⁱⁱ of the defence industry to increase cooperation (German Defence Strategy 2015: 2), with France already showing high ambitions in 2008, considering that the CSDP was only revised in 2009. Nonetheless, Franco-German cooperation is characterised by obstacles stemming from distinct industrial landscapes. In France, the main defence firms and companies are State-controlled or State-supported (French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs 2018), while Germany’s industrial scene is mostly privatised SMEs (Marx 2007: 20). The distinct role of the State in each country has thus led to divergent industrial defence systems.

Regardless of their divergent strategic interests, the two countries’ awareness and willingness to lead EU defence is noticeable and was further reinforced following the Brexit referendum. They understand how vital cooperation with one another is and acknowledge and respect cultural differences (French Senate 2019: 65). Despite contrasting strategies, both agree on several elements, including NATO’s role in Europe’s security, or ensuring the CSDP does not replace nor compete with NATO (e.g., Federal Republic of Germany 2006: 7).

Both MS’ commitment to deepening EU defence industry cooperation and capability development represents a strategic convergence. Yet, their recent White Papers and those published in the 2000s show divergences. Whereas the 2006 German White Paper displayed desire to strengthen the European defence industry and capabilities (Federal Republic of Germany 2006), the 2016 version is more critical, acknowledging lack of integration and fragmentation (Federal Republic of Germany 2016). Instead, the 2008 French White Paper on defence presented a similar level of ambition as the 2017 version, having already mentioned the need for an EU autonomous strategic planning capability. The EU defence industry was

previously identified as an issue, mostly regarding fragmentation (French Republic 2008: 84-86), which prevails nowadays.

This reflection on main strategic interests and priorities is key to understanding both MS' actions towards the CSDP to achieve unilateral and/or bilateral objectives. This is pertinent for analysing how the two countries have cooperated recently in defence and security, allowing us to determine if their interaction has enabled them to both positively surpass their divergences, eventually leading to a transactional leadership role, and to have an impact on achieving their goals (Schoeller 2020; Tömmel 2019).

Franco-German contributions following Brexit and the EU Global Strategy

The Franco-German axis' strategic convergence stemming from the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian conflict was strengthened. In addition to war to the East, the Euro crisis, the rise of populism, and the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean risking further fragmentation, two other events in 2016 triggered a new push in EU defence cooperation: Donald Trump's election as US president and the Brexit referendum (Daehnhardt 2018: 97). The Trump administration's demands for more defence spending by European NATO members led to a sense of unpredictability in transatlantic relations (ibid: 97), though France and Germany acknowledged the US and NATO's role as vital for Europe's security (Federal Republic of Germany 2016: 49). Moreover, one of the expected results of Brexit was that it might provide new impetus in defence, given the UK's track record of limiting advances in this area (Shea 2020).

In fact, Brexit is likely the main enabler of institutional changes that unfolded in subsequent years. Despite the strategic importance of the Anglo-Franco partnership (French Republic 2017:

59), the 2017 French Strategic Review acknowledges Brexit-induced challenges, including the EU's loss of one of its most powerful military actors and one of the biggest defence spenders. Yet, Brexit was also seen as an opportunity for removing the UK's veto, representing a significant change considering the UK's inclination towards Atlanticism, NATO, and the US to the detriment of a stronger and more autonomous EU defence (Koenig and Walter-Franke 2017: 6). However, Brexit was concomitantly perceived as a threat to the EU, challenging its unity and defence capabilities.

In an emerging multipolar system, France and Germany understood that action was required to ensure the EU would not further fragment nor abandon its defence ambitions. Following the British referendum, France and Germany's Foreign Affairs Ministers published a document stating they recognized their responsibility in reinforcing EU cohesion and highlighting the EU's need to cooperate efficiently to achieve its ambitions (French and German Foreign Ministers 2016: 1). Both MS realized that the Brexit referendum represented 'a unique window of opportunity' (Deschaux-Dutard 2019: 46) and a conducive *context* or *environment* for leadership, despite their shortcomings in acting on it.

Meanwhile, the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) was launched within days of the Brexit referendum (likely not by accident) to establish the EU's strategic direction in response to these security-related issues, including Russia's growing assertiveness, unveiling a new stage of CSDP development and a more ambitious international security actorness. Despite mentioning NATO as the prevailing collective defence provider, the EUGS underscores that 'Europeans must be better equipped, trained and organised to contribute decisively to such collective efforts, as well as to act autonomously if and when necessary' (Council of the EU 2016: 19), stressing the need for an EU 'strategic autonomy'.

Despite the EUGS' constructive contribution, further steps were required (French Republic and Federal Republic of Germany 2016: 3). Thus, the Franco-German partnership presented a proposal setting a joint vision and plan for defence cooperation that included the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). This mechanism proposed by articles 42.6 and 46 of the EU Treaty (TEU 2012) was directed at MS 'whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria, and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions' (EU 2008). The Franco-German post-Brexit partnership, with the support of Italy and Spain, was successful in reviving this tool from the EU treaties and in getting other MS aboard (Deschaux-Dutard 2019: 43). The launch of PESCO immediately following the Brexit referendum follows the logic that the UK might have been one of its main hurdles, due to the UK's historical hesitancy concerning EU defence integration, with the notable exception of the Saint-Malo declaration (Sweeney and Winn 2020: 232). The successful launch of PESCO reflects an effective Franco-German *transactional* leadership, as it expresses their ability to broker and achieve changes on a step-by-step basis incrementally, – given that PESCO was already on the Treaty –, rather than 'bringing about fundamental changes' (Tömmel 2013). This *impact* in effectively achieving goals further reinforces this coalition's leadership (Schoeller 2020; Tömmel 2019).

Notwithstanding, the ambition behind 'demanding missions' and 'binding commitments' became a source of disagreement between France and Germany due to their differing strategic cultures and aspirations for CSDP and PESCO. France desired a selective PESCO regarding the most ambitious and capable participants (French Senate 2019: 38) and saw it as a tool to improve the EU's operative efficiency and strategic autonomy. Conversely, Germany favoured an inclusive PESCO, framing it as an opportunity to drive EU integration forward. This contrast

exemplifies the challenges stemming from both countries' differing strategic cultures (Glegerich 2019: 3). The result, driven by a Franco-German impetus, was a more modest PESCO compared to initial intentions (French Senate 2019: 38), with the adoption of the German approach not due to leadership but compromise, while stressing the need to create a 'binding commitment allowing for a true step forward in CSDP' (French and German Defence Ministers 2016: 2). Notwithstanding, the *impact* stemming from actual results, albeit timid, corroborates the axis' leadership.

The Franco-German proposal also cited other initiatives, like the need to improve the launch of CSDP military operations, the EUBG, or a permanent EU headquarters for planning and conduct of military and civilian CSDP missions (ibid: 2). France and Germany also proposed a common EU budget for military research and technology (R&T) development, in line with the Commission's proposal. Alongside increasing equipment procurement among MS, another focal point was the need to improve competitiveness and coherence of the European defence industry (ibid: 5; Rettman 2016).^{iv}

This process depicts the importance of the *context* or *environment* as a potential enabler for change (Cox 1969 cited in Helms 2014; Schoeller 2020). The EU's circumstances – particularly Brexit – inspired a reaction by France and Germany to strengthen its defence actorness, thus displaying *situational* leadership (Ikenberry 1996). Here, *timing* was crucial to the development of a successful strategy (Daehnhardt 2018; Blondel 1987). However, the result is incremental changes through a successful brokerage, thus supporting the *transactional* leadership label (Tömmel 2013).

The Franco-German paper was sent to the other MS before an informal summit in Bratislava to discuss and negotiate the proposals (Kornelius 2016) and the summit produced a roadmap for stronger EU defence cooperation (Council of the EU 2016: 4). This shows the necessary *soft resources* and *processes* that even the most powerful bilateral European coalition must undertake to devise an EU action plan. For changes to be implemented in the EU, the approval of most or all MS is required (Wurzel and Connelly 2011). The transition from a unilateral French-German strategy (and lack of action plan) regarding the CSDP's direction, towards the development of a bilateral contribution following the previously mentioned challenges is also worth noticing. Here, the idea of *functional* leadership (Vu 2017) is clearly identified: to propel the EU in a certain direction, both countries understood the need to form a coalition and promote an institutional debate, leading to the adoption of measures. This is also in line with the overall label of *transactional* leadership, as it reflects their ability to broker and achieve incremental rather than fundamental changes (Tömmel 2013).

Thus, the process towards a more efficient and ambitious EU defence followed the initial Franco-German plan, reinforcing the coalition's *impact*. The effects of this renewed momentum were identified in the November and December 2016 European Councils where PESCO was discussed and agreed upon (subsequently established in December 2017), as was the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and a more integrated and competitive European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) (European Council 2016: 9). The sheer number of initiatives pushed by France and Germany approved a few months after the Brexit referendum attest to both their *transactional* leadership and the influence of this event in a piecemeal advancement of EU defence.

Despite PESCO's progress, it was not bereft of criticism. PESCO was less ambitious than the treaty proposed, and a European Council recommendation encouraged participating MS to 'advance the work and focus on the swift and effective implementation of the projects (...) to deliver tangible outputs and products' while stressing the need to 'develop projects that aim to exploit cooperation between existing military capabilities and make these capabilities available for missions and operations' (Council of the EU 2019: 9-10). In line with ongoing criticism regarding CSDP and PESCO, this recommendation focuses mostly on developing capabilities and not on improving the efficiency of CSDP missions. Here, contrasting strategic ambitions are clear and hinder the development of an EU strategic autonomy as swiftly as France desired.

Still, PESCO was not the only initiative developed immediately following the Brexit referendum and the launch of the EUGS. The EDF was launched following the Franco-German proposal for an increase in EU budget for military R&T (Kornelius 2016). Concurrently proposed by the Commission, the EDF was created in 2017 to increase national investments in defence research while reducing spending duplications (European Commission 2017: 1). The European Council also prompted the creation of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) 'to strengthen the planning and conduct of EU non-executive military missions' (Council of the EU 2017). Its importance had already been mentioned by France in 2003 (Koenig and Walter-Franke 2017: 9) and in the 2016 Franco-German paper (French and German defence ministers 2016: 2). The MPCC is perceived as an important step towards France's ambition of EU strategic autonomy, while also supporting Germany's EU integration focus (Koenig and Walter-Franke 2017: 10). While not as ambitious as France would have desired it, reflecting some tensions among both MS' visions (Deschaux-Dutard 2019: 42), the *impact* of the setting up of the MPCC reinforces the axis' leadership.

CARD, which helps foster capability development by addressing shortfalls and deepening defence cooperation (European Defence Agency 2018), is another example of an initiative created following France and Germany's incentive for more coordination and transparency regarding MS' defence budgets and an 'essential intermediate step in the overall EU capability development process' (ibid).

Finally, among other projects, France and Germany (with Italy, Spain, and Cyprus), have also been pursuing the creation of one of PESCO's cornerstones – a Crisis Response Operation Core to 'contribute to the creation of a coherent full spectrum force package, which could accelerate the provision of forces' (EEAS 2017b) and enhance the readiness and preparation of MS to engage in operations and missions (ibid). All these concrete incremental steps towards a stronger EU defence attest to the Franco-German *transactional* leadership (Tömmel 2013).

Complementary Franco-German intergovernmental defence initiatives

Following Brexit, Macron's election as French President in 2017 brought hope for EU defence due to his aspiration of deepening cooperation in this area – including Franco-German bilateral cooperation (Kempin 2021). This was seen in Macron's visit to Germany where, alongside Angela Merkel, he stated the need to 'breathe new dynamism' into the French-German partnership and develop a 'roadmap' to strengthen the EU (DN News 2017). In addition to Macron's attempts to galvanize defence cooperation and push for autonomous operating capabilities, France also announced the European Intervention initiative (EI2), a 'flexible, non-binding forum of European participating states which are able and willing to engage their military capabilities and forces when and where necessary to protect European security

interests' (Participating Member States 2018: 1), aimed at developing a shared strategic culture (Macron 2017).

According to the 2017 French White Paper, in addition to 'help develop a shared strategic culture for Europeans', though EI2 takes place outside the EU framework, it was meant to 'complement major bilateral defence relationships with Germany and the United Kingdom' (Franch Republic 2017: 3), thus reinforcing the Franco-German partnership but also attempting to mitigate Brexit fallout. The focus on military operations outside the EU framework led to EI2 not being initially positively seen by Germany (Major and Molling 2019: 13), though Germany ended up joining it to avoid a Franco-German disagreement (Daehnhardt 2018: 105). Besides, there is a connection between EI2 and the EU through PESCO, as some projects regarding military mobility and support to operations benefit from EI2 (Participating Member States 2018: 2). If it succeeds in developing a European strategic culture, the benefits for PESCO and the EU could be considerable (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2017). The individual leaders' influence and *impact* as difference makers are evident in these cases (Ikenberry 1996). Macron's election in 2017 (and Hollande before him) provides a distinct example of that potential (Pannier 2018), alongside Merkel's role in the EUGS from 2016, especially following the doubts cast on the transatlantic partnership by US President Trump (Iso-Markku and Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet 2020).

The contrast between a French push for EU strategic autonomy and the efforts of coordination between MS defence industries and weapons systems illustrates the diverging strategic interests regarding CSDP (Major and Molling 2019: 13; Daehnhardt 2018: 106). Germany's creation of the Enable and Enhance Initiative (E2I) reinforces this contrast. It focuses on supporting third countries to deal with domestic security and maintain stability (German Government 2016: 1).

E2I was proposed in 2013 to increase the CSDP's effectiveness, underlining that the EU's training missions are often hampered by lack of equipment among local partners. Despite E2I not having been accepted by the EU due to lack of consensus, the German federal government proceeded with its implementation by including an item of EUR 100 million in its defence budget to support the project (ibid: 2).

Despite these differences, there has been a slow but noticeable convergence between France and Germany regarding EU defence, largely due to the *regularised intergovernmentalism* that developed between the two through the 1963 Elysée Treaty and the cooperation framework it established (Krotz and Schild 2013). This is displayed in Merkel's 2018 speech to the European Parliament where she supported the idea of a European army to complement NATO. Merkel stressed the EU's inefficiency as a security actor due to the proliferation of different defence weapon systems among MS and proposed the establishment of a European Security Council to make crucial decisions more efficiently (Merkel 2018).

Taking advantage of the strategic alignment, recognising the value of the Franco-German partnership for the EU, and in celebration of the Elysée Treaty's 56th anniversary, the two MS established the Aachen Treaty in 2019. It focuses on strengthening foreign policy, defence, and internal security cooperation to increase the EU's ability to act autonomously (French Republic and Federal Republic of Germany 2019: 5). The treaty sought to promote competitiveness and consolidation of the EU's industrial and technological defence base, while developing a common approach on arms exports (ibid: 6).

That year, France and Germany reached a compromise on arms exports (French Republic 2019; French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2019) relevant for EU defence in attempting

to coordinate a sensitive area due to MS' divergent actions and strategies (Finabel 2019). The agreement also sought to increase integration between their defence industries and companies, including procurement (also a challenge) (European Commission 2016). By reducing restrictions and harmonizing standards and procedures it sought to benefit the EU's defence industry and cooperation and contribute to a common position. Still, an EU common stance is contingent upon other MS' agreement on certain security issues and join initiatives like the Aachen Treaty (Finabel 2019). Regardless of the non-participation of other MS in this framework, the agreement devised in the Aachen Treaty provides an example of *commitment capability*, in which France and Germany display leadership intentions, setting an example that may drive others to follow (Vu 2017).

Beyond these agreements, France and Germany have also worked on bilateral projects like developing next-generation fighters (DW News 2019) included in the Future Combat Air System. Yet, difficulties have emerged regarding leadership in specific parts of the projects and compatibility of French and German industries (French Senate 2019: 69). Another example of a Franco-German joint project is 'Eurodrone', a PESCO initiative in which both participate with other MS (EEAS 2020a). Actually, the two have the biggest participation in PESCO, either as participants or coordinators. France has also joined all current CSDP missions, while Germany has only been absent from ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EEAS 2020b) and EUTM CAR.

Individual ad hoc efforts in the Sahel, like French-led *Takuba* Task Force (part of operation *Barkane*) or German-led *Gazelle* Mission also converged with the EU's collective objectives, seeking to complement and improve its capacity building, training, and mentoring efforts in Mali. The idea that these operations could be integrated into, or work in close coordination with

EUTM Mali, highlights their complementarity and contribution to a common European strategic culture.

Despite its leading role, the Franco-German partnership has not set a strong example regarding defence spending in the past: both countries' spending on defence as GDP percentage was slightly decreasing in recent times, consistently remaining lower than NATO's two per cent threshold (EDA 2018). Several MS invest more on defence in terms of GDP percentage, though the volume of investment is far below that of France and Germany. These two MS remain, by far, the main spenders and investors in defence within the EU alongside the UK (ibid). Regarding participation in CSDP missions, both countries' commitment is indisputable, as mentioned.

The process leading to the adoption of the Strategic Compass shortly after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine was heavily influenced by the German and French EU Council Presidencies, as the process of the joint threat analysis that preceded it was launched during the 2020 German Presidency and the final document was adopted during the 2022 French Presidency. Although a considerable degree of individual leadership was displayed, the axis was not evident during the development of this historic milestone in EU defence, which represented one of the most significant post-Brexit opportunities for both MS to show their leadership in the CSDP. While both countries effectively ushered the EU's collective response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the subsequent CSDP development, this was not the case with the 2022 invasion (Särkkä and Ålander 2023). Although they individually ramped up their support for Ukraine, their leadership abilities regarding the development of EU defence, albeit belatedly present and somewhat underwhelming, were displayed separately.

German Chancellor Scholz inaugurated a new era of national EU defence expenditure with his *Zeitenwende* announcement (Scholz 2022), although his rhetoric somewhat exceeded Germany's deeds in practice. This constitutes a clear example of the use of *soft resources* and *processes* in the context of leadership as *soft power* (Müller and Van Esch 2020a: 1061). It is likely that both domestic and external expectations regarding Germany's role, following Merkel's record of antagonizing Russia and of playing a leadership role in EU defence, played a significant role in this attitude (Särkkä and Ålander 2023). Scholz' claim that 'step[ping] up as one of the main providers of security in Europe' is Germany's 'crucial role' (Scholz 2023) and the fact that the Germany's move led other NATO allies to increase their defence spending reinforce the country's *hegemonic* role in this regard (Otero-Iglesias 2017; Schild 2020).

Simultaneously, under President Macron, France during its EU Council Presidency facilitated the Versailles Declaration (EU MS 2022) which sought to bolster EU defence capabilities. Although this declaration and the tools that it fostered in terms of common procurement and ammunition production were collective EU efforts, the French Presidency played an important leadership role. On the other hand, Macron also sought unsuccessfully to play the role of mediator between Russia and the West. Macron's limitations stemming from unfavourable national elections reinforced his difficulties (and thus France's) at displaying leadership in this matter (Särkkä and Ålander 2023).

Ultimately, the *example* set the Franco-German partnership for the other MS highlights its *legitimacy* (Deschaux-Dutard 2022), which has allowed the axis to successfully establish strategies and mechanisms that have strengthened EU defence cooperation.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to analyse France and Germany's leadership role in the development of the EU's security and defence policy after the Brexit referendum. We sought to understand if Brexit could reinvigorate the leadership of the Franco-German axis in EU defence, considering that the UK had played a prominent role in this matter primarily as hindering its development. The analysis revealed that the Franco-German axis has played a leading role in the EU's defence strategy by enabling it to tackle challenges that threaten its unity, cohesion, and security. They have done so by recognising each other's importance and that of their axis for the EU and for defence. We conclude that the Franco-German axis has intentionally displayed a leadership role throughout the development of the CSDP, and that this role was further reinforced by the opportunities brought by Brexit (Krotz and Schild 2018). It also benefitted from a conducive *environment* marked by multiple crises (Cox 1969), not least Russia's aggression toward Ukraine or the doubts cast over the transatlantic alliance during Trump's tenure as US President. Meanwhile, NATO under US President Biden is thriving, having been significantly reinforced in terms of structure/mission with a new Strategic Concept, as well as in terms of MS, with the recent enlargement to Finland and the impending Swedish membership.

The Franco-German axis has been at the heart of European integration since its inception in 1951, when the *rapprochement* between the two created the European Coal and Steel Community. Throughout the history of the European integration project, this partnership has sparked some of the main changes that have shaped the EU and its institutions. Not only have German and French leaders and strategies influenced the direction of European integration, but they were also the main contributors in key moments of defence cooperation, from the EDC to the ESDP. That cooperation has often been unexpected, considering their different strategic

interests and cultures. Despite those differences, France and Germany have displayed a clear leadership in EU defence by acting together bilaterally, or unilaterally.

Notwithstanding the dispersion of power in the EU and the several potential sources of leadership, and that only absolute consensus among all MS allows the EU to move forward in CSDP, the Franco-German coalition has been decisive to provide the required impetus, mostly through *soft resources* and *processes* like unilateral or bilateral statements, speeches, proposals, and strategies, and by providing stimulus to the institutional debate. Those contributions have propelled the EU to adopt strategies and measures that have shaped the CSDP during the period of analysis. Thus, despite showing signs of *situational* and *functional* leadership (or rather because of it), and while taking advantage of its *environment* and *positional resources*, the Franco-German leadership can be defined as *transactional* rather than strictly *transformational*, as it has attempted to increment policy changes in a particular direction vis-à-vis a complete shift of this area (Nye 2008 cited in Wurzel and Connelly 2011: 12).

Our analysis allowed us to better understand how the European political process functions regarding defence and security, how the EU operates, and the importance of joint leaderships of MS in these processes. At the EU's core lies the interaction among MS, which are inevitably the main players in driving cooperation. These 'tactical associations' between MS (Janning 2005) make political leadership within the EU distinct and more complex than other strictly intergovernmental international settings, and worth studying. That also justifies how, despite great success in leading EU defence and strengthening cooperation, the Franco-German partnership has not been able to achieve all its goals.

The complexity of the EU's multi-layered system also makes the limitations of joint leadership clearer (Müller and Van Esch 2020a). Despite progress in bilateral cooperation, France and Germany have distinct defence strategic cultures, interests, and preferences regarding the CSDP, and different military capabilities. These discrepancies depict prevailing divergences between them, affecting the EU's possibilities of finding common ground. The Franco-German case also provides a valuable example of how those differences can be surpassed and a common strategy be agreed upon. The bilateral agreements that stimulated the EU's defence project, like the 2016 agreement that led to PESCO, the Aachen Treaty, or joint-projects for new weapon-systems show how a compromise can be reached despite normative divergences.

Also, unilateral efforts like EI2, E2I, or the pressure for more efficient funding are other examples of how France and Germany have made a difference in the EU's defence framework. While strategic autonomy has not yet been reached, these inputs have provided a key impetus for the reinforcement of the EU's institutional framework, capability development, defence industry, and research funding. Despite the success for EU defence cooperation through Franco-German initiatives, a distinction must be made between capabilities and the actual ability to execute military operations.

In that regard, the EU still struggles, as the aforementioned initiatives contribute to the increase of defence capabilities, but they still fall short of achieving what they (and the Franco-German axis) aim for (Daehnhardt 2018, 106). That is, unquestionably, a point of disunity between France and Germany due to the former's ambition of improving the EU's capability of carrying out military operations, and the latter's vision of deepening European integration (cf. PESCO) (French Senate 2019). Nonetheless, the Strategic Compass might contribute to mitigating this disunity. Its development starting during the 2020 German Council Presidency and concluding

during the 2022 French Presidency certainly imbued these actors with *positional resources* (Héritier and Prakash 2015: 2), thus boosting their *situational* leadership (Ikenberry 1996).

The peculiar relationship between the two MS can be framed as institutionalised *regularised intergovernmentalism* (Krotz 2010; Krotz and Schild 2013). Indeed, were it not for the close and persistent interaction and dialogue between several French and German political entities, inputs provided by the partnership might not have come to fruition. Organs like the Franco-German Defence and Security Council, aligned with Council meetings, provide vital platforms for the two MS to coordinate their actions. As consistently mentioned in official documents published by both States, France and Germany recognise each other's importance and that of their cooperation for EU defence.

Nonetheless, Germany's fragmented and overregulated defence structure, in addition to its restraint culture in defence remain obstacles to strengthening the Franco-German axis as a leadership coalition in EU defence. In that regard, Scholz's tenure in Germany will determine the country's strategy for coming years (Major and Mölling 2021).

In terms of *leadership supply*, both countries often demonstrated the ability to build consensus, and promote a common agenda and strategic planning that led to progressive policy changes; regarding *followership inclusion*, the Franco-German axis focused primarily on common rather than egoistic goals and managed to work in concert or mutual agreement with each other in the process; finally, concerning overall *influence* and *impact over policy outcomes*, both were able to set the agenda on multiple CSDP developments, either together or separately and displayed a significant degree of normative persuasion (Bruno and Finzi 2018).

While it is crucial that the two countries' actions converge in the same direction for their strategy to succeed, even if partially, the support of the two biggest EU MS is vital for any EU defence endeavour, as shown in our analysis. We therefore conclude by acknowledging the existence, importance, and profound complexity of the Franco-German leadership – and by acknowledging its frequent asymmetry – in the development of EU defence cooperation.

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ⁱ Cf. the negative impact of French domestic policies in the performance of the French Council Presidency in 2000 (Ross 2001).

ⁱⁱ I.e., an actor's ability to influence the actions of another through coercion (Nye, 2010 cited in Helms 2014: 264).

ⁱⁱⁱ The process of 'domestic adaptation to the pressures emanating directly or indirectly from EU membership' (Featherstone, 2003: 7).

^{iv} Prior to this proposal, the Franco-German Security and Defence Council had already called for the standardization of the European defence industry with the promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises in the EDTIB, while pushing for more funding regarding research and development programs (German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).