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Strategic autonomy: A 'quantum leap forward on' European total defence?

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Abstract

In the last decade, the idea of total defence – a whole-of-society approach integrating civilian and military capabilities – has gained renewed prominence in Europe, including within the European Union (EU). Concurrently, the concept of strategic autonomy – the EU's ability to act independently – has emerged as a central feature in its security policy, driving ambitions for 'a quantum leap forward on security and defence'.[1] Despite significant conceptual overlaps, the relationship between total defence and strategic autonomy remains underexplored. Drawing on discursive institutionalism and the ideational power framework, this article examines EU security discourses from 2010 to 2024, analysing how strategic autonomy has shaped the development of European total defence. The study considers three dimensions of ideational power – *through, over*, and *in* – showing that while the idea of total defence predates strategic autonomy, the latter has certainly elevated the idea of European total defence and enhanced collective capability building, especially through entwining civilian and military domains, and yet has constrained the establishment of a unified military defence. The findings underscore the long-term discursive evolution underpinning the EU's security strategy and its ongoing efforts to consolidate a European total defence framework, now more tangible than ever.

Keywords: discursive institutionalism; European Union; ideational power; strategic autonomy; total defence

Introduction

Over the past decades, the idea of total defence has gained renewed salience in Europe. Defined as a whole-of-society approach to security that integrates both military and civilian capabilities, total defence is designed to enhance resilience and withstand a wide range of threats, from hybrid warfare to large-scale military attacks.[2] While most visibly articulated in national contexts such as in the Nordic and Baltic states,[3] the European Union (EU) has also edged towards elements of a

[1] Josep Borrell, 'A Strategic Compass to Make Europe a Security Provider. Foreword by HR/VP Josep Borrell', in European External Action Service (ed) A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022).

[2] Ieva Berzina, 'From "total" to "comprehensive" national defence: The development of the concept in Europe', *Journal on Baltic Security*, 6:2 (2020), pp. 7–15; James Kenneth Wither, 'Back to the future? Nordic total defence concepts', *Defence Studies*, 20:1 (2020), pp. 61–81.

[3] See Asta Maskaliunaite, 'Editorial introduction: Special issue on understanding of total defence in the Baltic countries', *Journal on Baltic Security*, 6:2 (2020), pp. 5–6; Jana Wrange, Rikard Bengtsson, and Douglas Brommesson, 'Resilience through total defence: Towards a shared security culture in the Nordic–Baltic region?', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:4 (2024), pp. 511–32.

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total defence posture. Its long-term emphasis on resilience building in crisis management and the defence field in tandem signals a gradual, albeit incomplete, shift towards a more integrated total defence architecture. Yet, despite these ambitions, a coherent European total defence strategy, combining civilian and military capabilities under one umbrella, has not yet materialised, even though external challenges, such as deteriorating transatlantic relations and Russia's war on Ukraine, to name a few, have certainly accelerated the agenda. This became particularly evident in 2025, when the European Commission articulated its twin aspirations for establishing both a Defence Union and a Preparedness Union, thereby laying clearer groundwork for a total defence approach.

Alongside these developments, the concept of strategic autonomy has become increasingly prominent in the EU's foreign and security policy. Broadly defined as the Union's ability to act independently to protect its strategic interests and build its own capabilities and resilience in an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment, strategic autonomy has expanded beyond defence into trade policy;[4] energy policy;[5] and the cyber domain.[6] By linking disparate policy areas under the banner of security and capability building, strategic autonomy has signified the EU's geopolitical awakening and the desire to reduce dependence on external actors.

With the adoption of a comprehensive understanding of security, the stressing of resilience and autonomy, and the integration of the civil and military dimensions, there appears to be a significant overlap between the idea of total defence and the concept of strategic autonomy. Yet, despite this convergence, the two strands of research have largely evolved in parallel rather than in dialogue, and their relationship remains underexplored. This is particularly striking given that strategic autonomy has ignited the ambition to make 'a quantum leap forward on security and defence',[7] fuelling discussions on the maturation of a potential European Defence Union[8] while simultaneously highlighting the strategic importance of other, non-military capabilities. These policy changes, however, are often necessitated by referencing external events and their potential bearing on actual policy change.

Yet, from the perspective of discursive institutionalism, with its focus on ideational power, external events may open windows of opportunity for policy action, but these moments only translate into change when they are framed and constructed as such. Policy shifts, therefore, do not occur simply 'when windows of opportunity open' but rather must be considered in relation to the broader, long-term programmatic ideas that shape and sustain policy.[9] Thus, a puzzle emerges of the ideational impact of the concept of strategic autonomy for the potential consolidation of a long-term European total defence idea, raising the question of to what extent the adoption of the

[4]Sarah Bauerle Danzman and Sophie Meunier, 'The EU's geoeconomic turn: From policy laggard to institutional innovator', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62:4 (2024), pp. 1097–115; Ana E. Juncos and Sophie Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62:4 (2024), pp. 955–72; Luuk Schmitz and Timo Seidl, 'As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary: Understanding the rise of open strategic autonomy in EU trade policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61:3 (2023), pp. 834–52.

[5]Eloïse Ryon, 'European strategic autonomy: Energy at the heart of European security?', *European View*, 19:2 (2020), pp. 238–44; Louise Van Schaik, Sarah Lokenberg, and Giulia Cretti, 'A tale of two dependencies: European strategic autonomy in the field of energy', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 28:4 (2023), pp. 417–38.

[6]Dennis Broeders, Fabio Cristiano, and Monica Kaminska, 'In search of digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy: Normative power Europe to the test of its geopolitical ambitions', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61:5 (2023), pp. 1261–80; Tero Poutala, Elina Sinkkonen, and Mikael Mattlin, 'EU strategic autonomy and the perceived challenge of China: Can critical hubs be de-weaponized?', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27:SI (2022), pp. 79–98.

[7]Borrell, 'A strategic compass', p. 7.

[8]Pol Bargués, *From "resilience" to strategic autonomy: A shift in the implementation of the global strategy?*, (EU-LISTCO Policy Paper Series. 9, 2021); Heidi Maurer, Kolja Raube, and Richard G. Whitman, '"Zeitenwende" as coming of age? EU foreign & security policy through war & peace*', *European Security*, 33:3 (2024), pp. 345–63; Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, 'Illusions of autonomy: Why Europe cannot provide for its security if the United States pulls back', *International Security*, 45:4 (2021), pp. 7–43; Eva Michaels and Monika Sus, '(Not) coming of age? Unpacking the European Union's quest for strategic autonomy in security and defence', *European Security*, 33:3 (2024), pp. 383–405; Marianne Riddervold and Pernille Rieker, 'Finally coming of age? EU foreign and security policy after Ukraine', *European Security*, 33:3 (2024), pp. 497–516.

[9]Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Speaking of change: Why discourse is key to the dynamics of policy transformation', *Critical Policy Studies*, 5:2 (2011), p. 108.

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concept of strategic autonomy has discursively opened a 'window of opportunity' for the EU to move towards total defence. In other words, how has the discursive push for autonomy shaped – or not – the EU's long-standing pursuit for a European Total Defence Union?

Accordingly, this article has two aims: the first is to investigate the trajectory of the EU's security policy through the lens of total defence; and the second is to assess the ideational impact of the concept of strategic autonomy within the EU's total defence approach. To do so, the study applies the ideational power framework,[10] concerned with the question of why certain ideas become successful and others do not. By focusing on three dimensions of ideational power – power *through, over*, and *in* the idea of total defence, the study investigates security discourses in official EU documents and statements from 2010 to 2024 and demonstrates that the rhetoric of a more resilient and autonomous Europe, with both civil and military defence capabilities, has been on the horizon far longer than the reemergent concept of strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, strategic autonomy has been used to elevate the total defence idea and to justify capability development, though primarily by intertwining civil and military domains, rather than in terms of establishing a collective armed force. This article concludes that while the concept of strategic autonomy has not yet consolidated a European total defence strategy, it has nonetheless played a significant role in the making a 'quantum leap forward' in the EU's total defence approach, especially in the civilian realm. The analysis thereby underscores long-term discursive developments in the direction of total defence, also evident in the recent EU Commission's aspiration for a European Preparedness Union.

The article proceeds as follows. It first reviews the idea of total defence in EU contexts, underlining its dual emphasis on military as well as civilian capabilities. This is followed by a discussion of the various interpretations of the concept of strategic autonomy in the EU literature. It then discusses the commonalities as well as discrepancies between the respective topics, while clarifying how discursive institutionalism helps to shed light on these. The brief methodological section is followed by an empirical analysis of how the ideational power of total defence has manifested in the EU's foreign and security policy from 2010 to 2024. The article concludes with a final discussion of the prospects for a European Total Defence Union.

The idea of total defence in the EU

The idea of total defence is framed by a comprehensive notion of security, implying a whole-of-society approach to national security that integrates both military and civilian activities to counter a wide range of threats, including war. The common, and historically rooted, understanding of total defence distinguishes it as a deterrence strategy by 'raising the cost of aggression and lowering the chance of success'.[11] Total defence is a strategy for both 'the future and the present – it is simultaneously preparation for (total) war, but also a way to avoid (total) war'.[12] Mounting a credible deterrent requires visible capabilities and the willingness to resist an attack, meaning both a robust military and a resilient society, defined as 'the ability of societies to withstand challenges that arise and the ability to "bounce back" once hit'.[13]

To that end, total defence consists of two, equally essential, sides – military and civil defence. While the objective of the former is rather straightforward, in terms of building military capabilities that serve as a credible deterrent, it is the idea of civil defence that makes this approach a 'total' one. In wartime, this would entail activities conducted by civilians to plan for and organise alarm

[10]Martin B. Carstensen and Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in ideas: Conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:3 (2016), pp. 318–37.

[11]Wither, 'Back to the future?'.

[12]Jan Angstrom and Kristin Ljungkvist, 'Unpacking the varying strategic logics of total defence', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 47:4 (2023), pp. 498–522.

[13]Jonathan Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience: Studies in Governmentality* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Wrange et al., 'Resilience through total defence', p. 512.

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systems, shelters, and communication.[14] However, contemporary civil defence, addressing broader threat perceptions, involves a wide range of activities and actors, covering everything from psychological to economic defence and beyond, with the main purpose of ensuring societal functioning in times of crisis or war.

Thus, the core idea within total defence in general and civil defence in particular is resilience – both state and societal, where the former is reached through security of supply and robust critical infrastructure in crucial areas (such as energy, transport, health, communication, and finances); and the latter through enhancing the resistance of the population to external pressures, from disinformation to cyber-attacks and beyond.[15] What distinguishes civil defence from traditional crisis management measures is its explicit focus on the preparation for war and the emphasis on civil–military collaboration. Civil defence can thus be understood as the capacity of actors to prepare for and withstand various threats, including war, by enhancing resilience through civilian means in close cooperation with military forces. In this sense, civil defence must function in tandem with military defence.

While total defence is a national security doctrine, often employed by small states, the idea of total defence is not limited to the national context. Indeed, the logic is increasingly being implemented in security institutions such as the EU and NATO, mainly expressed through discourses of enhancing resilience and civil–military interoperability.[16] For instance, Missiroli and Rühle illustrate how, during the Covid-19 pandemic, military actors under both the EU and NATO flags played a major role in fighting the pandemic by providing support for civilian actors through transportation, setting up hospitals, and other services. The authors find that narratives around the role of military involvement were different for NATO, which had to balance its core task of deterrence with peace-time crisis management, and the EU, which was able to showcase and enhance its internal crisis management capacities. They argue for a broader concept of defence that should increasingly be understood as 'total defence'.[17]

A comprehensive notion of security has anchored EU security policy since long before 2014. The EU endorsed common civil security governance at the European Council summit in December 1999, committing 'to endowing the Union with a capacity for autonomous action in the area of crisis management'.[18] Rieker writes that 'the Union's potential to coordinate diverse tools of security policy – economic, political and military – makes it one of the most important security actors of the post-Cold-War context. It is precisely this broader view that is emphasized by the EU itself'.[19] The ambition to move towards a 'secure European community' was underpinned by an all-hazards approach to protecting citizens, which meant the expansion of EU policies into fields that were once solely competences of the individual Member States.[20] However, some argue that because the EU's civil security competences are scattered across various policy areas, it is hard to establish the scope

[14]Marie Cronqvist, Rosanna Farbøl, and Casper Sylvest (eds), *Cold War Civil Defence in Western Europe: Sociotechnical Imaginaries of Survival and Preparedness* (Springer International Publishing, 2022).

[15]Malin E. Wimelius and Jan Engberg, 'Crisis management through network coordination: Experiences of Swedish civil defence directors', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 23:3 (2015), pp. 129–37; Wither, 'Back to the future?'; Jana Wrange, 'Entangled security logics: From the decision-makers' discourses to the decision-takers' interpretations of civil defence', *European Security*, 31:4 (2022), pp. 576–96.

[16]Edward Hunter Christie and Kristine Berzina, *NATO and Societal Resilience: All Hands on Deck in an Age of War* (The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2022); Bryan Frizzelle, Julie Garey, and Isak Kulalic, 'NATO's national resilience mandate: Challenges and opportunities', *Defence Studies*, 22:3 (2022), pp. 525–32; Nicole J. Jackson, 'Deterrence, resilience and hybrid wars: The case of Canada and NATO', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 19:4 (2019), pp. 104–25.

[17]Antonio Missiroli and Michael Rühle, 'The pandemic and the military: EU and NATO between resilience and total defence', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 26:2 (2021), pp. 203–18.

[18]Lisa Watanabe, 'The ESDP: Between estrangement and a new partnership in transatlantic security relations', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 13:1 (2005), p. 5.

[19]Pernille Rieker, 'Europeanization of Nordic security: The European Union and the changing security identities of the Nordic states', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 39:4 (2004), p. 370.

[20]Magnus Ekengren, Nina Matzén, Mark Rhinard, and Monica Svantesson, 'Solidarity or sovereignty? EU cooperation in civil protection', *Journal of European Integration*, 28:5 (2006), pp. 457–76.

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of the policy space and the strategic vision or reference object that binds it together.[21] In line with national-level moves to dismantle civil defence policies in favour of crisis preparedness in the post–Cold War period, military means also remained relatively absent from the EU's comprehensive all-hazards approach.[22]

The shift towards total defence was initially accompanied by the concept of resilience. While 'the ambition of the EU to provide security in a comprehensive manner' raised strategic, operational, and implementation challenges,[23] the concept of resilience, intertwined with that of security, became increasingly employed as a framework for addressing broad and interrelated security threats.[24] Resilience was still mainly connected with civil protection and preparedness, rather than defence,[25] but it did feature in EU foreign and security policy documents. There, resilience was perceived as the

> ability of states to confront security threats, ranging from Russian hybrid warfare to terrorism, cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, and to assaults on critical infrastructure … by striving to prevent them, by responding to them when they occurred, and by recovering promptly from the damage incurred.[26]

Attempts to integrate resilience and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) were also noted in the establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2017,[27] with clear links to the idea of total defence. Yet, resilience has not functioned as a sufficient signifier to unify diverse policy areas into a coherent comprehensive approach at the EU level. Instead, it has largely operated as a projection tool, conveying the appearance of a holistic strategy while, in practice, fragmentation across institutional levels and Member State interests remains.[28] In recent years, strategic autonomy has emerged as a potentially 'constructively ambiguous' alternative.

The many facets of strategic autonomy

When the concept of strategic autonomy reemerged in the EU's security discourse in 2013, after first being mentioned at the end of 1990s amidst ambitions for a European CSDP, both academic and policy circles investigated its implications for the development of European foreign and security policy. The concept is widely considered ambiguous,[29] and various definitions can be found in the literature. Most agree that in essence, strategic autonomy denotes an actor's ability to act autonomously in pursuing its strategic goals and interests.[30] European strategic autonomy

[21] Arjen Boin, Magnus Ekengren, and Mark Rhinard, *The European Union as Crisis Manager: Patterns and Prospects* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[22] Raphael Bossong and Hendrik Hegemann, 'Introduction: European civil security governance – towards a new comprehensive policy space?', in Raphael Bossong and Hendrik Hegemann (eds), *European Civil Security Governance* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), pp. 1–23.

[23] Carmen Gebhard and Per Martin Norheim-Martinsen, 'Making sense of EU comprehensive security towards conceptual and analytical clarity', *European Security*, 20:2 (2011), p. 222.

[24] David Chandler, 'Resilience', in Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Thierry Balzacq (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Security Studies* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 436–46; Tapio Juntunen and Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen, 'Resilience, security and the politics of processes', *Resilience*, 2:3 (2014), pp. 195–209.

[25] Joseph, 'Varieties of resilience'; Jonathan Joseph and Ana E. Juncos, 'Resilience as an emergent European project? The EU's place in the resilience turn', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57:5 (2019), pp. 995–1011.

[26] Nathalie Tocci, 'Resilience and the role of the European Union in the world', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2 (2020), p. 178.

[27] Sven Biscop, 'European defence: Give PESCO a chance', *Survival*, 60:3 (2018), pp. 161–80; Bossong and Hegemann, 'Introduction'.

[28] Joseph and Juncos, 'Resilience as an emergent European project?'

[29] Niklas Helwig, 'The ambiguity of the EU's global role: A social explanation of the term "strategic autonomy"', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27:SI (2022), pp. 21–38.

[30] Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies'.

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is therefore about 'the capacity to act independently in an interdependent world. It is not synonymous with autarky, but it does require developing a capacity to act, particularly in traditional security fields'.[31]

This has sparked an evolving scholarly debate with two main perspectives: conventional and global.[32] The conventional view, dating to the 1990s, emerged from concerns over US disengagement and Europe's ability to defend itself, revived during the Trump presidency. Strategic autonomy here refers to the EU's capacity to plan and conduct military operations independently and develop related capabilities with minimal US assistance.[33] Accordingly, most debates focus on the EU's military defence, its transatlantic relationship, and the evolution of European defence policy.[34] While some evidence, such as the EU's response to the war in Ukraine, suggests growing cohesion and autonomy,[35] others remain sceptical, seeing conventional strategic autonomy as largely symbolic due to differing threat perceptions and national strategic cultures.[36]

While conventional perspectives on strategic autonomy focus on the EU's military defence and capabilities, a broader interpretation of it considers contemporary challenges that extend beyond military issues. The concept is often called 'open' strategic autonomy when expanded to policy areas such as trade, health, digitalisation, or energy.[37] This strand of research responds to growing competition between China and the US, and the EU's ambitions to promote its interests and values globally,[38] with the pandemic exposing the EU's inability to act collectively as well as the vulnerabilities of European economic security in light of geopolitical competition.[39]

[31]Tara Varma, 'European strategic autonomy: The path to a geopolitical Europe', *The Washington Quarterly*, 47:1 (2024), pp. 65–83.

[32]Niklas Helwig, *EU Strategic Autonomy: A Reality Check for Europe's Global Agenda* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2020).

[33]Meijer and Brooks, 'Illusions of autonomy', p. 8.

[34]Lisbeth Aggestam and Adrian Hyde-Price, 'Double trouble: Trump, transatlantic relations and European strategic autonomy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57:S1 (2019), pp. 114–27; Jolyon Howorth, 'Strategic autonomy and EU–NATO cooperation: Threat or opportunity for transatlantic defence relations?', *Journal of European Integration*, 40:5 (2018), pp. 523–37; Gorm Rye Olsen, 'Transatlantic cooperation in flux: Europe's small and cautious steps towards "strategic autonomy"', *Defence Studies*, 22:4 (2022), pp. 609–23; Elie Perot, 'The European Union's nascent role in the field of collective defense: Between deliberate and emergent strategy', *Journal of European Integration*, 46:1 (2024), pp. 1–23; Moritz Pieper and Martijn Lak, 'The end of transatlanticism? EU security and defence policies and the "strategic autonomy" debate from a historical and contemporary perspective', *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs*, 23:4 (2019), pp. 23–44; Luca Ratti, 'NATO and the CSDP after the Ukraine war: The end of European strategic autonomy?', *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies*, 16:2 (2023), pp. 73–89; Michael E. Smith, 'Transatlantic security relations since the European security strategy: What role for the EU in its pursuit of strategic autonomy?', *Journal of European Integration*, 40:5 (2018), pp. 605–20.

[35]Oriol Costa and Esther Barbé, 'A moving target: EU actorness and the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *Journal of European Integration*, 45:3 (2023), pp. 431–46; Daniel Fiott, 'In every crisis an opportunity? European Union integration in defence and the war on Ukraine', *Journal of European Integration*, 45:3 (2023), pp. 447–62; Maurer et al., '"Zeitenwende" as coming of age?'; Michaels and Sus, '(Not) coming of age?'; Jost-Henrik Morgenstern-Pomorski, 'Reaching for the threshold?: Assessing institutional maturity in EU foreign policy', *European Security*, 33:3 (2024), pp. 517–36; Riddervold and Rieker, 'Finally coming of age?'.

[36]Sven Biscop, *Fighting for Europe: European strategic autonomy and the use of force* (Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations, 2019); Meijer and Brooks, 'Illusions of autonomy'; Perot, 'The European Union's nascent role in the field of collective defense'; Ratti, 'NATO and the CSDP after the Ukraine war'.

[37]Broeders et al., 'In search of digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy'; Tobias Gehrke, 'EU open strategic autonomy and the trappings of geoeconomics', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27:SI (2022), pp. 61–78; Thomas Jacobs, Niels Gheyle, Ferdi De Ville, and Jan Orbie, 'The hegemonic politics of "strategic autonomy" and "resilience": COVID-19 and the dislocation of EU trade policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61:1 (2023), pp. 3–19; Poutala et al., 'EU strategic autonomy and the perceived challenge of China'.

[38]Daniel Fiott, Strategic autonomy: Towards "European sovereignty" in defence? (Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018); Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies'.

[39]Esther Barbé and Pol Morillas, 'The EU global strategy: The dynamics of a more politicized and politically integrated foreign policy', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:6 (2019), pp. 753–70; Costa and Barbé; Niklas Helwig, and Ville

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Although differing in their policy focus, these studies converge on three key dimensions of strategic autonomy: political, institutional and material. The political dimension refers to 'the ability to independently define common priorities and take decisions'; the institutional is concerned with 'distinct structures and instruments for the planning and implementation of policies'; and the material relates to the 'capacity to independently implement decisions'.[40] Howorth argues that the most important dimension is the political, as 'without agreement on the long-term political and strategic *finalité* of SA [strategic autonomy], there is little point in focusing on the nuts and bolts'.[41] Still, he concludes that viable strategic autonomy must combine all three elements.

Strategic autonomy is multifaceted, possessing what could be perceived as constructive ambiguity.[42] This diversity of meaning could be beneficial to actual policy development towards total defence, especially if the political, material, and institutional dimensions align on both the civilian and military domains. To assess the potential influence of the concept of strategic autonomy in EU security policy discourses, the following section introduces the ideational power framework.

Connecting total defence and strategic autonomy through discursive institutionalism

Although total defence and strategic autonomy have different primary objectives – the former emphasises war preparation and deterrence, whereas the latter focuses on reducing dependence on external actors – the two concepts overlap in important ways. Both approaches adopt a holistic view of security, expanding it beyond purely military concerns to include multiple societal sectors and capabilities. In the total defence framework, this is expressed through the combination of strong military capabilities and civil defence measures, ensuring resilience in energy, transport, food supply, and other critical infrastructure. Similarly, strategic autonomy emphasises capability enhancement in not only conventional military terms but also broader domains, calling for enhanced EU-level capabilities and resources to strengthened resilience and independence of the Union as a whole. Both approaches highlight the importance of resilience and the need for effective coordination of available tools, ultimately converging on the shared objective of a stronger, more coherent European security policy.

While the resilience discourse in the EU's foreign and security policy reflected the EU's ambition for a comprehensive approach to security, in its vagueness, it has come to be replaced with that of strategic autonomy,[43] signalling a geopolitical shift towards a more focused and constrained security policy. As proposed in this paper, the total defence idea provides a useful analogy for understanding this transition. Yet important questions remain: how has the concept of strategic autonomy influenced discursive developments in the EU's security policy?

To examine how the concept of strategic autonomy has influenced the conceptualisation of the total defence idea on the EU level, discursive institutionalism offers a helpful lens, with its emphasis on the role of ideas and discursive processes in politics.[44] It posits that ideas 'shape how we understand political problems, give definition to our goals and strategies, and are the currency we use

Sinkkonen, 'Strategic autonomy and the EU as a global actor: The evolution, debate and theory of a contested term', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27:SI (2022), pp. 1–20.

[40]Niklas Helwig, EU Strategic Autonomy: A Reality Check for Europe's Global Agenda (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2020), p. 8; Helwig and Sinkkonen, 'Strategic autonomy and the EU as a global actor'.

[41]Jolyon Howorth, *Strategic Autonomy: Why It's Not About Europe Going It Alone* (Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2019), p. 12.

[42]Maya Jegen and Frédéric Mérand, 'Constructive ambiguity: Comparing the EU's energy and defence policies', *West European Politics*, 37:1 (2014), pp. 182–203; Antoine Rayroux, 'Understanding "constructive ambiguity" of European defence policy: A discursive institutionalist perspective', in Caterina Carta and Jean-Frédéric Morin (eds), *EU Foreign Policy through the Lens of Discourse Analysis: Making Sense of Diversity* (Routledge, 2014), pp. 227–63.

[43]Bargués, 'From "resilience" to strategic autonomy'; Missiroli and Rühle, 'The pandemic and the military'.

[44]Daniel Béland, 'The idea of power and the role of ideas', *Political Studies Review*, 8:2 (2010), pp. 145–54; Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox, *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Martin B. Carstensen, 'Ideas are not as stable as political scientists want them to be: A theory of incremental ideational change', *Political Studies*, 59:3 (2011), pp. 596–615; Graig Parsons, 'Showing ideas as causes: The origins of the European Union', *International Organization*,

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to communicate about politics'.[45] Ideas can be understood as 'normative or causal beliefs held by individuals or adopted by institutions that influence their actions and attitudes'.[46]

Two types of ideas emerge from this definition. Cognitive ideas define and offer solutions to the problems at hand, while normative ideas attach values and ideals to political action, with reference to appropriateness.[47] Furthermore, ideas occur on three levels – policy, programmatic, and philosophical – ranging from specific policies to the more general programmes that underpin them, and to worldviews that 'undergird the policies and programs with organising ideas, values, and principles of knowledge and society'.[48]

To track the development of ideas and study why some ideas become more successful than others, Carstensen and Schmidt propose a framework for ideational power. They define ideational power as 'the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements'.[49] Three types of ideational power are distinguished: power *through*, power *over*, and power *in* ideas.[50]

Power *through* ideas refers to the persuasiveness of ideas – the ability of actors to convince others to adopt particular views or courses of action.[51] This is achieved through cognitive arguments, which define problems and propose solutions, and normative arguments, which appeal to shared values and the appropriateness of specific approaches.[52] In the context of EU security policy, power through ideas is analysed primarily via coordinative discourses, where policy actors reason for a whole-of-society approach. The total defence idea, for example, emphasises broad threat perceptions and the need to synchronise military and civil capabilities, while strategic autonomy can be incorporated into these arguments to strengthen the rationale for EU-wide resilience and capability building. This analysis allows for the tracing of the evolution of total defence over time and situates strategic autonomy within this trajectory, highlighting when and how the concept is used to encourage European total defence.

Power *over* ideas refers to 'the capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas'.[53] In one form discussed by Carstensen and Schmidt, this involves actors who 'control most of the levers of traditional power – coercive, structural, and/or institutional – and who can therefore promote their own ideas to the exclusion of all others'.[54] In this sense, actors possessing traditional forms of power also deploy ideational power to ensure that their ideas remain dominant. This occurs, for instance, when political elites seek to convince the public of the validity and value of their ideas through mass media – a dynamic most clearly illustrated in totalitarian regimes – operating through communicative discourses. As Carstensen and Schmidt note, elements of persuasion may also be involved (*power through ideas*) in this process, which to some extent blurs the distinction between these two forms of ideational power.

56:1 (2002), pp. 47–84; Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Taking ideas and discourse seriously: Explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth "new institutionalism"', *European Political Science Review*, 2:1 (2010), pp. 1–25; Schmidt, 'Speaking of change'.

[45]Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox, 'Introduction', in Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox (eds), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 3.

[46]Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss, 'Economic and social thinking at the UN in historical perspective', *Development and Change*, 36:2 (2005), p. 214.

[47]Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11:1 (2008), p. 307.

[48]Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism', p. 307.

[49]Carstensen and Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in ideas', p. 321.

[50]Find a similar analysis in Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies'.

[51]Carstensen and Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in ideas'.

[52]Vivien A. Schmidt, *The Futures of European Capitalism* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism'.

[53]Carstensen and Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in ideas', p. 326.

[54]Carstensen and Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in ideas', p. 326.

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While ideational power in general 'is less observable and its effects are not as clearly measurable' as traditional powers, to capture *power over ideas* in coordinative discourses is particularly challenging, not least in the EU context and the field of security, as much of detailed policy discussions that reflect on the positions of various individual actors are conducted behind closed doors, thus granting limited access to assess actors' power to control, dominate, or resist ideas. Yet, novel attempts to conduct such analysis can be found in the literature. For instance, Juncos and Vanhoonacker analyse the ideational power surrounding the concept of strategic autonomy in the EU's security and defence policy, where they reason that an actor's *power over ideas* depends on their authority and competences within a specific institutional context, both of which stem from traditional power.[55]

However, for a study that treats the EU as a single entity and does not distinguish between its various institutional and national actors, examining the Union's collective *power over* the idea of total defence through coordinative discourses poses particular analytical challenges. To bring greater clarity and structure to the analysis, the EU's *power over ideas* – or what Blyth refers to also as 'power by ideational veto'[56] – is understood here as being reflected in the enhancement of the Union's authority and capabilities. The discursive bargaining regarding the establishment of collective EU-level capabilities in both civil and military sectors leading to increased EU competences in these fields indicates a degree of consensus among EU actors, ultimately granting the Union (increasing) power over (the idea of) total defence. The analysis of *power over ideas* thus examines the discursive expressions of proposed and established EU initiatives in these fields, while also highlighting the role of the concept of strategic autonomy in it.

Power *in* ideas is concerned with 'the constraining or structuring power of ideas'.[57] Thus, while the above two ideational powers

> focus on the direct use of ideas to influence other actors, *power in ideas* is about the background ideational processes – constituted by systems of knowledge, discursive practices and institutional setups – that in important ways affect which ideas enjoy authority at the expense of others.[58]

These processes are difficult to alter as they build on deeply rooted philosophical ideas that affect why certain policy and programmatic ideas succeed and why others do not. These include ability to reach unity, which is the cornerstone of its collective action, rooted in its identity as a global actor as well as Member States sovereignty, not least in the security field. Examining power in ideas reveals how strategic autonomy is inscribed within existing institutional and philosophical frameworks, shaping the authority of total defence discourses and highlighting both opportunities and constraints for establishing a coherent European total defence strategy.

Applying this framework reveals how total defence and strategic autonomy intersect across cognitive, normative, and institutional dimensions, showing how strategic autonomy has shaped the development, persuasive appeal, and institutional embedding of the total defence idea within EU security policy. It also highlights the ideational factors that can determine why certain policies fail to gain traction, even in the face of external pressures perceived as 'windows of opportunities' for policy change.

The following section outlines the specific discourses and types of evidence that are used in applying the ideational power framework in this study.

[55] Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies'.

[56] Mark Blyth, 'The new ideas scholarship in the mirror of historical institutionalism: A case of old whines in new bottles?', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:3 (2016), p. 468.

[57] Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies', p. 957.

[58] Carstensen and Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in ideas', p. 329.

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Discourses and materials

Methodologically, this article relies on discourse analysis. Discourses are defined as interactive processes of expressing ideas, assigning importance to not only ideas within discourses but also agency.[59] The article analyses EU security policy discourses to assess how the concept of strategic autonomy has influenced the trajectory of the total defence idea. For policy development, a successful discourse depends on several factors, including 'relevance to the issues at hand, adequacy, applicability, appropriateness, and resonance'.[60] Additionally, a discourse's credibility is enhanced by consistency and coherence across policy sectors, although a degree of vagueness or ambiguity is often present. The ideational power framework foregrounds the dynamic relationship between ideas, discourses, and institutions – in this case the EU – and how discourses are used to shape political outcomes – a security policy including both civil and military defence.

The analysis covers the period 2010–2024, thereby capturing EU security discourse both before and after the reemergence of strategic autonomy and allowing inferences about its impact. The primary sources are official documents and statements from the European Commission and the European Council, as the key actors for strategic policy development within the EU. Focusing on these institutions underscores the ideational developments shaping the Union's long-term strategic direction. From distinct institutional positions, the Commission – as a supranational authority – and the European Council – representing the collective stance of the Member States – both occupy strategically central roles for a total defence policy development.

By contrast, the European Parliament is excluded given its inherently polyphonic character. While it plays an important legislative role, it is not the primary institution for strategic policy development. Similarly, the Council of the EU in its various configurations (e.g., General Affairs and Foreign Affairs Councils) is not included, even though it too adopts conclusions and could, in principle, be studied systematically. This article, however, focuses on the EU's long-term strategic direction, and thus limits its scope to actors that set the strategic agenda. Likewise, individual Member State positions are not included, since the analysis is concerned with the collective EU perspective.

To that end, the material includes a total of seventy-four documents produced by the Commission and the European Council. Commission documents include State of the Union addresses (SOTEU) held by the incumbent president of the European Commission since 2010. These have become an annual tradition, where the achievements of the past year and priorities for the year ahead are presented to the European Parliament and public. For scholars of the EU, these speeches represent an opportunity to comprehend the union's self-understanding and trace the transformation of this hybrid entity.[61] The discourses within provide a window into the past, present, and future evolution of the Union. Therefore, the SOTEU addresses provide a systematic source of data for tracing the idea of an emerging European total defence. To that end, this study relies on the twelve SOTEU addresses held every year since 2010 with the exception of 2014, 2019, and 2024, when there was a new president of the European Commission incoming.

While the addresses provide a glimpse of the most acute challenges to the Union at the time of the speeches, and plans to mitigate them, they do not go deep into long-term strategies. For these, documents such the European Union's Global Strategy (EUGS) issued in 2016 (and its follow-up

[59] Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism'.

[60] Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism', p. 311.

[61] Magnus Lund Nielsen, 'Exploring EU's self-narratives in State of the Union addresses (2010–2023): From Ambition to Consolidation', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 29:3 (2024), pp. 295–330; Anna Molnár and Éva Jakusné Harnos, 'The postmodernity of the European Union: A discourse analysis of State of the Union addresses', *The International Spectator*, 58:1 (2023), pp. 58–74; Pamela Pansardi and Francesco Battegazzorre, 'The discursive legitimation strategies of the president of the commission: A qualitative content analysis of the State of the Union addresses (SOTEU)', *Journal of European Integration*, 40:7 (2018), pp. 853–71.

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from 2019), as well as the Strategic Compass published in 2022 (and its follow-up from 2024) are important sources of information regarding the advancement of the EU's foreign and security policy in general, and strategic autonomy in particular.

Finally, rooted in the EU's founding treaty is the idea that the foreign and security policy domain remains in the hands of its Member States, with decisions taken by unanimity in contrast to the qualified majority used in other policy areas. Thus, the material also includes the conclusions from European Council meetings, which give insight into what has been collectively discussed and decided upon. Fifty-eight European Council conclusions from scheduled meetings – with heads of state or government present – held between 2010 and 2024 were examined.[62] From the initial examination, documents with discourses concerning threat perceptions and enhanced autonomy, resilience, and capacity building in both civilian and military domains were identified for further analysis.

European total defence through strategic autonomy

The rest of the paper analyses EU security discourses from 2010 to 2024. It examines the persuasiveness of the total defence idea, situating the concept of strategic autonomy within it. It then focuses on discourses around the establishment of EU-level total defence capabilities, which could potentially enable the Union to more effectively advance the idea of European total defence. Finally, it considers how the idea of total defence and strategic autonomy are embedded in the Union's prevailing ideational structures and philosophies, which both constrain and enable the potential to deliver total defence. The analysis follows a chronological order to trace the trajectory of EU security policy, with each section beginning with a brief theoretical introduction that frames the empirical material.

Power *through* ideas: A total defence for Europe

This section examines the EU's efforts over the years to justify the adoption of a total defence idea. It highlights how both the Commission and the European Council have employed cognitive and normative arguments – emphasising the relevance of a comprehensive approach and appealing to EU values – to advance European total defence, ultimately integrating the concept of strategic autonomy into these arguments.

During the early 2010s, the EU was preoccupied with the global economic crisis and its consequences, particularly in the Euro area, working on strengthening the Union's economic resilience,[63] while also seeking a greater role on the global stage. For this, as argued by the Commission President Barroso, key elements included 'a common crisis response capacity and also a common foreign and a common defence policy'.[64] Barroso also stated,

> if Europe is to exert its influence fully, if Europe really wants to be a power, we must strengthen the Common Foreign and Security Policy. It must be credible. It must be based on a common security and defence dimension if we are really to count in the world.[65]

Hence, the cognitive arguments for total defence were mainly centred on the importance of resilience and the EU's global actorness. Even the European Council agreed 'that EU Member States

[62]For consistency, the study only includes conclusions from scheduled European Council meetings and not from informal or extraordinary meetings.

[63]José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2010; (European Commission, 2010) European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (16-17 December 2010) (General Secretariat of the Council, 2010); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (28-29 June 2012), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2012).

[64]José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2010 (European Commission, 2010), p. 11.

[65]José Manuel Durão Barroso, European renewal – State of the Union Address 2011 (European Commission, 2011), p. 10.

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must be ready to provide future-oriented capabilities, both in the civilian domain and in the field of defence',[66] calling to enhance the effectiveness of the Union's crisis management capabilities and further develop its military capabilities. Therefore, by the early 2010s, a vision already existed of a more resilient and autonomous Europe, with its own 'truly collective defence planning'[67] and more developed civilian preparedness.[68]

When the concept of strategic autonomy briefly entered the discourse in late 2013, it did so amid a rapidly changing European strategic environment. Member States agreed that 'defence matters' and called for strengthening the European defence industry to enhance capabilities, which the Council framed as a way to 'also enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners'.[69] The concept then disappeared from official statements for several years.

Meanwhile, the push to enhance both civilian and military capabilities continued, and by 2016 the need for a collective, comprehensive security strategy became central. Both the Commission and Member States expressed the need to do more to take greater responsibility for European security and defence in the challenging geopolitical environment, as 'the EU and its Member States must be able to contribute decisively to collective efforts, as well as to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible'.[70] The 'very real threats to our security at home and abroad'[71] meant that 'soft power is not enough'.[72] Subsequently, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called for Europe to 'toughen up'[73] and enhance its civilian and especially its military power. Both EU actors employed cognitive arguments based on threat perceptions and the EU's identity to advocate for a comprehensive approach to security, in line with total defence.

When strategic autonomy reappeared in the 2016 EUGS, it was framed more comprehensively, addressing multiple challenges with a clear total defence focus. Federica Mogherini, then High Representative, similarly emphasised a broad interpretation of 'global' in her foreword to the Strategy, asserting that it

> is not just intended in a geographical sense: it also refers to the wide array of policies and instruments the Strategy promotes. It focuses on military capabilities and anti-terrorism as much as on job opportunities, inclusive societies and human rights. It deals with peacebuilding and the resilience of States and societies, in and around Europe.[74]

[66]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (13-14 December 2012), p. 9; European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19-20 December 2013), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2013); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (26-27 June 2014), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2014).

[67]José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2012 Address (European Commission, 2012), p. 11.

[68]José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2010 (European Commission, 2010); José Manuel Durão Barroso, European renewal – State of the Union Address 2011 (European Commission, 2011); José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2012 Address (European Commission, 2012); José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union address 2013 (European Commission, 2013); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (13-14 December 2012); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19-20 December 2013); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (26-27 June 2014).

[69]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19-20 December 2013), p. 7.

[70]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (15 December 2016), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2016), p. 3.

[71]Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe - A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends (European Commission, 2016), p. 7.

[72]Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe - A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends (European Commission, 2016), p. 18.

[73]Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe - A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends (European Commission, 2016), p. 19.

[74]European External Action Service, Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (European External Action Service, 2016), p. 4.

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Subsequently, the EUGS, with 'the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union',[75] suggested using a varied toolbox of policies and instruments at the EU's disposal for a collective EU response to a wide range of threats.

Following the Strategy's publication, this broadened threat perception became established in the EU security discourse, as did calls for more autonomy and greater responsibility in security and defence.[76] The new strategic agenda for 2019–2024 claimed that 'addressing such threats requires a comprehensive approach with more cooperation, more coordination, more resources and more technological capacities'.[77] To that end, both the Member States and the Commission would welcome future developments in security and defence, on both the civilian side by strengthening the Union's resilience, and the military side. This view was reinforced in the EUGS follow-up where calls for a revival of civilian components of CSDP would highlight 'how the EU's joined-up approach to security continues to see civilian and military components developing at the same time',[78] another key component of the total defence approach.

Both aspects took centre stage in the EU's Strategic Compass 2022, which aimed to signify 'a shared threat assessment and a joint commitment to action'[79] making 'best use of the entire EU toolbox, including civilian and military policies'.[80] The concept of strategic autonomy was only mentioned once in the document, but the idea of developing both civilian and military capacities as part of a comprehensive EU defence policy remained central. In the words of Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the EU at the time,

> The Strategic Compass is about much more than the war on Ukraine, as we have to confront the full range of threats we face … threats to European security clearly come from a variety of sources, both within Europe and beyond … the conclusion is clear: the defence of Europe requires a comprehensive concept of security.[81]

The ambition expressed in the Strategic Compass was 'to make a quantum leap forward on security and defence, similar to other big jumps we have made in European history'.[82] This leap was to be

[75]European External Action Service, Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (European External Action Service, 2016), p. 4.

[76]European External Action Service, Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (European External Action Service, 2016); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (28 June 2018), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2018); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (20 June 2019), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2019); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (16 December 2021), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2021); European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (15 December 2022), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2022); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (14-15 December 2023), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2023).

[77]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (20 June 2019), p. 7.

[78]European External Action Service, The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward (European External Action Service, 2019), p. 11.

[79]European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022), p. 15.

[80]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (16 December 2021), p. 3; European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (24-25 March 2022); European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022).

[81]European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022), p. 5.

[82]European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022), p. 5.

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taken in the spirit of total defence, embodying elements of both civil and military defence. This synchronised enhancement of both civil and military capabilities was also endorsed by the Member States:

> The European Council underlines the imperative need for enhanced and coordinated military and civilian preparedness and strategic crisis management in the context of the evolving threat landscape. It invites the Council to take work forward and the Commission together with the High Representative to propose actions to strengthen preparedness and crisis response at EU level in an all-hazards and whole-of-society approach, taking into account Member States' responsibilities and competences, with a view to a future preparedness strategy.[83]

Further, following the publication of the Commission-initiated report[84] on how to enhance the EU's civilian and military preparedness and readiness for future crises in November 2024,

> the European Council reaffirms the importance and urgency of strengthening the resilience, preparedness, crisis prevention and response capacities … the European Council considers that enhanced and coordinated military and civil preparedness and strategic crisis management are required, in an all-hazards and whole-of-society approach.[85]

In conclusion, the idea of total defence was present in the EU's security discourse before the reemergence of the concept of strategic autonomy in 2013, and more significantly after 2016. Both EU actors – the Commission and the European Council – justified the idea mainly by cognitive arguments relating to threat perceptions, demanding a whole-of-society approach comprising both civilian and military capabilities. External challenges – such as Euro crises or Russia's aggression in Ukraine that in 2022 culminated in a war – clearly created a 'window of opportunity' that amplified these arguments and paved the way for the introduction of the concept of strategic autonomy into the discourse. While the initial justifications were closely tied to military defence, the concept was also invoked to promote a total defence approach, emphasising resilience and capability building in the civilian domain. In this way, strategic autonomy helped elevate and broaden the total defence idea, even though the references to the concept itself have significantly decreased in the EU's security discourse. Given that both EU actors have consistently promoted the idea of total defence, why has this idea not yet materialised?

Power *over* ideas: Enhancing European total defence capabilities

The question hinges on whether the EU possesses capabilities to impose the idea of total defence on the EU-level – its power over ideas. One departure point in this regard is to reason that actors with traditional power resources also hold ideational power over ideas. Following this line of logic, the EU's power over the total defence idea is linked to its (actors') traditional powers

[83]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (21-22 March 2024), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2024), p. 14.

[84]The report 'Safer together: Strengthening Europe's civil and military preparedness and readiness', by Sauli Niinistö, 'is intended to inform, inter alia, future actions to be proposed by the High Representative and the Commission in the light of the Political Guidelines for the next Commission (2024–2029)…It is offered moreover as an independent analytical assessment that may provide inspiration to decision-makers in all EU institutions and Member State capitals' (p. 3). https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/safer-together-path-towards-fully-prepared-union_en; Sauli Niinistö, Safer Together - Strenghtening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness. (European Commission, 2024) Accessed: 19 Nov 2025.

[85]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19 December 2024), p. 7.

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such as the Commission's institutional role and budgetary resources, enabling it to propose initiatives to advance a total defence approach, as well as the European Council's authority of Member States, with power to ultimately accept or reject these propositions. Thus, increasing or establishing EU-level collective capabilities in both civilian and military sectors can be perceived as expressions of the EU's increasing power to impose the idea of total defence on the EU level. That is because the implementation of such efforts requires alignment between the two key actors, consequently empowering the Union as a whole. Thus, the following analysis is focused on total defence capability building, highlighting the role of the concept of strategic autonomy in doing so.[86]

The EU's collective capacities in the civilian domain have been scattered across various sectors. For instance, the establishment of a Banking Union is perceived as insurance for the Union's financial resilience and autonomy, focusing on reducing and distributing risk.[87] Ambitions to invest in energy independency and building a resource-sufficient – in essence strategically autonomous – Europe with modern, interconnected infrastructures to ensure energy security also have deep roots.[88] In the health domain, in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, calls for a stronger European Health Union,[89] with increased resilience and, again, autonomy in terms of crisis preparedness, stockpiling, and reducing supply-chain dependencies, led to positive progress a year later, when von der Leyen claimed that there were already assets in place 'to deal with future health threats earlier and better', while also 'proposing a new health preparedness and resilience mission for the whole of the EU'.[90]

A similar development can be observed regarding Europe's digital sovereignty, where cyber threats are portrayed as potentially more destabilising than conventional military attacks,[91] highlighting the need for coordinated EU action. Consequently, the Council welcomed efforts to develop collective cyber capabilities, including coordinated attribution and the Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox, to enhance resilience and strategic autonomy.[92] Hence, in these sectors, a clear and long-standing ambition for more autonomy and resilience have led to the strengthening of collective EU instruments, expanding the Union's authority and thus its capability to advance the idea of total defence, particularly in the civilian domain.

In the military domain, ambitions to establish a Defence Union have come in waves, one of which had emerged already in the early 2010s.[93] In 2012, Member States called for the 'urgent necessity to strengthen European cooperation in order to develop military capacities' through pooling

[86]It is important to bear in mind that the analysis is on a discursive level and therefore does not provide an evaluation of the actual initiatives taken to increase resources or institutional structures. Instead, it focuses on how (the ambitions for) collective resources and structures are expressed.

[87]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (15 December 2016); Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union Address 2017 (European Commission, 2017).

[88]José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2010 (European Commission, 2010); José Manuel Durão Barroso, European renewal – State of the Union Address 2011 (European Commission, 2011); José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2012 Address (European Commission, 2012); Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe - A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends (European Commission, 2016); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (4 February 2011), (General Secretariat of the Council, 2011); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (22 May 2013); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (26-27 June 2014).

[89]Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2020: Building the World We Want to Live in: A Union of Vitality in a World of Fragility (European Commission, 2020).

[90]Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2021: Strengthening the Soul of Our Union (European Commission, 2021), p. 4.

[91]Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union Address 2017 (European Commission, 2017), p. 3.

[92]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (20 June 2019), p. 2.

[93]José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2010 (European Commission, 2010); José Manuel Durão Barroso, European renewal – State of the Union Address 2011 (European Commission, 2011).

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and sharing means.[94] A year later, they encouraged the development of both civilian and military capabilities for a stronger CSDP, suggesting that willing Member States 'develop capacities based on common standards or decide on common usage, maintenance or training arrangements'[95] to improve interoperability and effectiveness, setting favourable preconditions for the EU to have collective resources and structures in place. The development of Europe's defence capabilities, they reasoned, 'can also enhance its strategic autonomy'.[96]

Support for more coordination and even collectivisation of military resources grew in the mid-2010s. Juncker expressed the ambition to increase the EU's own military capabilities and assets, claiming that 'we should also move towards common military assets, in some cases owned by the EU'.[97] However, this is not feasible 'without a permanent structure'.[98] Thus, proclamations were made to

> dedicate further efforts to defence matters. A new European Defence Fund is in the offing. As is a Permanent Structured Cooperation [PESCO] in the area of defence. By 2025 we need a fully-fledged European Defence Union. We need it. And NATO wants it.[99]

Correspondently, concrete steps were soon proposed by the Member States:

> The European Council calls for the fulfilment of the PESCO commitments and the further development of the initial projects and the institutional framework … welcomes progress on military mobility in the framework of PESCO and EU–NATO cooperation, expects the military requirements under the EU Action Plan on military mobility now to be finalised, and calls on Member States to simplify and standardise relevant rules and procedures by 2024. These efforts, which should fully respect the sovereignty of the Member States, be mutually reinforcing and follow a whole-of government approach.[100]

Hence, it can be observed that both the Commission and the European Council are aligned in their goals for the establishment of a collective defence fund, PESCO as well as military mobility initiatives, increasing the EU's defence capabilities. However, these developments largely unfolded without explicit acknowledgement of the concept of strategic autonomy. Yet, as the European Council emphasised that 'military and civilian aspects need to be addressed in a comprehensive manner with a focus on concrete deliverables',[101] the discourse around the total defence idea was still clearly gaining strength.

Indeed, the 2019 EUGS follow-up acknowledged that the EU had made 'historic breakthroughs in the field of security and defence … working towards the goal of strategic autonomy as set out by the Council'.[102] These included developments in information sharing and new

[94] European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (13-14 December 2012), p. 9.
[95] European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19-20 December 2013), p. 5.
[96] European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19-20 December 2013), p. 7.
[97] Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe - A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends (European Commission, 2016), p. 19.
[98] Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe - A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends (European Commission, 2016), p. 19.
[99] Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union Address 2017 (European Commission, 2017), p. 8.
[100] European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (28 June 2018), p. 4–5.
[101] European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (28 June 2018), p. 5.
[102] European External Action Service, The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward (European External Action Service, 2019), p. 10.

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platforms for pooling resources (such as CARD; MPCC;[103] PESCO;[104] EDF;[105] European Peace Facility[106]) and establishing joint funds, but also structures for more effective collective decision-making.[107]

In 2022, the European Council expanded its ambitions for joint action capabilities, calling for 'Member States to make full use of collaborative instruments and frameworks'[108] to enhance mobility infrastructure and rapid deployment capabilities. In addition, they supported 'investment in strategic enablers, such as cybersecurity and space-based connectivity, as well as in the resilience of critical infrastructure'.[109] What followed was the 2022 Strategic Compass,[110] which mentioned the concept of strategic autonomy only once,[111] asserting that the document 'will enhance the EU's strategic autonomy',[112] and went on to set out specific goals and propose concrete initiatives to strengthen the EU's capacity to act. The suggestions were mainly focused on entwining civil–military capabilities, perceiving collective efforts such as the establishment of 'the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, military mobility, live exercises, enhancing space security, countering cyber and hybrid threats and addressing foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)'[113] as of particular importance. To that end, the Union is to 'work to reinforce our crisis management missions and operation and will develop an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity to allow us to quickly deploy up to 5,000 troops for different types of crises'.[114] These EU-level structures are being implemented specifically to enable collective action and 'to increase the defence readiness, resilience and security of the Union'.[115]

[103]'Established in 2017, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) is the first-ever unified command centre for EU's military training missions. It works closely with its civilian counterpart, to ensure maximum coordination between military and civilian missions' (European External Action Service, The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward (European External Action Service, 2019), p. 34).

[104]'Launched in 2017, the Permanent Structured Cooperation on defence is a prominent example of how Member States have come together in unprecedented ways to strengthen their defence through cooperation. Twenty-five Member States are working together on concrete projects such as military trainings and exercises, a common medical command, joint capabilities, and the increasingly important area of cyber' (European External Action Service, The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward (European External Action Service, 2019), p. 35).

[105]'The European Defence Fund (EDF) promises to generate real financial incentives for systematic defence industrial cooperation in research and capability development, reinforcing also the collaborative projects launched in the PESCO framework' (European External Action Service, The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward (European External Action Service, 2019), p. 11).

[106]'The proposed European Peace Facility – a new off-budget fund worth €10.5 billion – should fund the common costs of CSDP operations and contribute to the financing of military peace support operations' (European External Action Service, The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward (European External Action Service, 2019), p. 11).

[107]European External Action Service, The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward (European External Action Service, 2019), p. 11, 34-35.

[108]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (15 December 2022), p. 7.

[109]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (15 December 2022), p. 7.

[110]Also, the 2023 EU Capability Development Priorities.

[111]Which, as discussed by Juncos and Vanhoonacker, is an illustration of the disagreements among Member States on the idea of strategic autonomy, and Member States deciding to 'set aside the conceptual debate and focus on more practical issues regarding the strengthening of EU security and defence capabilities'. See Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies', p. 965.

[112]European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022), p. 22.

[113]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (21-22 March 2024), p. 6.

[114]European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022), p. 6.

[115]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (14-15 December 2023), p. 8.

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In conclusion, these steps illustrate how the EU has increased its material and institutional power in the field of total defence, particularly in the civil defence pillar. That is reflected in the discursive alignment between the Commission's and the European Council's objectives, which have led to the establishment of material resources and institutional structures to counter hybrid and cyber threats; strengthen interoperability through PESCO, the European Defence Fund, and military mobility initiatives; and bolster crisis preparedness, further entwining the civil–military dimensions. These established instruments potentially bolster the EU's ideational power as well, especially when deployed as ideational persuasion tools (in power through ideas). Although connections to the concept of strategic autonomy have been more evident in the civilian dimension than in the military, the EU is now clearly better positioned to advance the idea of European total defence. Yet, Juncker's ambition of achieving a fully-fledged European Defence Union by 2025 has not materialised – why is that the case?

Power *in* ideas: Towards European total defence?

The answer to this puzzle can be found in the background ideational processes that ultimately determine the success or failure of certain ideas – the power in them. The following analysis examines two such processes that shape the EU's unity and, by extension, its capacity for collective action in total defence: the Union's identity construction and the divergent perceptions of NATO's role. It traces the discursive evidence of these processes and their impact on the evolution of both the total defence idea and the concept of strategic autonomy.

The EU's authority in any domain rests on unity, which is tied to its identity as an (global) actor as well as the sovereignty of its Member States. Only when this foundation is secured can the Union act collectively and project power – whether externally on the global stage or internally among its Member States. And nothing puts European solidarity to test like a crisis. But when hopeless division and stalling make way for collective solutions, the process of overcoming deadlock also strengthens togetherness and capacity for collective action. To name a few examples, the EU's unity was tried in dealing with the global financial crisis;[116] its solidarity was put to test during the migration crisis;[117] its (lack of) autonomy was tested by the global pandemic in 2020;[118] and its capacity for collective action was stretched in relation to the war in Ukraine.[119] In many of these areas, the EU has found a way forward, ultimately strengthening its core identity regarding solidarity amongst its Member States and its geopolitical actorness. As a testament to this, von der Leyen declared 'the birth of a geopolitical Union – supporting Ukraine, standing up to Russia's aggression, responding to an assertive China and investing in partnerships'.[120]

However, unity is more contested in the security field than in these examples, not least due to the intergovernmental nature of decision-making, which requires unanimity rather than the qualified majority of other policy areas. Hence, Member States preferences play a more significant role in achieving unity. As identified by most of the literature on the EU's security and defence policy in

[116]José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2010 (European Commission, 2010); José Manuel Durão Barroso, European renewal – State of the Union Address 2011 (European Commission, 2011); José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union 2012 Address (European Commission, 2012); José Manuel Durão Barroso, State of the Union address 2013 (European Commission, 2013).

[117]Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2015: Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity (European Commission, 2015); Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe - A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends (European Commission, 2016); Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union Address 2017 (European Commission, 2017); Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2018: The Hour of European Sovereignty (European Commission, 2018).

[118]Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2020: Building the World We Want to Live in: A Union of Vitality in a World of Fragility (European Commission, 2020); Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2021: Strengthening the Soul of Our Union (European Commission, 2021); Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2022: A Union that Stands Together (European Commission, 2022).

[119]Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2022: A Union that Stands Together (European Commission, 2022); Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2023: Answering the Call of History (European Commission, 2023).

[120]Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2023: Answering the Call of History (European Commission, 2023), p. 2.

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general and strategic autonomy in particular, core ideational constraints in this field come from the Member States' diverging perceptions on transatlantic relations, and the role of NATO in European security architecture.

Throughout the years, many attempts have been made to counter this narrative, dating back to when Commission President Barroso made a case for the European Defence Union in 2011. He then stressed that

> Long gone is the time when people could oppose the idea of European defence for fear that it might harm the Transatlantic relationship. As you have noticed, today it is the Americans themselves who are asking us to do more as Europeans.[121]

However, that did little for reaching coherence in this question. Although it was indeed the European Council – hence the Member States – that brought up the concept of strategic autonomy and made 'a strong commitment to the further development of a credible and effective CSDP',[122] they did so stressing that this move was to be made 'in full complementarity with NATO in the agreed framework of the strategic partnership between the EU and NATO and in compliance with the decision-making autonomy and procedures of each'.[123] This discourse became typical of strategic autonomy discussions connected to military capacities, which often mentioned complementarity with NATO, paradoxically further cementing NATO's role in European security.

As the EU's strategic autonomy discourse grew, so did the arguments that positioned it in the context of transatlantic relations, where the Commission emphasised that

> We should also move towards common military assets, in some cases owned by the EU. And, of course, in full complementarity with NATO … More European defence does not mean less transatlantic defence and solidarity.[124]

The EUGS argued along the same lines, that 'a more credible European defence is essential also for the sake of a healthy transatlantic partnership with the United States'[125] but also rationalised that, while in terms of collective defence,

> NATO remains the primary framework for most Member States … EU–NATO relations shall not prejudice the security and defence policy of those Members which are not in NATO … European security and defence efforts should enable the EU to act autonomously while also contributing to and undertaking actions in cooperation with NATO.[126]

The concept of strategic autonomy was clearly intended to satisfy both those states that relied on NATO and those that sought European solutions. The use of an autonomy discourse to balance the EU–NATO relationship in European security was also evident when Juncker insisted that 'by 2025 we need a fully-fledged European Defence Union. We need it. And NATO wants it',[127] but later clarified this ambition by claiming that 'we will not militarize the European Union. What we want is to become more autonomous'.[128] This highlights the ideational constraints the concept imposed

[121] José Manuel Durão Barroso, European renewal – State of the Union Address 2011 (European Commission, 2011), p. 10.
[122] European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19-20 December 2013), p. 2.
[123] European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19-20 December 2013), p. 2.
[124] Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe - A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends (European Commission, 2016), p. 63.
[125] European External Action Service, Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (European External Action Service, 2016), p. 20.
[126] European External Action Service, Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (European External Action Service, 2016), p. 20.
[127] Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union Address 2017 (European Commission, 2017), p. 8.
[128] Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2018: The Hour of European Sovereignty (European Commission, 2018), p. 5.

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on the materialisation of total defence, stemming largely from the ambiguity of the discourse and the mixed signals it conveyed.

However, while the idea of NATO as 'the foundation of collective defence for its members'[129] remains deeply rooted in the European security discourse, not least with two additional EU Member States joining the alliance, there is still room for the EU's security policy to evolve alongside NATO, especially in 'countering hybrid threats, including foreign information manipulation and interference, crisis management and the relationship with strategic competitors',[130] areas also pointed out in the previous section of this analysis.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the ambitions for a Defence Union are conceived of in relation to not only autonomy and transatlantic relations but also the EU's more fundamental identity and its place in the world. In 2021, von der Leyen emphasised that

> The European Union is a unique security provider … We can combine military and civilian, along with diplomacy and development – and we have a long history in building and protecting peace. The good news is that over the past years, we have started to develop a European defence ecosystem. But what we need is the European Defence Union.[131]

The Strategic Compass repeated this emphasis on the EU's unique and important role:

> We must use the new momentum to ensure that we, finally, equip ourselves with the mindset, the means and the mechanisms to defend our Union, our citizens and our partners. In so doing, the EU will also help to strengthen NATO and become a stronger Transatlantic partner: a partner that is more capable of sharing the burden of maintaining international peace and security. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has shown both how essential NATO is for the collective defence of its members and the important role that the EU plays in today's complex security and defence environment.[132]

The EU's unique identity enables the Union to take further steps in the areas in which it has already carved a space for itself – that is, civil–military coordination, diplomacy, and development, as well as crisis preparedness. While NATO and Member State interests remain central to military defence (thus far), its underlying identity as a unique security provider has opened a space for the Union to enhance and coordinate 'military and civil preparedness and strategic management … in an all-hazards and whole-of-society approach. This should be done in synergy with NATO … and taking into account the security and defence interests of all Member States'.[133]

In conclusion, the analysis of power in ideas shows that cohesion in EU security is hampered by diverging views on NATO's role, with the concept of strategic autonomy ultimately reinforcing NATO's central place in Europe's security architecture. This has constrained the materialisation of collective European military capabilities and a credible total defence. At the same time, the EU's

[129]European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022), p. 14; European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (21-22 March 2024); European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (27 June 2024).

[130]European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022), p. 56.

[131]Ursula von der Leyen, State of the Union 2021: Strengthening the Soul of Our Union (European Commission, 2021), p. 12.

[132]European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security (European External Action Service, 2022), p. 5.

[133]European Council, Conclusions of the European Council (19 December 2024), p. 7.

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identity as a unique actor has allowed it to advance in less contested areas, carving out a complementary role to NATO. As such, the Union has laid strong foundations to become one of the key pillars of European total defence.

A 'quantum leap forward on' European total defence

By tracing the trajectory of EU security discourses from 2010 to 2024, this article has shown a growing emphasis on total defence at the EU level, combining civilian and military capabilities, well before the recent resurgence of the concept of strategic autonomy. The findings suggest that while strategic autonomy has certainly elevated the European total defence idea and catalysed the development of EU total defence capacities, most notably in the civilian domain, it has simultaneously reinforced NATO's role as the main constraint on its full realisation. NATO thus remains a decisive factor in shaping the prospects for a European Total Defence Union, particularly on the military side. Nonetheless, the discursive advances towards the institutionalisation of the idea of total defence and the establishment of collective EU resources in both the civilian and military dimensions have strengthened the Union's unique identity as a security provider, carving out space for it to complement NATO within the European security architecture and to position itself as a key actor in total defence. This long-standing discursive evolution strengthens the foundations for a potential European Preparedness Union, as proposed by the Commission in 2025.

Theoretically, the study demonstrates an application of the ideational power framework in the novel case of EU security policy, to analyse how agents use discursive arguments to work within and shape institutional structures and deeper ideational processes. The analysis of power *through* ideas found that the idea of total defence was mainly justified by cognitive arguments relating to broad threat perceptions and demanding a whole-of-society approach. When the concept of strategic autonomy re-entered the discourse, it was initially linked to military defence, but then used to justify a total defence approach, calling for more resilience and capabilities in the civilian domain too. The analysis of power *over* ideas found that the concept of strategic autonomy was a catalyst for increasing or establishing collective EU resources, most visibly in the civilian domain. In contrast, its configuration in military topics was limited, although the idea of total defence still clearly gained traction, most notably regarding capability building to counter hybrid threats and to enhance interoperability and civil–military coordination, as well as crisis preparedness. This, potentially, provides the Union with more power over the idea of total defence, although further research is needed to offer a more nuanced analysis of EU actors' capability to impose, resist, or counter the European total defence idea. The analysis of power *in* ideas found that while the autonomy discourse was strongly shaped by and reinforced existing deeper beliefs, it arguably strengthened the ideational power of total defence in the EU. That is particularly the case in terms of implementing the civilian components, due to its preestablished identity as a provider of civil security and crisis preparedness, and its competence in regulating critical societal sectors of its Member States.

That said, the evolving nature of transatlantic relations and the ongoing war in Ukraine have certainly intensified the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy as well as total defence. This shift has cast the EU's defence ambitions in a more urgent and pressing light, with more Member States searching for European solutions. A key question remains as to whether this will finally overturn existing philosophies – especially regarding the role of NATO in the European security architecture – and strengthen the power *in* the idea of a total defence, ultimately reinvigorating the EU's long-standing ambition to reach a fully-fledged European Total Defence Union. This article's examination of the EU's security discourses over the past decade and more makes clear that the Union has long harboured ambitions for a total defence posture and is well positioned, and armed with ideational power, to establish itself as a key actor, particularly on the civilian side of total defence. Whether the profound shifts in transatlantic relations and the acute threat posed by Russia will serve as 'the

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windows of opportunity' for ideational and fundamental policy changes within the EU remains to be seen, although the ambitions underpinning the European Preparedness Union certainly point in that direction.

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