

INDEPENDENCE PLAY: EUROPE'S PURSUIT OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

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SUMMARY

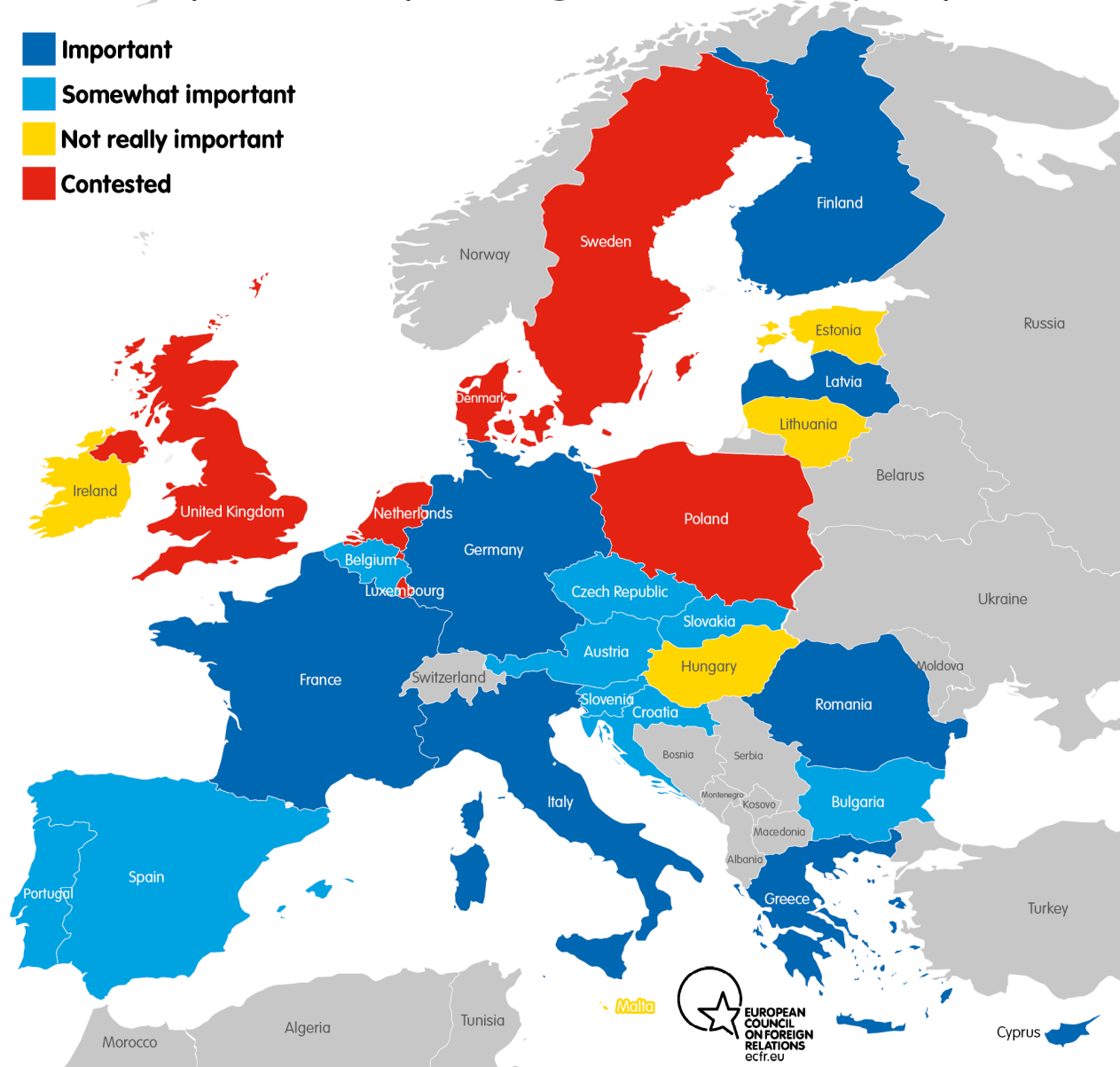
- The debate on European strategic autonomy remains overly focused on US criticism of the EU.
- EU member states do not agree on the geographical and functional level of ambition they should adopt in pursuing strategic autonomy.
- Member states have a conflicted approach to strategic autonomy: even those that do not fully support the concept argue that the EU should develop more capabilities.
- Member states are unsure how Brexit will affect their strategic autonomy.
- To fulfil its true potential, the EU needs to end its strategic cacophony and focus on capability building.
- European strategic autonomy is – like European sovereignty and strategic sovereignty – one of many concepts that seek to promote a more capable, independent EU at a time of growing geopolitical competition.

INTRODUCTION

“European strategic autonomy” (ESA) is one of those elusive phrases that float around in European politics, alongside terms such as “European army” and “common European strategic culture”. It has been used in European Council, European Parliament, and European External Action Service (EEAS) communications. It is mentioned, most importantly, in the European Union’s June 2016 Global Strategy, which claims to nurture the organisation’s “ambition of strategic autonomy”. Indeed, the Global Strategy uses the term “autonomy” seven times, speaking of decision-making autonomy and autonomy of action, and stating that “an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important for Europe’s ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders”. In his September 2017 Sorbonne speech, French President Emmanuel Macron provided his take on the concept, referring to “Europe’s autonomous operating capabilities” and thereby anchoring the concept more explicitly in defence and security matters.

But what does ESA entail? How is the concept defined in capitals across Europe, and to what extent does it have governments’ support? This paper draws on the European Council on Foreign Relations’ network of researchers in all 28 EU member states to identify where views on ESA converge and where they differ. Each of ECFR’s national researchers met with decision-makers and experts to understand the views of informed stakeholders in their countries. They conducted interviews with more than 100 policymakers and analysts, combining this with research into policy documents, academic discourse, media analysis, and opinion polls. The survey on which this paper is based asked whether there had been a conversation on ESA in each country, what level of ambition was needed to develop ESA, which capabilities were most necessary to achieving progress in this, and whether ESA was compatible with NATO. As such, the data reflect officials’ and experts’ beliefs about the position of their respective countries on these topics. (For individual country analyses, see the second part of this paper.)

How important is the goal of European strategic autonomy to your country's foreign and defence policy?



The debate over strategic autonomy is taking place within a welter of initiatives and accompanying terminologies that all focus on preparing Europe for what many perceive as a new era of heightened geopolitical competition. Broadly, these efforts express the view that, if Europeans do not find a path towards greater independence and coherence in foreign and security policy, they will condemn themselves to, at best, irrelevance and, at worst, a field of geopolitical competition. ECFR has put forward a notion of strategic sovereignty that takes a broader view of strategic autonomy and proposes ways to enhance Europe's capacity to act well beyond the defence field.

With this vast semantic flowering in the background, the picture of ESA that emerges from our surveys is one of uncertainty and confusion. Partly as a result of this, important elements of ESA remain unclear and contentious.

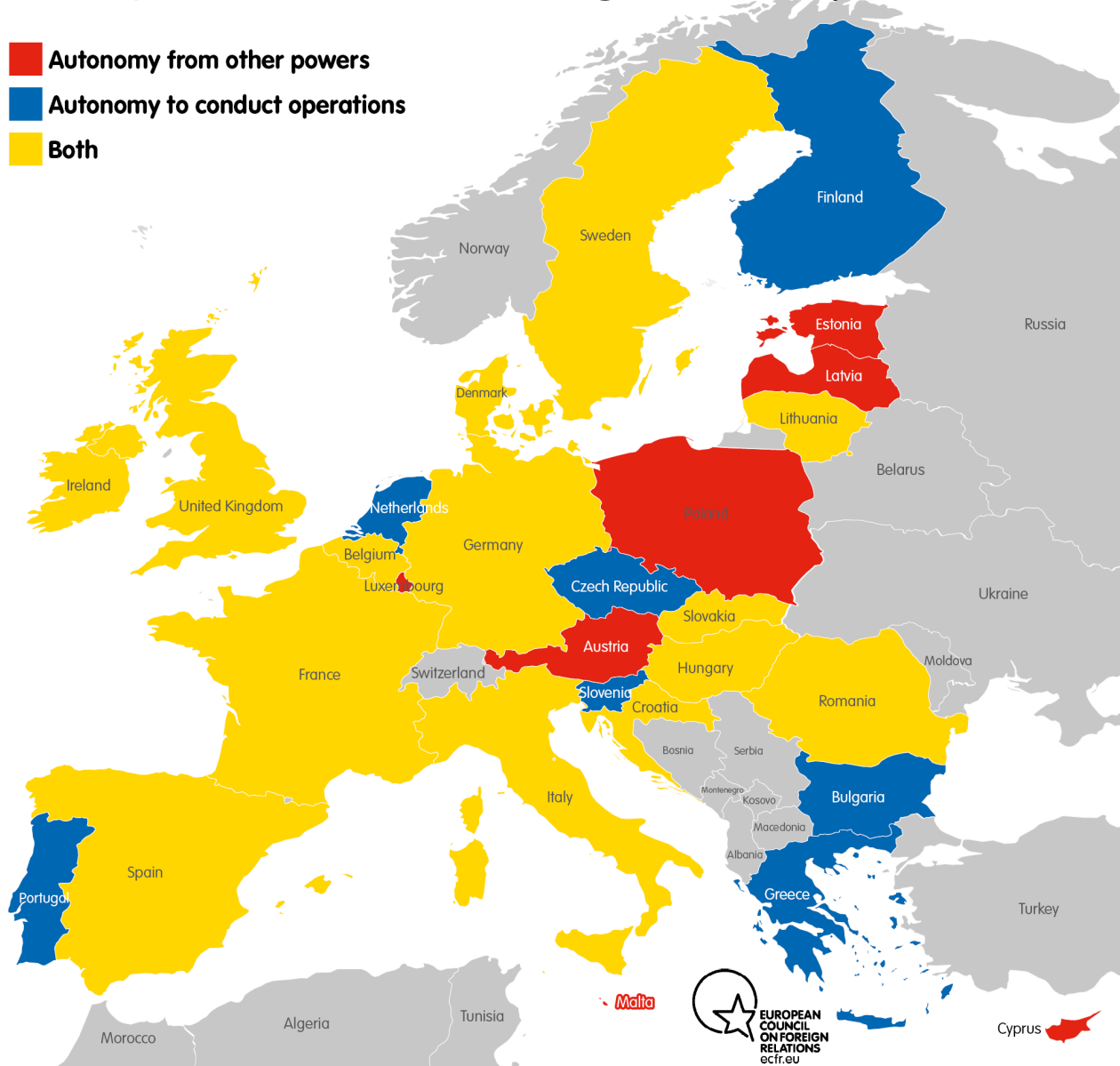
Where there is a debate on ESA in member states, it has come in response to recent US criticism of the EU. Moreover, such debate largely focuses on ESA's impact on the transatlantic relationship rather than the capabilities Europe needs to become autonomous.

To develop strategic autonomy, the EU should put aside its concerns about how the United States sees ESA efforts. The EU needs to concentrate instead on the scope of these initiatives – particularly on the question of whether they should primarily be defence projects or should concern foreign policy more broadly – and on the capabilities that it requires to ensure that they are successful.

LEADERS, FOLLOWERS, AND SCEPTICS

As ECFR's survey shows, many member states see strategic autonomy as a French concept. They view Paris as the main proponent of ESA – partly because European strategic autonomy is a development of the French idea of “strategic autonomy”. The French initially used this term in their 1994 white paper on defence (the first they published after the end of the cold war). One part of their 2017 Strategic Review is entitled “Our Defence Strategy: Strategic Autonomy and European Ambition”. And, through his Sorbonne speech and subsequent proposals – most notably, the European Intervention Initiative – Macron has come to be seen as the champion of the idea.

How does your country define and discuss strategic autonomy?



For France, ESA is a continuation of national strategic autonomy, which it defines as the ability to decide and to act freely in an interdependent world. As Corentin Brustlein, an analyst at French think-tank Institut français des relations internationales, explains: “for Europe, being strategically autonomous requires the ability to set a vision of its role in its neighbourhood and on the world stage, to identify desirable political goals, and to craft and implement plans meant to achieve those, including through the use of military force. The French case also illustrates that strategic autonomy should not be considered as something absolute. The ability to use military force autonomously depends on factors such as the urgency of the crisis, the geography of the theatre of

operations, or the severity of the threats that might be encountered. Framing the debate as a binary issue is both mistaken and counterproductive. The question is not whether Europe should be strategically autonomous or not – it already is, in some limited respects – but what benefits can be drawn from reaching higher degrees of European autonomy in the political, operational, and industrial realms.”

Given these considerations, it is unsurprising that ECFR’s research shows that France is one of several countries that consider ESA to be an “important goal” of their foreign and defence policies. The other members of the EU are more divided. Seventeen countries – among them the big three of France, Germany, and Italy – regard ESA as an important or somewhat important goal, while 11 see it as either an unimportant or even contested goal (among them Denmark, Poland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom).

Countries that view ESA as a contested goal do so for different reasons. For example, Sweden has been reluctant to support the concept due to the country’s neutrality – and to the perceived risk that it could threaten the EU’s intergovernmental decision-making system or decouple Europe from the US. The Swedish approach to the concept is similar to that in the 1998 Anglo-French St Malo declaration, which primarily emphasises operational autonomy. As such, the Swedish government believes that, in operational matters, the EU should act with its partners whenever possible, but on its own if necessary.

In Denmark, the goal of ESA is highly contested because the country has opted out of EU defence cooperation, *en vigueur*, since 1992. Thus, Denmark is unable to take part in new initiatives designed to develop ESA. At the same time, most Danes support strengthened defence and security cooperation with the EU, and want Europe to establish greater autonomy in these domains. In its 2018 survey of European attitudes to nuclear deterrence, ECFR identified several member states that – in a reversal of the Danish case – were torn between their governments’ desire to start work on the issue and vehement public opposition to doing so.

Luxembourg is generally uninterested in defence questions. Meanwhile, ESA is a contested goal for the Netherlands due to the ambiguity of the concept – and to some Dutch experts’ and policymakers’ concern that it could lead to the creation of a European army.

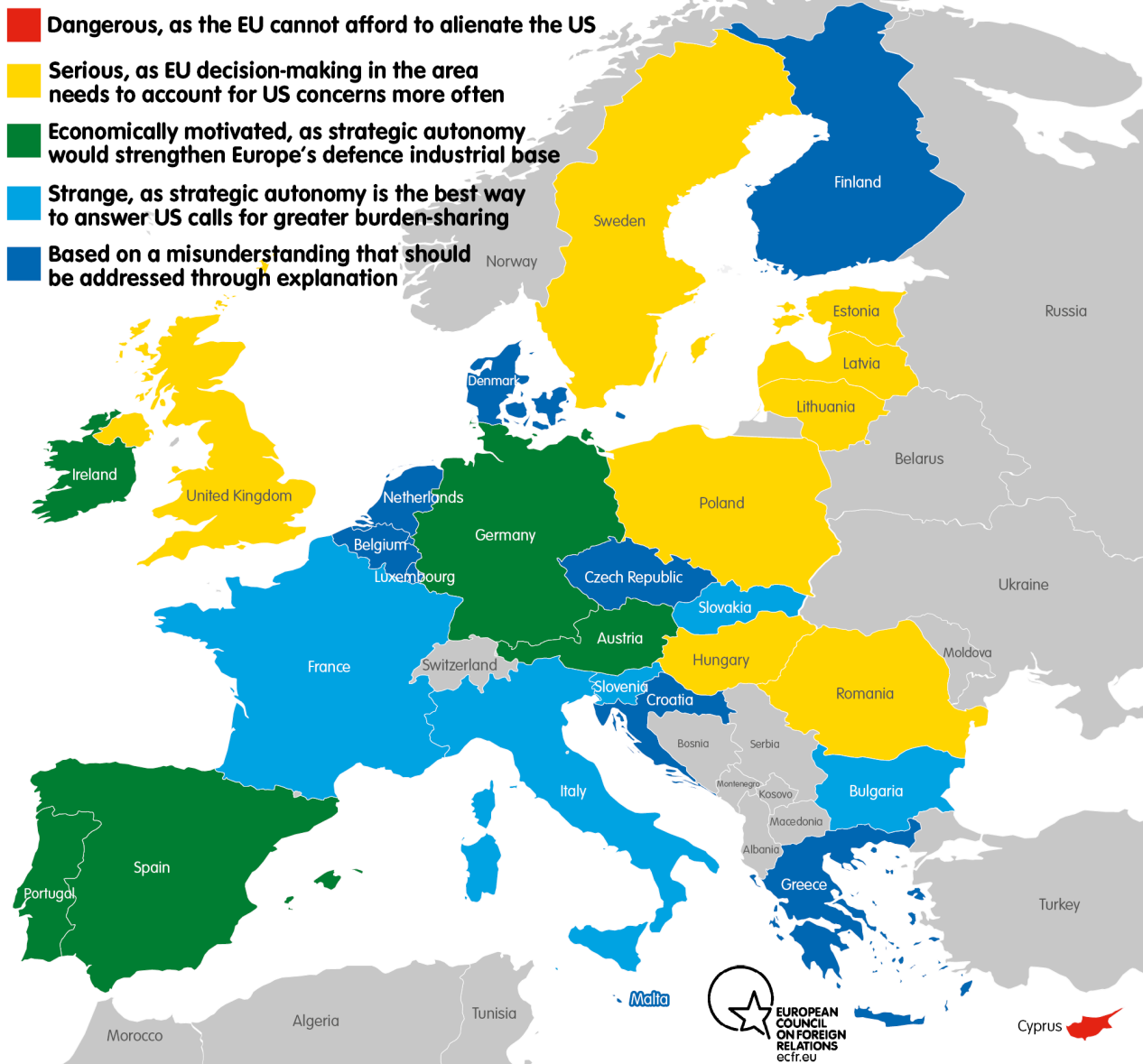
Perhaps due to the ambiguity of the concept, there is significant disagreement between member states over whether there has been progress towards ESA. France is not only the biggest believer in the idea

but is also the only one that believes there has been significant progress towards ESA goals in all areas – including budgetary issues, general awareness of the concept, operational cooperation, and collaboration on capability-related projects. All other countries regard ESA efforts as having mixed results. Slovenia and Malta, for example, see them as having made little progress, while Croatia believes that the EU is slightly further away from achieving ESA than it once was. Most countries' experts and policymakers see the EU as "somewhat moving towards" its overall ESA goals, but the wide range of answers they gave to ECFR's survey reveals their underlying confusion about the issue.

AMBIGUITY AND US INTERFERENCE

The publication of the Global Strategy did little to help the concept of ESA gain traction in European capitals. However, in the long shadow of Donald Trump's election as US president and the UK's decision to leave the EU, some European governments have undergone a general, albeit slow, strategic awakening. This has led them to take geopolitical questions more seriously. Accordingly, the EU has stepped up its efforts to build common European defence capabilities in recent years, with projects such as the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), complemented by projects such as the European Intervention Initiative – which, proposed by France, takes place outside the EU framework. So far, one would be hard-pressed to argue that these projects amount to a coherent undertaking that will logically lead to strategic autonomy. However, they have attracted the attention of the US government – if not in a positive way.

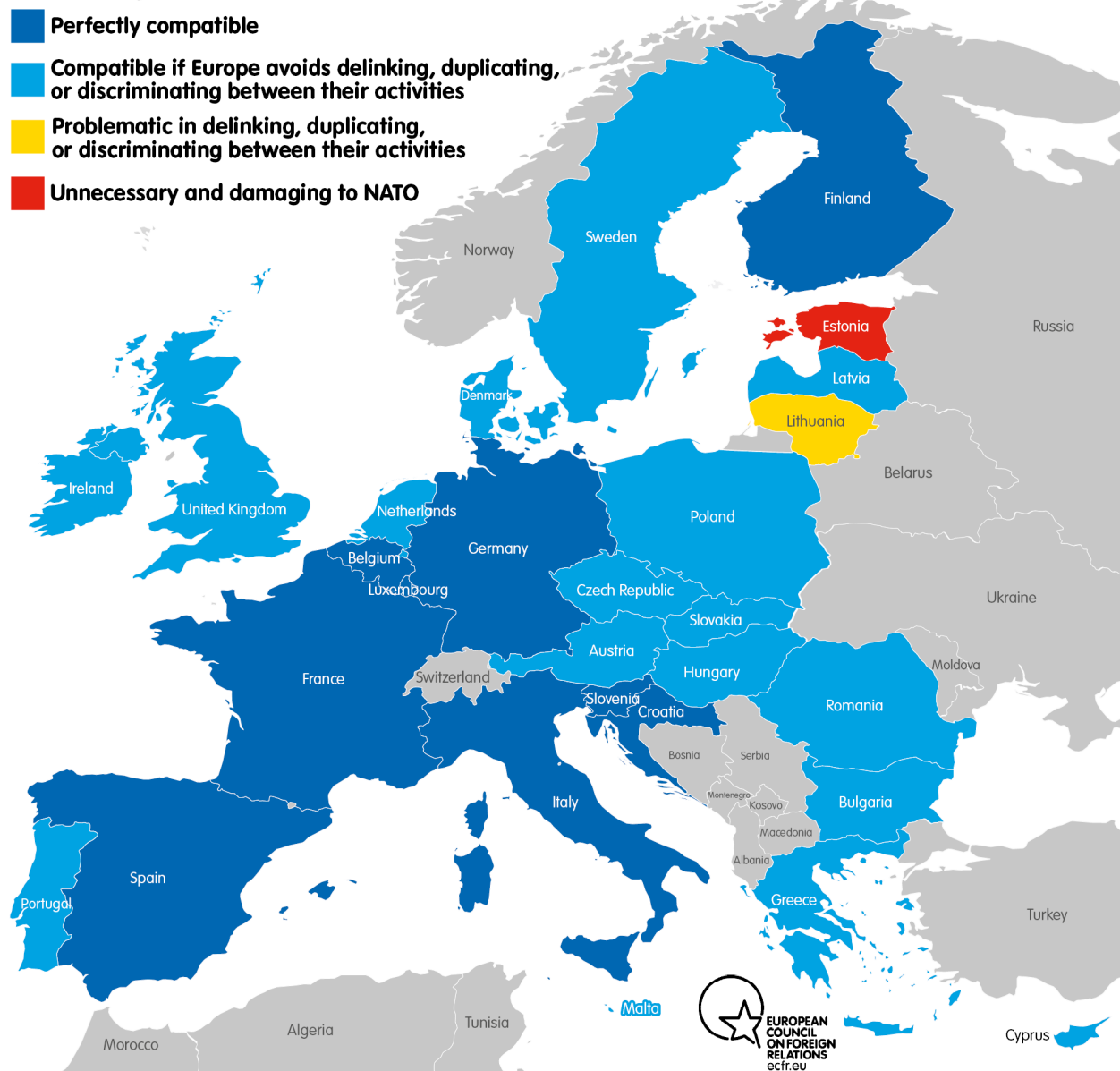
How does your country see US concerns about European strategic autonomy?



Trump and his administration have, on multiple occasions, criticised the EU in general and its efforts to build up its common defence capacity in particular – all while insisting that European states should do more to strengthen their capabilities. Most recently, in a letter to EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, two US undersecretaries of the Department of State and the Department of Defense criticised both the European Defence Fund and PESCO. This raised Europeans’ concerns about the future of transatlantic defence cooperation. In the letter, the US argued that the initiatives might lead to redundancy in industrial defence programmes and that they would interfere with NATO’s mission.

Such combative behaviour has left Europeans more unsure than ever about whether and how to pursue strategic autonomy. Yet it is because of such criticism that the debate on ESA has gained momentum in EU member states. ECFR’s researchers have found that the relationship with the US plays a more important role than any other topic in European countries’ debate on strategic autonomy: in 17 EU member states, ESA efforts’ implications for the relationship with the US is one of the leading issues of debate – coming before those such as ESA’s implications for foreign policy and defence capabilities.

How does your country see European strategic autonomy in relation to NATO?



That the US criticism has become such an important topic, even dominating the debate ahead of a discussion of the meaning of ESA, can be partly explained by the fact that there is confusion about what ESA means inside and outside the EU. The Global Strategy provides few clues as to the content of ESA, creating a gap that a wealth of expert publications and analyses – all of which provide slightly different takes on the concept – have attempted to fill.

The idea of ESA remains vague partly by design. Leaving the exact content of big ideas ambiguous is a strategy that the EU has perfected over the years. It is meant to inspire, while deliberately leaving

room for interpretation, so that potential supporters can project their ideas onto the concept and back the initiatives it creates – despite a basic lack of agreement as to its meaning. But such ambiguity has been unhelpful for ESA, as it has drawn criticism from the US – criticism that appears to be at least partly grounded in wilful misunderstanding.

Even more importantly, this vagueness has led to confusion within the union. A lack of clarity shaped responses to ECFR’s survey across the continent, independently of countries’ enthusiasm for the concept. Member states variously perceive ESA as: decision-making autonomy, which turns on political will and the decision-making process (a concern that is especially prevalent in the larger member states – France, Germany, Poland, and the UK – as well as Belgium, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Slovakia); autonomy of action, which requires military and civilian capabilities and operational readiness (a concern in eastern European states such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Latvia, and Romania); and information autonomy, which involves intelligence, analysis, and data collection (a concern in Austria, Croatia, Estonia, and Malta). Some countries see ESA as involving all three; others, none of them. Meanwhile, seven EU member states primarily view ESA as “autonomy from” outside powers, while seven others perceive it as “autonomy to” pursue national or European goals, and the remainder as both.

The US view of European defence efforts has been particularly important in shaping the debate on ESA in Germany. In Berlin, the current discourse on strategic autonomy – which only gained prominence after Trump’s election to the presidency – is mainly a reaction to the US and the role it plays in NATO. While only Cyprus regards US complaints as a threat to ESA, eight EU member states are concerned about Washington’s criticism. This group includes six eastern European countries – Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania – as well as Sweden and the UK. However, most member states view US concerns as being either strange (believing that ESA is the best way to answer Washington’s calls for Europe to take up a greater share of the defence burden), based on a misunderstanding, or economically motivated.

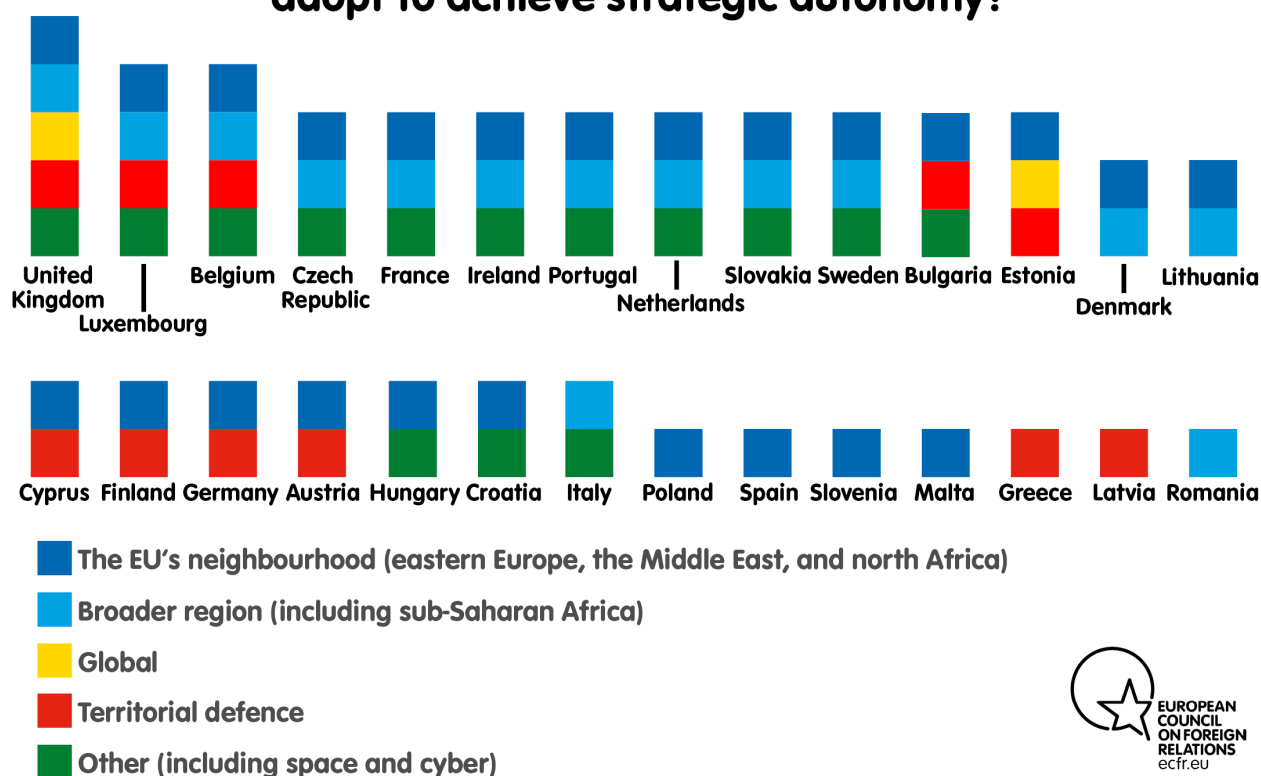
These conclusions fit with the countries' assessment of ESA's effect on NATO – Washington's main concern in the area. Almost all EU member states consider ESA to be either perfectly compatible with their commitments to the alliance or compatible if they avoid delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between NATO and EU activities. Experts in two of the three Baltic states have reservations about ESA: those in Estonia see it as “unnecessary and damaging to NATO”, while those in Lithuania view it as potentially delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between NATO and EU activities. Nonetheless, most member states disagree with the US claim that EU efforts in security and defence undermine NATO.

Given these sober assessments, it seems surprising that EU member states primarily discuss ESA because of American criticism. This is likely a sign of a deeper transatlantic estrangement. As [a previous ECFR study](#) noted, the advent of the Trump administration has dealt a major blow to the transatlantic relationship. A minority of EU member states say that the US may have become “somehow a threat” or even a “moderate threat”. And several European countries expect this sentiment to grow. Still, it is a good sign that most of them believe ESA does not endanger NATO, as statements to that effect could help dispel US concerns. Indeed, the EU recently [wrote](#) in answer to the US undersecretaries' letter discussed above, arguing that EU defence efforts strengthen NATO and “are meant to boost European defence cooperation without excluding any partner or entity per se”.

LEVEL OF AMBITION

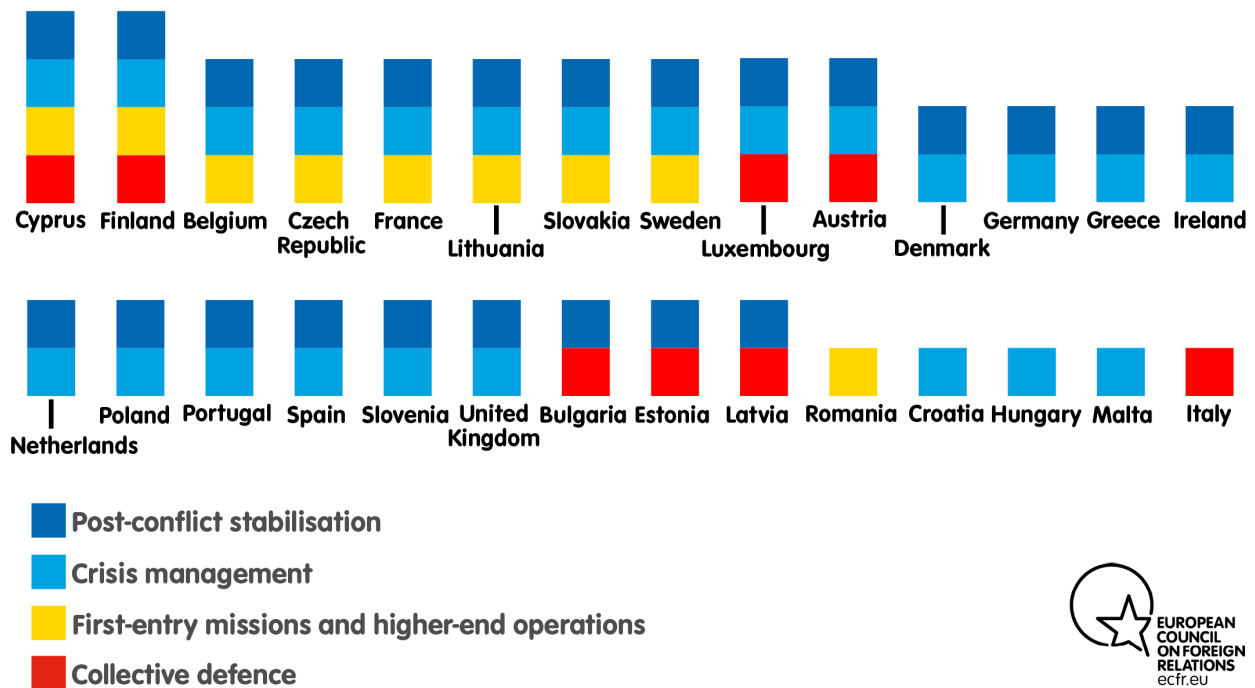
An essential question about the nature of ESA concerns whether it should involve European territorial defence – a role that NATO currently fulfils – or only civilian missions, thereby more clearly complementing the alliance. Strategic autonomy does not mean autarky, the creation of completely independent capabilities, or the rejection of US support – none of which are financially or materially possible. But it certainly means the establishment of a capacity to work together in Europe when European and American interests are not aligned, especially in regional crises on Europe's eastern and southern flanks. Twenty-four member states believe that ESA efforts should focus on Europe and its neighbourhood, including the Middle East and north Africa. Only two member states think that the EU should aim to have a global reach, ten that ESA should involve territorial defence, and 14 that it should also deal with a broader area, including sub-Saharan Africa.

What level of ambition should the EU adopt to achieve strategic autonomy?



For several member states, the scepticism and controversy that surround the idea of ESA come from perceptions of it as focused on capabilities for territorial defence. Many member states believe that Europe should not acquire, or is incapable of acquiring, those capabilities. In ECFR's survey, only Estonia and Lithuania expressed concern about the compatibility of NATO and ESA, pointing to problems with delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities (a framework that Madeleine Albright, as US secretary of state, devised to describe the transatlantic relationship – specifically, the need for the EU to avoid separating its security agenda from that of NATO). All other member states believe that ESA is either compatible with NATO, or can be if Europe makes an effort to avoid these three processes. Nonetheless, 17 member states define the discussion of ESA in their country as being entwined with the relationship with the US – which does not equate to NATO but is closely related to it in this context.

What operational level of ambition should the EU adopt to achieve strategic autonomy?



Twenty-two member states see ESA as concerning post-conflict stabilisation and crisis management, eight think that ESA should enable the EU to conduct first-entry missions (penetrating remote and contested theatres) and higher-end operations (coordinating many different capabilities, as well as the ability to fight in high-intensity situations), and seven believe that the union should aim to provide collective defence. For instance, while Spain argues that NATO is its current security guarantor, the country still sees the EU as having the potential to become a security organisation.

As discussed above, European strategic autonomy has three main components: information autonomy, decision-making autonomy, and autonomy of action. For ten member states, autonomy of action takes precedence over the others in efforts to develop ESA. Four member states regard information autonomy, and seven decision-making autonomy, as their top priority. Yet European countries have apparently contradictory views in this area: they declare that they are unsure whether to pursue ESA, but more than one-third of them define the acquisition of military and civilian capabilities as their priority. It may be that they are more conscious of growing external threats to Europe, as well as the EU's place in the world, than they care to admit.

Only six countries that are members of both the EU and NATO believe that Europe requires greater

solidarity on defence to develop strategic autonomy. This is because most think that the EU should not become involved in the area – as NATO’s Article 5 is sufficient – or else that EU treaty provisions, including Article 42.7, are adequate. Indeed, in times of need, Europeans have the ability to demonstrate their solidarity: for instance, EU member states activated Article 42.7 in response to the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. Since then, they have not used the provision.

PROGRESS TOWARDS STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: THE NEED FOR CAPABILITIES

As noted, most member states see the post-conflict stabilisation and crisis management missions provided for in the Lisbon Treaty as the level of ambition required to develop ESA. Under the treaty, the EU’s security tasks comprise “joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peace-keeping tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilisation”. As such, it is unsurprising that respondents to ECFR’s survey believe the following capabilities to be the most important to achieving strategic autonomy: air-to-air refuelling, civilian capabilities, medical support and evacuation, interoperability, military mobility, drones, and increased coordination in implementing the European Defence Fund and PESCO.

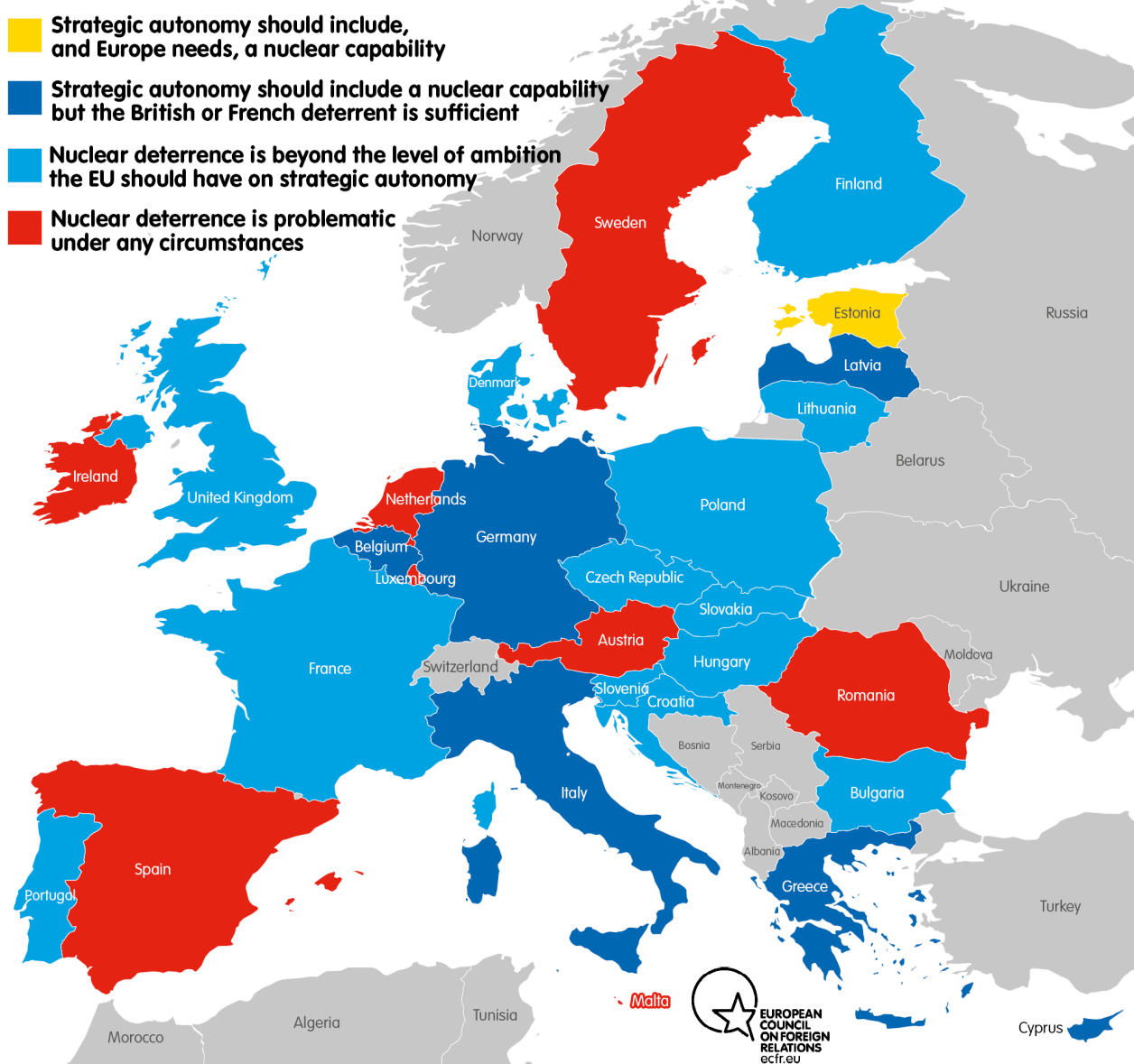
However, member states’ conflicted attitudes towards security and defence came to the fore here too, because they also often referred to the importance of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; cyber defence; conventional capabilities; missile defence; and strategic deployment capabilities. They even referred to a command structure unified in a single military headquarters – one modelled on Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, the centre for NATO’s Allied Command Operations. This EU headquarters would control the union’s missions and operations worldwide, after member states established a military planning and conduct capability to coordinate operational planning and non-executive missions (non-combat missions that are not independent of the contributor nation).

But the complexities and limited purview of both the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) hinder Europe’s progress towards strategic autonomy because, as the German Institute for International and Security Affairs has argued, they are “intergovernmental and consensus-based, and therefore tend to be slow, indecisive and susceptible to blockades and vetoes of single member states”. This is an area in which leadership from France and

Germany will be necessary but not sufficient to ensure that ESA efforts continue after the UK, one of Europe's two major defence and security powers, leaves the EU.

While some media outlets have recently speculated about the establishment of a European nuclear capability, ECFR's survey shows that there is little to no appetite for this in most EU countries. For one thing, a sizeable number of member states oppose nuclear weapons in general, with eight of them considering nuclear deterrence to be problematic irrespective of ESA efforts. Most see nuclear deterrence as beyond the level of ambition the EU needs to develop strategic autonomy or else regard British or French capabilities as sufficient.

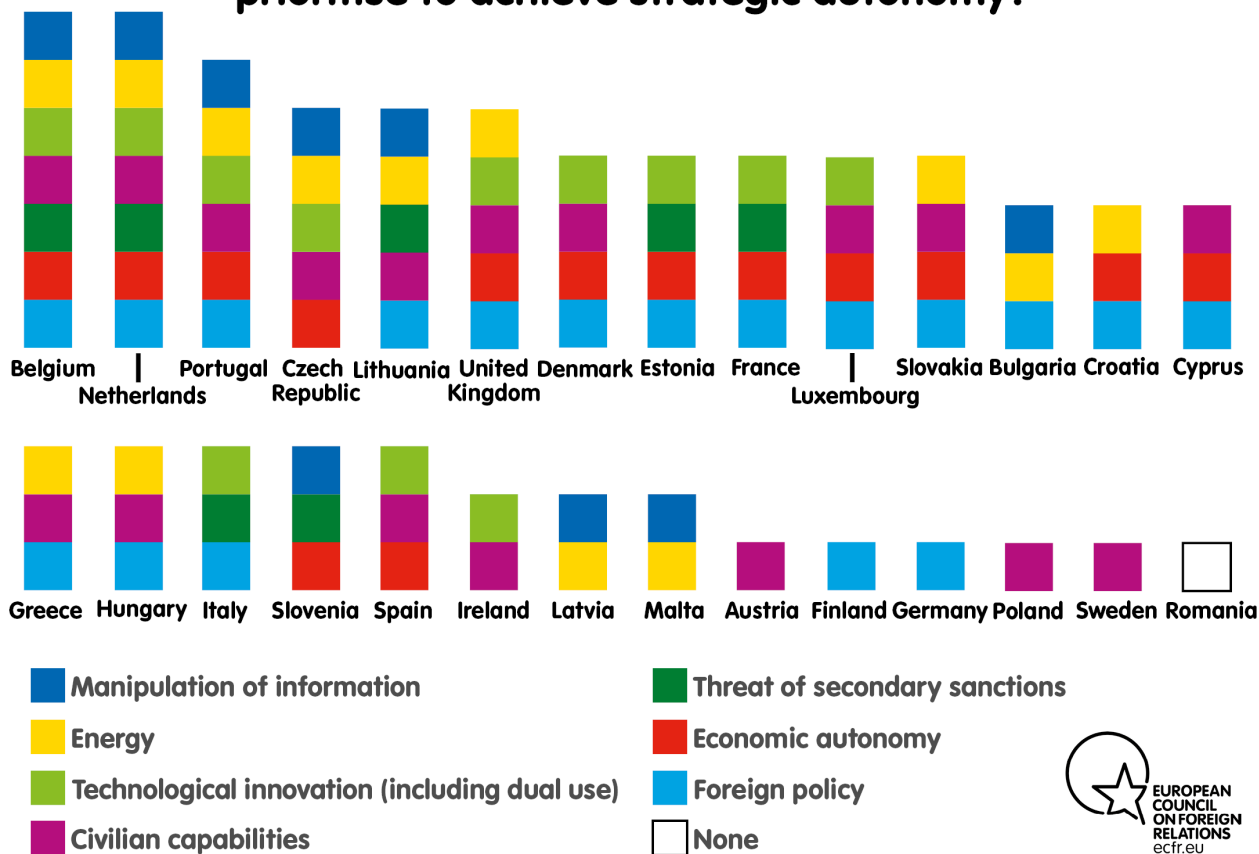
What is your country's approach to nuclear deterrence in relation to European strategic autonomy?



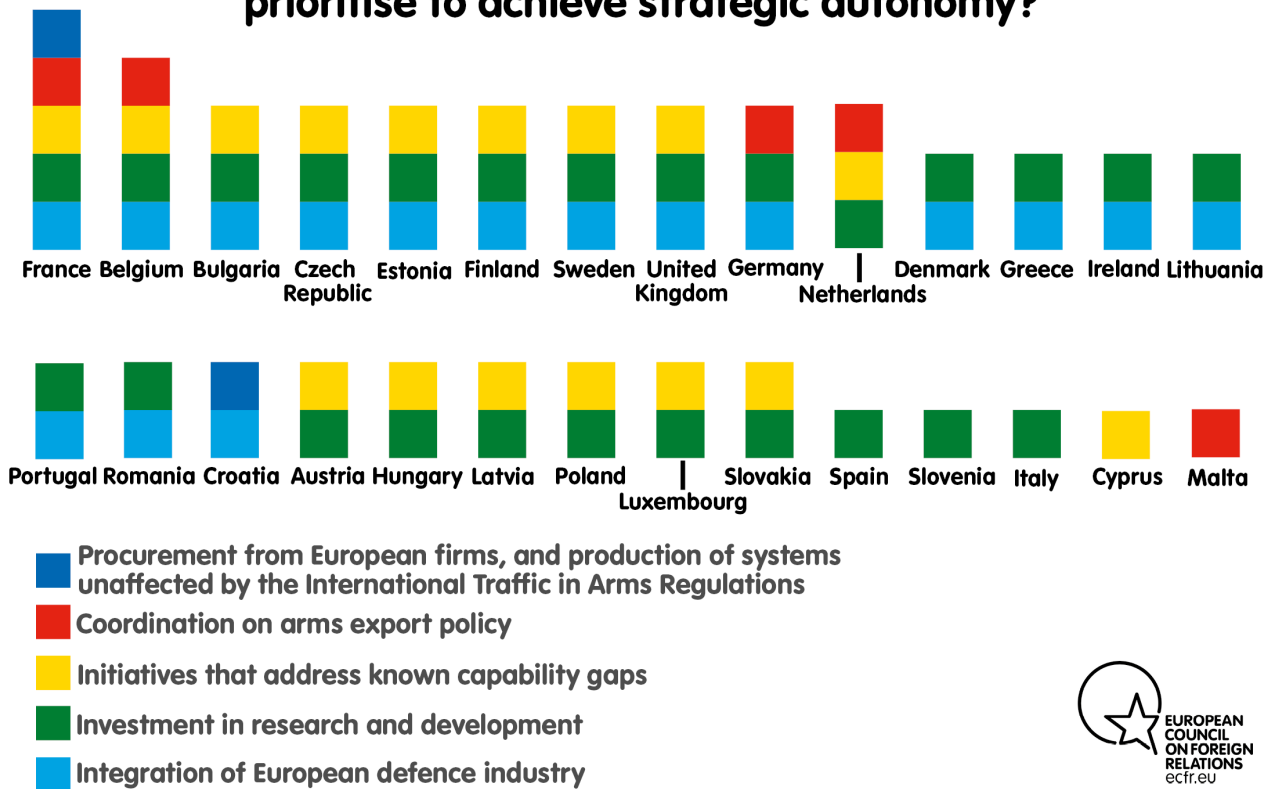
Beyond the classic dichotomy between territorial defence and crisis management missions, energy independence was mentioned by several respondents to ECFR's survey as a key criterion for ESA, particularly in relation to Russia. The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline that links Germany to Russia under the Baltic Sea has split Europe and, crucially, the Franco-German relationship. These very different issues highlight the need for Europe to think strategically and holistically about the challenges it faces. It remains to be seen whether ESA is the appropriate vehicle to address these challenges – because progress in this area is at least as dependent on the choice of process as it is on political will. Indeed, Europeans still need to determine whether the concept of ESA focuses purely on security and defence

or on a more comprehensive foreign policy project for protecting their core interests (a source of ongoing debate between the authors of this paper).

Which non-military areas should the EU prioritise to achieve strategic autonomy?



Which economic areas should the EU prioritise to achieve strategic autonomy?



EU OR EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: WHICH WILL IT BE AFTER BREXIT?

In aiming to develop strategic autonomy, the EU will need to work with the UK to integrate British capabilities into a European defence strategy. Indeed, this process raises important questions about the scope of EU-gb security cooperation after Brexit. ECFR recently argued that there was a strong case for close cooperation between them – and that one of the goals of a proposed European Security Council would be to ensure the UK stays involved in matters in which the country is influential, and that it remains a close partner of France, Europe’s other defence heavyweight.

Partly due to a lack of clarity over the terms on which the UK will leave the EU (as it is scheduled to do by 31 October 2019), it remains unclear whether they will cooperate on security issues primarily within EU structures. In this context, it becomes necessary to distinguish between EU strategic autonomy and European strategic autonomy. The former directly involves CSDP efforts, which the UK has historically stalled out of fear of duplicating NATO. The UK’s disengagement from decision-

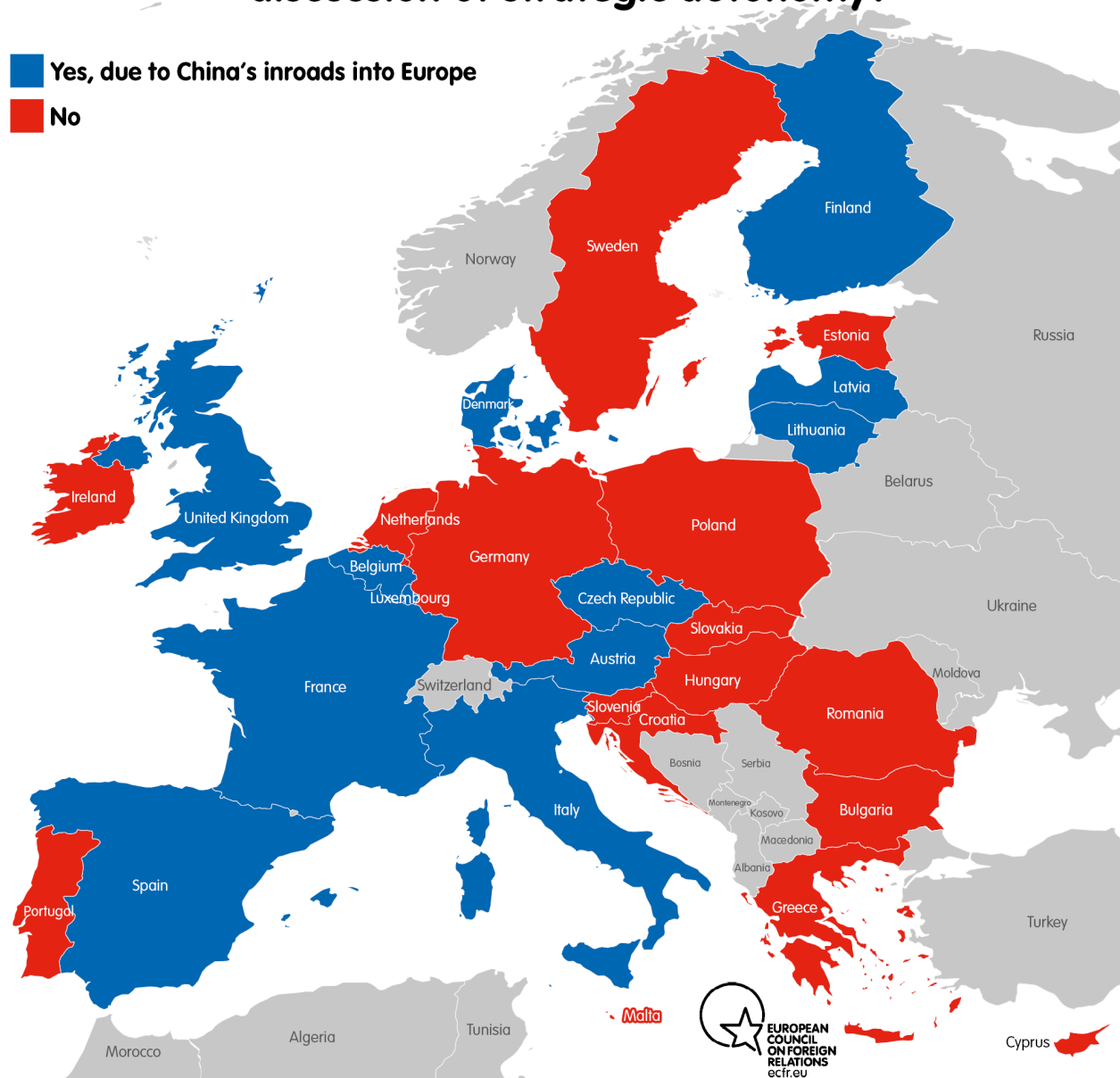
making in the European Defence Agency might remove one obstacle to the EU acquiring more independent capabilities and reducing its reliance on the US. Yet the UK's absence might also be an obstacle to EU strategic autonomy – because, when it leaves the union, the country will take with it its decision-making power, its political will to conduct military operations, and its substantial defence funding resources.

In comparison to EU strategic autonomy, European strategic autonomy would provide for larger-scale, more diverse security cooperation between the EU and the UK. European strategic autonomy would encompass issues such as nuclear deterrence, the transatlantic relationship, NATO, and conventional and non-conventional forms of strategic autonomy – in which the UK will continue to have a crucial role even after it leaves the EU. Therefore, cooperation with the UK on matters that are at the core of European strategic autonomy is essential for the EU in the current geopolitical environment, especially given the unreliability of the US president.

THE CHINA DIMENSION

One of the issues ECFR's survey raised was the extent to which China shaped each EU country's discussion of strategic autonomy. China is not part of the discussion of ESA for 15 member states – a surprisingly high number. The others declared that it was – because of the inroads into Europe the country has made, in areas ranging from political influence to technology and economic interests. Fascinatingly, though, no member state thought China should be part of the debate due to its military build-up or the growing strategic importance of the Asia-Pacific.

Does China feature in your country's discussion of strategic autonomy?



In 2012 China initiated the 16+1 framework: a new cooperation format between Beijing and 16 central and eastern European countries. As 11 of the 16 countries are EU member states, this alarmed EU institutions about China's will and capacity to divide and rule the union. They worried that Beijing would create havoc between member states and break down much-needed unity with promises of substantial economic investment. For instance, as a consequence of this initiative, Hungary and Greece have become reluctant to criticise China's human rights record. In 2017 Greece – which joined the 16+1 framework in 2019 and which has received substantial Chinese investment – went so far as to block an EU statement on China's human rights record at the United Nations. Of the 12 member

states that have joined the framework, eight declared in ECFR's survey that China was not part of their discussion of ESA. It is unclear whether these countries understand that China could pose a challenge to ESA or simply do not discuss the issue.

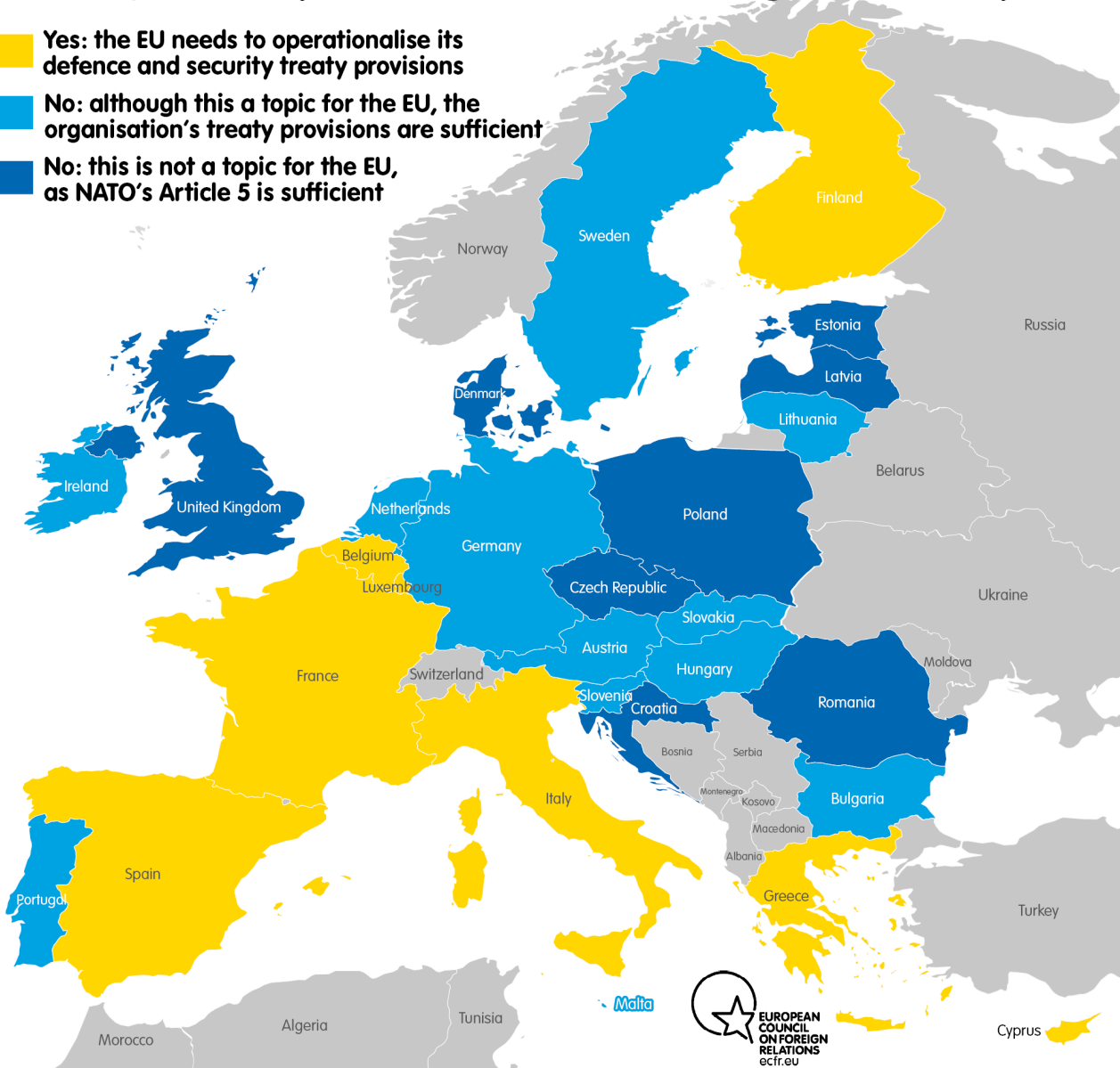
Nonetheless, respondents in member states such as France and the UK indicated that China was part of their ESA discussions. In the UK's case, this may be partly due to the sacking this year of defence secretary Gavin Williamson over a leaked plan for Chinese firm Huawei to help build the UK's 5G network. Both France and the UK see China as a growing challenge to European security generally. Although Germany does not see China as part of its discussion of ESA – despite Huawei and 5G featuring in the German public debate – the European Commission has acknowledged European concerns about the issue. In its March 2019 report “EU–China – A strategic outlook”, the Commission referred to China as a “systemic rival”.

DIFFERING STRATEGIC CULTURES AND GEOPOLITICAL OUTLOOKS

European leaders' frequent allusions to a “European army” have not pushed the ESA debate forward in the public sphere – particularly since, every time the subject comes up, they remain evasive about the precise form and approach such an organisation would take. Their caution plays to the concerns of countries such as Denmark, which worries that the pursuit of ESA will lead to the establishment of a supranational EU army. Having opted out of EU defence cooperation in the 1990s, the Danish government has greeted the revival of this debate with some trepidation.

Does Europe need greater solidarity on defence and security to move towards strategic autonomy?

- Yes: the EU needs to operationalise its defence and security treaty provisions
- No: although this a topic for the EU, the organisation's treaty provisions are sufficient
- No: this is not a topic for the EU, as NATO's Article 5 is sufficient



In any event, differences between European countries' strategic cultures are a major hurdle to ESA generally and, *a fortiori*, to the formation of a European army. For example, many EU countries are frustrated with what they regard as France's overly interventionist tendencies, and Germany's excessive caution, in military affairs.

Differences between European countries' geopolitical outlooks also threaten ESA efforts. It is unclear whether such initiatives can move ahead with only incremental changes in institutions and instruments such as PESCO and the European Defence Fund, or whether this requires a true

revolution in EU procedures. Specifically, member states may have to implement qualified majority voting – instead of unanimity – in EU foreign and security policy decision-making. They will have to decide whether to pursue ad hoc initiatives that involve only groups of willing member states.

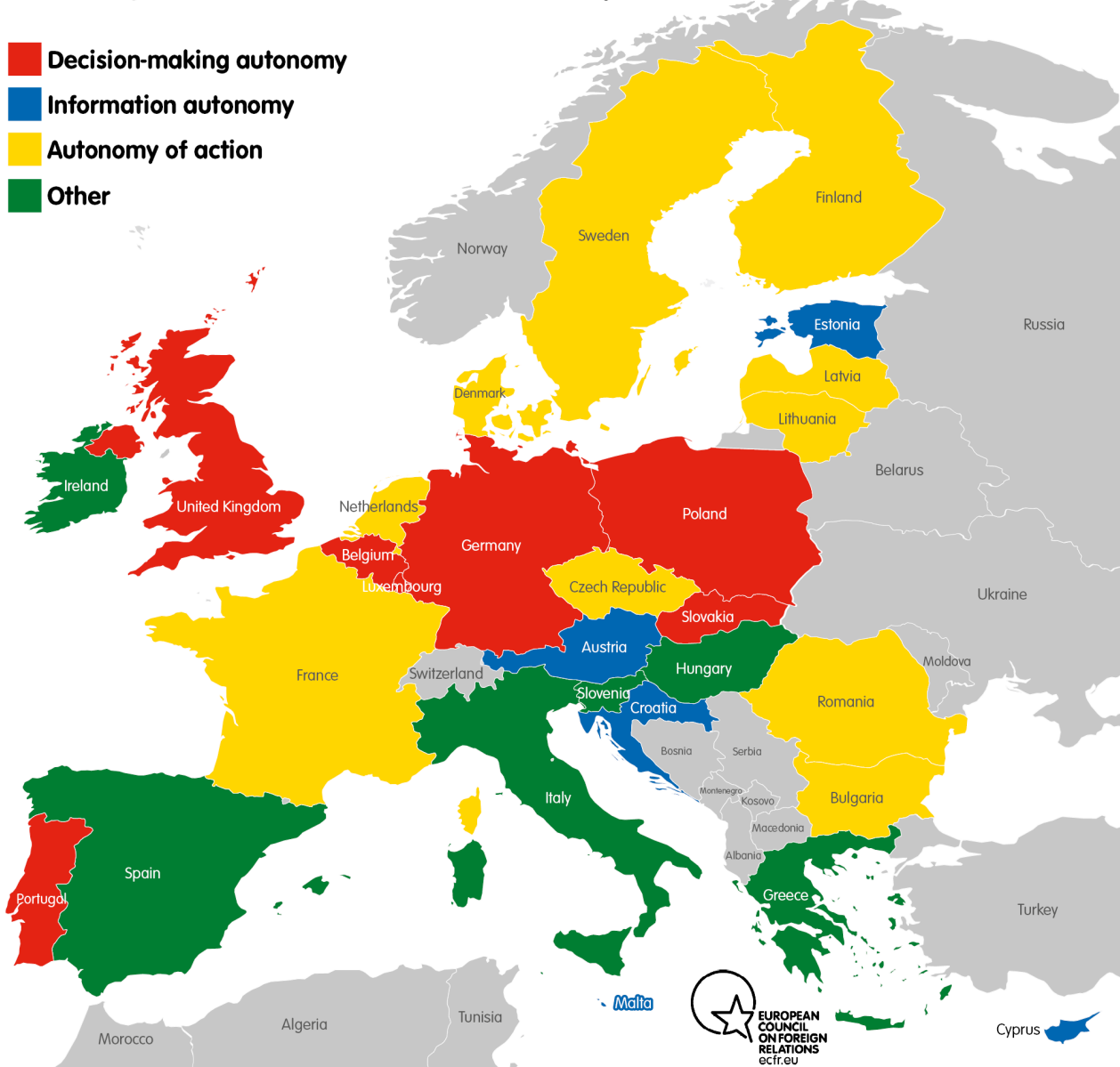
Germany has made it clear that it does not support these approaches, and that it prefers cooperation in established formats such as the EU and NATO. This explains why the country only joined the European Intervention Initiative late on but actively supported PESCO – which includes a far larger share of EU member states. Aware of these differing outlooks, France insists that the objective of the European Intervention Initiative is to foster a strategic community while producing shared assessments of threats and the required responses to them.

FROM STRATEGIC CACOPHONY TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY?

In 2013 ECFR's Olivier de France and Nick Witney lamented the lack of a common strategic outlook in Europe. Three years before the adoption of the EU Global Strategy, they pointed to the fact that the documents comprising most member states' national strategies were “incoherent, derivative, devoid of the sense of a common European geostrategic situation, and often long out-of-date”. Six years later, much the same judgment could be made of ESA. Europe now faces an openly hostile US president who has gone so far as to declare the EU to be a foe. He has also threatened to withdraw from NATO. The deterioration of the transatlantic relationship has pushed Europeans into an existential crisis. The rise of a revisionist Russia and an increasingly assertive China are hardly lesser problems. Yet it remains to be seen whether these issues will be enough to lead Europeans to develop a common strategic culture.

What kind of autonomy should the EU prioritise?

- Decision-making autonomy
- Information autonomy
- Autonomy of action
- Other



As this study shows, there are significant geographical and functional divergences in member states' conception of ESA. Yet, despite the divergences in their priorities on ESA, Europeans could make their existing comparative advantages work in the collective European interest. Autarky in security and defence is neither possible nor desirable – a fact that national capitals fully understand. At their core, ESA efforts are about strengthening Europeans' capacity to act together, making use of their various comparative advantages when their allies prove unwilling to help.

This requires political will. Europeans need to show leadership and unity in their pursuit of strategic

autonomy. If they fail to do so, they will continue to struggle to wield influence at home and abroad. In this, the creation of a European Security Council would have two major advantages: it would make security and defence a European priority, and would help keep the UK “in Europe” – through both formal and informal mechanisms.

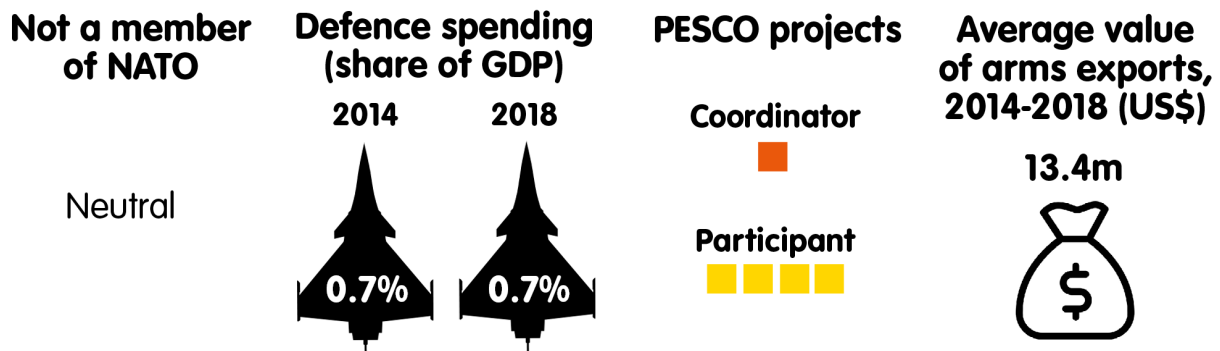
As part of a pan-European network, ECFR authors have contributed to renewed strategic thinking in Europe, including through work on strategic sovereignty, as well as on mobilising the upcoming European Commission on foreign policy priorities.

European strategic autonomy should not and cannot replace the relationship with the US. Indeed, most EU countries see ESA efforts as not a way to gain autonomy from the US but to build up Europe’s capacity for action. Among the few countries that primarily conceive of ESA efforts as weakening the transatlantic relationship, some – including Estonia, Luxembourg, and Poland – criticise the pursuit of strategic autonomy out of a desire to maintain as close a relationship with the US as possible. Moreover, Europe has a web of political, economic, and military relationships with powers other than the US. Although attitudes towards Russia and China vary widely between EU member states, most of them agree that Europe needs to become more engaged with its neighbourhood. To fully achieve this, they need to make progress towards shared strategic thinking. One way to do so would be to host discussions on ESA in Nordic, Baltic, and central and eastern European states – thereby broadening the Franco-German debate and incorporating these countries’ positions and preoccupations into this living concept.

ESA initiatives entail closer, more efficient security cooperation between member states and a greater focus on the threats to Europe that NATO does not address. The EU is capable of pioneering strategic leadership, as it has shown in its implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation. If it were to devote its unique resources – not least its economic power and the influence of its single market – to the pursuit of strategic autonomy, the EU could help reverse the international trend towards narrow, inward-looking nationalism and finally become a true power in its own right.

ANALYSES BY COUNTRY

Austria



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

European strategic autonomy (ESA) is not a particularly prominent topic in Austria's public debate. But Austrian policymakers and policy experts are aware of the issue, and intend to play a supportive role in strengthening ESA. As a neutral country, Austria primarily looks to France and Germany to lead efforts in this area. Austria regards the idea of ESA as somewhat important to the European Union, primarily due to its expectation that the United States will eventually turn away from Europe. When it held the EU presidency in the second half of 2018, Austria supported ESA and emphasised the need to build up Europe's defence technological and industrial base.

Level of ambition

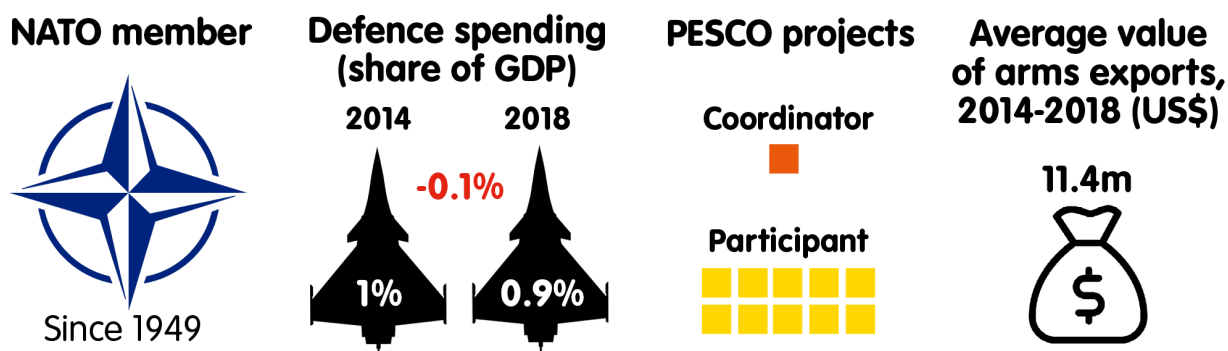
Austria often defines its neutrality as equidistance between the US and Russia. Its defence budget is well below 1 percent of GDP. If ESA develops further, Austria could eventually be forced to re-evaluate its neutrality and lack of military capabilities – which may leave it unable to fulfil Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty (the EU's collective defence clause), let alone help strengthen the Common Security and Defence Policy or initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation. For the moment, Vienna seems content to allow other capitals to shape the ESA debate and strengthen European capabilities, so long as this process does not disrupt Austrian domestic politics. Austria does not believe that there

is likely to be a military attack on Europe. Despite the fact that it is not covered by NATO's Article 5, Austria focuses less on collective territorial defence than on crisis management and post-conflict stabilisation. The country views its participation in international crisis management as a decisive instrument of security policy and, therefore, supports other countries' efforts in the area. As one of the leading voices in the international campaign for global nuclear disarmament, Austria strictly opposes any attempt to add a nuclear dimension to ESA.

Transatlantic dimension

As a neutral country that is not a member of NATO, Austria may appear to be relatively insulated from a potential US withdrawal from Europe. Nevertheless, as it relies – at least indirectly – on the US security guarantee in Europe, Austria has responded to US President Donald Trump's harsh criticism of the EU by increasing its support for European defence projects.

Belgium



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

The concept of European strategic autonomy (ESA) does not generate a great deal of interest in Belgium. Discussion of the issue mainly takes place in think-tanks and academia – as is the case with defence topics more broadly. Even well-informed officials have little understanding of Belgian political leaders' positions on defence. This is the result of a systemic lack of interest from civil society, as well as a lack of ambition among these leaders – most of whom prefer to stick to the standard rhetoric of endorsing “the creation of a more autonomous EU, complementary to NATO”. Their approach transfers responsibility for dealing with the issue to the European level, allowing Belgians to avoid talking or thinking about it.

Level of ambition

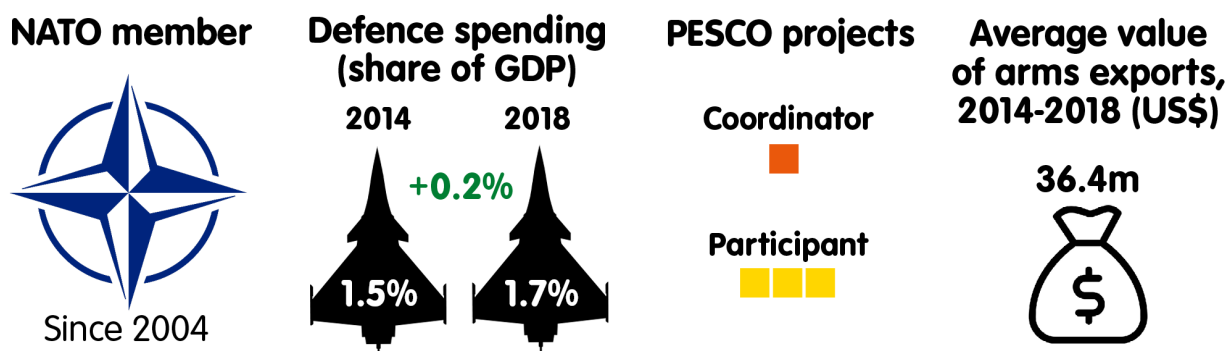
Historically, Belgium has always been strongly committed to European integration, believing that this should extend to defence matters. Most Belgian policymakers and policy experts believe that a more integrated European Union would have greater freedom to act when it needs to defend its security interests. Primarily viewing ESA as the EU's capacity to complete certain tasks in cooperation with its international partners, they support efforts to focus on European security (in areas such as territorial defence, counter-terrorism, and migration policy) and on new technologies. They also back attempts to establish an effective form of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to generate strong, efficient military capabilities. However, they also complain about the EU's lack of strategic vision and

political will, as well as the unwieldy nature and budgetary challenges of structures such as PESCO.

Transatlantic dimension

Home to the headquarters of both NATO and the EU, Belgium sees harmonious cooperation between the organisations as its main foreign policy goal. However, the victories of two anti-NATO parties (the far-right Vlaams Belang and the far-left PTB/PVDA) in the last general election may suggest that the country's political consensus on the importance of the transatlantic partnership is deteriorating somewhat. Due to its belief that responsibility for collective defence primarily rests with the transatlantic alliance, the country has stated that a more independent EU should not aim to form a strategic counterweight to NATO. Defence missions should, therefore, take place under NATO's aegis. As such, the EU's push to establish autonomous defence structures should complement NATO. Belgian defence experts are also convinced that, if NATO weakens, the EU should be capable of effective strategic action.

Bulgaria



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Bulgaria's debate on European strategic autonomy (ESA) remains chaotic, even though the topic has become more relevant domestically since the country held the EU presidency in 2018. Bulgarians most often discuss the concept in relation to defence rather than economic or energy issues. Sofia's approach is similar to that of Berlin, generally supporting efforts to strengthen ESA and seeing the involvement of all EU members as fundamental to this. Nevertheless, Bulgarians stress that such cooperation does not require the creation of a European army or an alternative to NATO. Most Bulgarian policymakers and policy experts primarily conceive of autonomy as the capacity to conduct operations.

Level of ambition

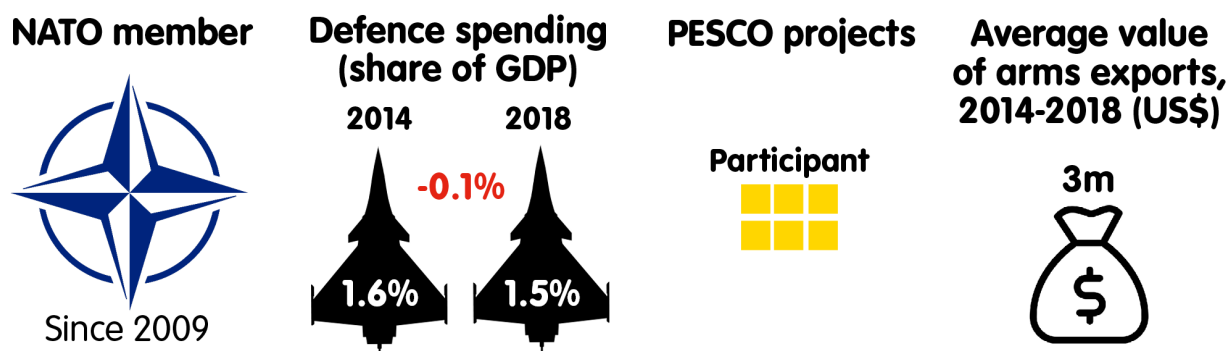
When analysing the geographical regions in which Europe should pursue strategic autonomy, Bulgaria is aware that member states have differing priorities. It is particularly concerned about its neighbourhood and it is relatively uninterested in the Middle East and north Africa. Bulgarian officials believe that collective territorial defence, as well as post-conflict stabilisation, may be suitable ambitions for ESA. To achieve strategic autonomy, they argue, it is important that Europe improve military mobility. Thus, ESA should firstly involve efforts to fill in capability gaps that Europe has already identified, before taking further steps. There is no debate on nuclear deterrence in Bulgaria. The country believes that member states should invest in information autonomy where EU

cooperation can develop adequate programmes to achieve this. In May 2019, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov ruled out the establishment of a European army, emphasising the primacy of NATO and the United States. Discussing European defence in relatively technical and logistical terms, he implied that Bulgaria would have a limited role in the area and rejected attempts to expand the role of Frontex.

Transatlantic dimension

Bulgarian officials see ESA and NATO as compatible, so long as member states avoid delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. They do not generally perceive European strategic autonomy as clashing with NATO membership. They believe that the European pillar of NATO can become stronger, which would be beneficial to the transatlantic alliance. Engaging in a political dialogue on all corresponding levels, they argue, should deepen cooperation between the EU and NATO. This is why Bulgarian officials are surprised by the United States' opposition to ESA, which they see as the best way to answer its calls for Europe to take up a greater share of the defence burden.

Croatia



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

There is almost no discussion of European strategic autonomy (ESA) in Croatia – among either the general public or experts. Even the country's prime minister, defence minister, and foreign minister have rarely mentioned the concept in public. However, some issues that could be important to ESA – such as Europe's relationship with the United States – feature in the public debate. Thus, Zagreb believes that Europe has made some progress towards achieving ESA goals.

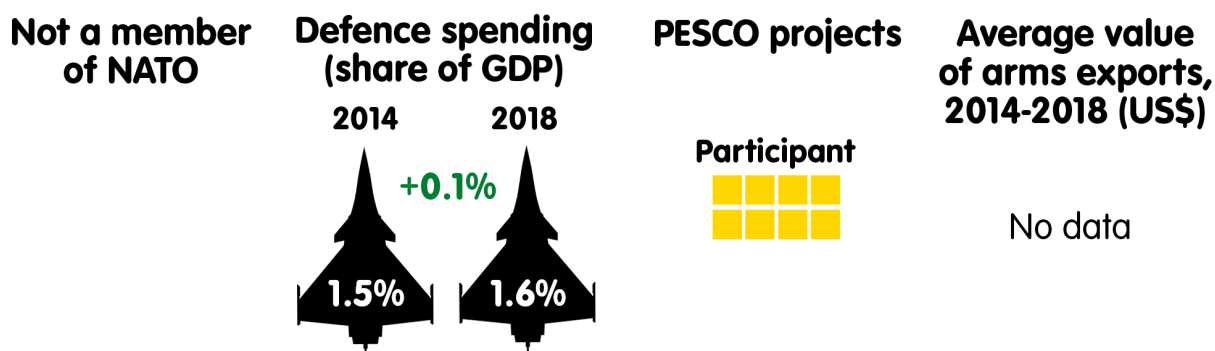
Level of ambition

Expecting a repeat of the 2015 migrant crisis, Zagreb believes that ESA's main role should be to address the causes of such problems. This is why it welcomes the prospect that Europe will increasingly engage with neighbouring regions. Croatia is one of the few European countries that values information autonomy more than decision-making autonomy or autonomy of action as a priority in ESA efforts. Croatians generally see military preparedness as the most valuable aspect of defence capability. Croatia supports reform of the European defence industry, as this sector is relatively important to its economy. This is particularly true in relation to cyber defence, as reflected in its creation of the Center for Pilotless Air Systems and Cyberspace Command. There is almost no debate on nuclear deterrence in the country, but Croatian officials would rather not include this topic on the ESA agenda. Croatians believe that NATO's Article 5 can promote European solidarity in defence.

Transatlantic dimension

Croatia's NATO membership is a cornerstone of its security. However, it sees ESA as an opportunity for its defence sector. Thus, for the Croatian government, Europe should make ESA and NATO compatible with each other. Strategic autonomy may help the European Union take up a greater share of the defence burden – as the US has called for. In this sense, Zagreb sees US concerns about ESA as based on a misunderstanding that Europe needs to resolve.

Cyprus



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Cyprus has only engaged in a very limited discussion of European strategic autonomy (ESA) but there is a broad consensus in the country that European military independence would benefit smaller member states. Cyprus has endorsed the European Union's strategic autonomy as a strategic goal, seeing Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as an important step that deepens European integration. Cyprus is a firm advocate of the EU's security and defence initiatives. And it wants to sustain the rate of progress the EU has made in the area in the last two years. However, Cyprus cannot significantly expand its defence activities, as it has a limited military capacity and Turkey has occupied parts of its territory. Thus, the country sees the threat from Turkey as its biggest security challenge, viewing the development of new defence technology as a potential source of tension between them.

Level of ambition

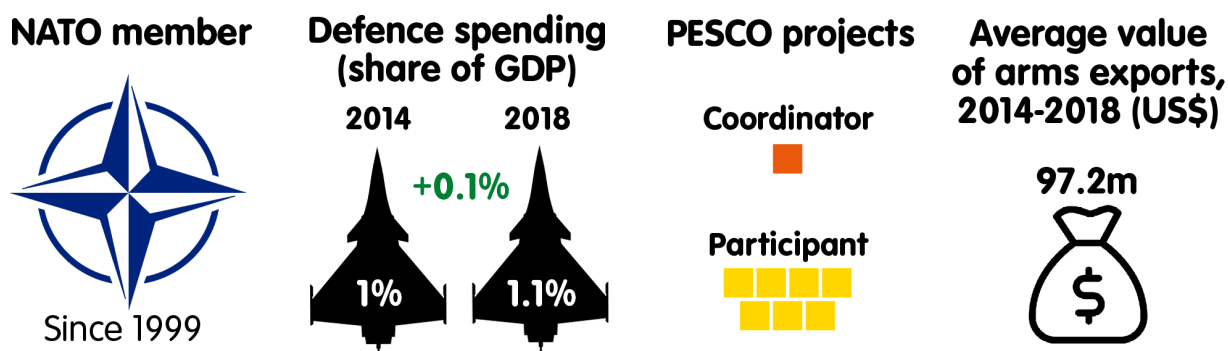
Cyprus would like Europe to enhance the Common Security and Defence Policy, strengthen its capacity to act as a security provider, and achieve military independence by creating a European army that would deal with collective defence, post-conflict stabilisation, and crisis management. Cyprus wants the EU to establish a powerful body that will secure its borders, serve Europe's defence interests, end conflicts, stabilise neighbouring regions – particularly in eastern Europe, the Middle East, and north Africa – and end disputes with Russia. It believes that the military starting point for

this process includes an effort to improve EU defence capabilities, enhancing both the EU's autonomous analysis capacity and intelligence sharing between member states. Cyprus has joined Greece in leading a PESCO project designed to provide education and training in intelligence and develop new capabilities such as drones. Cyprus believes that, in pursuing strategic autonomy, Europe should both collaborate with NATO and take Russia's interests into account.

Transatlantic dimension

Cyprus views close collaboration with NATO as a way to improve the EU's military capabilities. However, Turkey uses its membership of NATO to prevent such cooperation, while Cyprus prevents the EU from involving Turkey in its defence activities. Cyprus would support further interaction between the EU and NATO only if it was involved in the process. Cyprus believes that cooperation with NATO must be based on the principles of inclusiveness, reciprocity, and respect for the decision-making autonomy of each organisation. But, given that Turkey prevents Cyprus from joining the alliance, Nicosia believes that ESA efforts and NATO should avoid delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities – as this would prevent the former from relying on the latter's command structure.

Czech Republic



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Ambitions of European strategic autonomy (ESA) do not resonate across the Czech political debate. The Czech government supports Europe's effort to increase its global influence, but not necessarily through defence integration. Thus, ESA is somewhat important to the Czech political agenda, albeit only indirectly. Czech officials are pessimistic about Europe's efforts to achieve strategic autonomy. They perceive no overall progress in the effort or in budgetary matters. Indeed, the Czech Republic is the only member of the European Union that believes the organisation is drawing away from its goals of operational collaboration (through undertakings such as joint deployments and the European Intervention Initiative).

Level of ambition

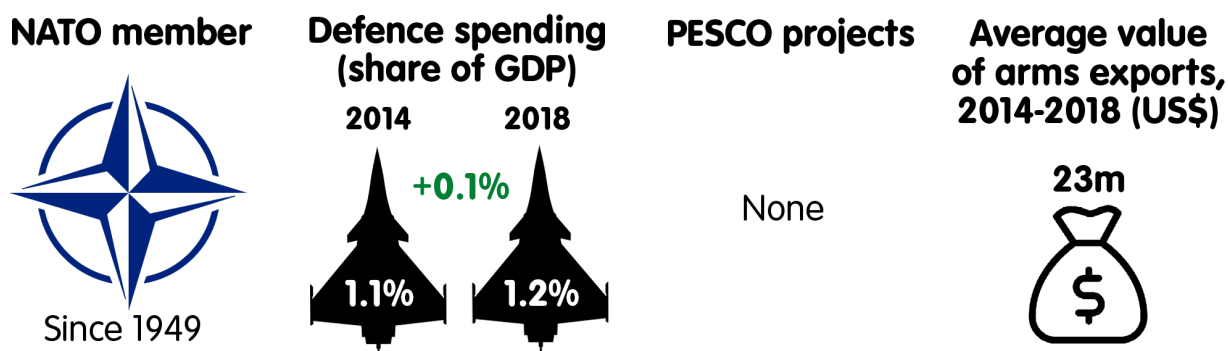
Despite their pessimism, Czech policymakers and policy experts have relatively high ambitions for Europe to increase its influence through strategic autonomy. They suggest that EU member states should work together not only in eastern Europe, countries that border the Mediterranean, and sub-Saharan Africa, but also on space and cyber security. They expect ESA efforts to serve as a framework for post-conflict stabilisation, crisis management, first-entry missions, and higher-end operations. They view transportation, communication, cyber security, intelligence, and precision weapons as the areas in which Europe should work hardest to achieve ESA. Czechs see a common vision of ESA as a way to improve the efficiency of this process. They argue that greater solidarity in defence is not a

topic for the EU and that NATO's Article 5 is sufficient to achieving ESA.

Transatlantic dimension

From the Czech government's perspective, ESA efforts and NATO can be compatible, so long as Europe avoids delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. Prague privileges NATO as a framework for defence cooperation and sees ESA as complementary to this. Czech officials worry that the United States misunderstands ESA, believing that Europe needs to explain the concept more clearly to ease tension in the transatlantic relationship. □

Denmark



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Denmark has been engaged in a discussion about European strategic autonomy (ESA) since the 1990s, when the country received an opt-out from EU cooperation on military and defence-related decisions and activities. Copenhagen feared that the pursuit of ESA through the creation of an EU army would have disrupted the transatlantic relationship and changed NATO's position within the European security architecture. As a result, the revival of the debate on ESA is highly contentious in Denmark. Most Danish voters hope that members of the European Union will improve their defence and security cooperation to achieve greater geopolitical freedom of action.

Level of ambition

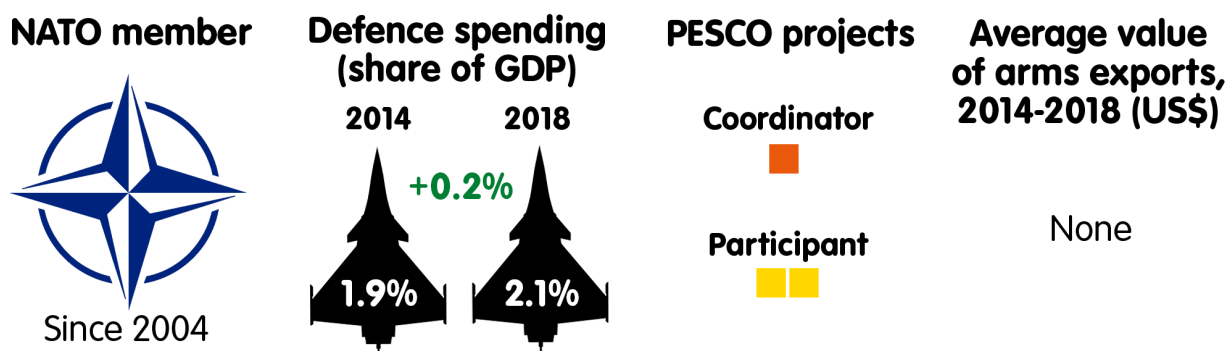
Denmark largely views territorial defence as a task for NATO. However, it sees issues such as an increasingly assertive Russia, hybrid threats, cyber vulnerabilities, and migration as undermining the security of Europe's citizens and territory – and believes that the EU plays an important role in addressing these challenges. Denmark wants the EU to focus more on the development of its cyber capabilities and autonomy of action, and to engage in activities such as post-conflict stabilisation and crisis management in regions neighbouring Europe.

Transatlantic dimension

Seeing ESA efforts as potentially disruptive to the transatlantic relationship and the position of

NATO, Denmark faces a dilemma. While it wants to protect its relationships with the United States and the United Kingdom (which have been its main security and defence allies for decades, partly due to its opt-out), Denmark is aware that these countries may no longer be reliable partners. As a consequence, Danish officials want the EU to pursue strategic autonomy to some extent.

Estonia



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Discussions on European strategic autonomy (ESA) in Estonia have been mostly restricted to academics and military experts. Yet the national media has covered the topic several times. Indeed, the pursuit of ESA could appeal to Estonians, as they see security guarantees as an important part of Europe's geopolitical framework. However, French-style ESA is divisive in Estonia, because it overlaps with NATO.

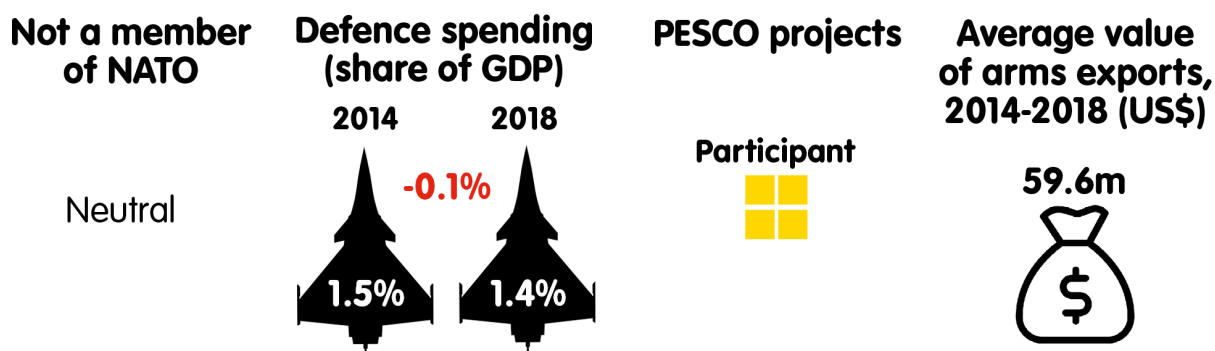
Level of ambition

Estonian officials are among the few to believe that ESA efforts should involve not only Europe's neighbourhood but also the rest of the world. They believe that territorial defence – which they are more concerned about than other issues – and post-conflict stabilisation should be common aims in these efforts. They see the development of conventional military capabilities as the most vital aspect of ESA. They also advocate for deeper European defence industry integration and for increased investment in research and development. As it is deeply concerned about cyber security, the Estonian government hopes that Europe will formulate a common strategy in the sector. Strikingly, Estonian officials believe that the country's allies are prepared to use nuclear weapons to protect the Baltic states. Thus, they welcome attempts to establish a European nuclear deterrent.

Transatlantic dimension

Estonia is the only EU member state in which officials explicitly characterise current ESA efforts as unnecessary and damaging to NATO. Careful to preserve its alliance with the United States, Estonia sees ESA as too inefficient and vague at this stage. Estonia also regards the concept as emphasising independence from other powers more than the freedom to conduct operations. Estonians worry that an autonomous Europe will improve its relationship with Russia and distance itself from the US.

Finland



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Finland's foreign policy leadership has only referred to "strategic autonomy" since 2018. For Finns, the term seems to be largely synonymous with deeper European security policy and defence cooperation (as exemplified in projects such as Permanent Structured Cooperation, the European Defence Fund, and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence), which they strongly favour. However, the preferred term in Finland is "strategic responsibility", which comes closer to the Finnish understanding of what the European Union – and Europe more broadly – should be able to do. In practice, the term refers to the ability to assume more responsibility for security and stability both within and outside Europe, as well as to be a reliable partner for others. Although Finns have talked about strategic autonomy primarily in the context of security and defence policy, they do not view the term as applying exclusively to the military domain. Instead, the EU should seek to improve its capabilities in a comprehensive manner.

Level of ambition

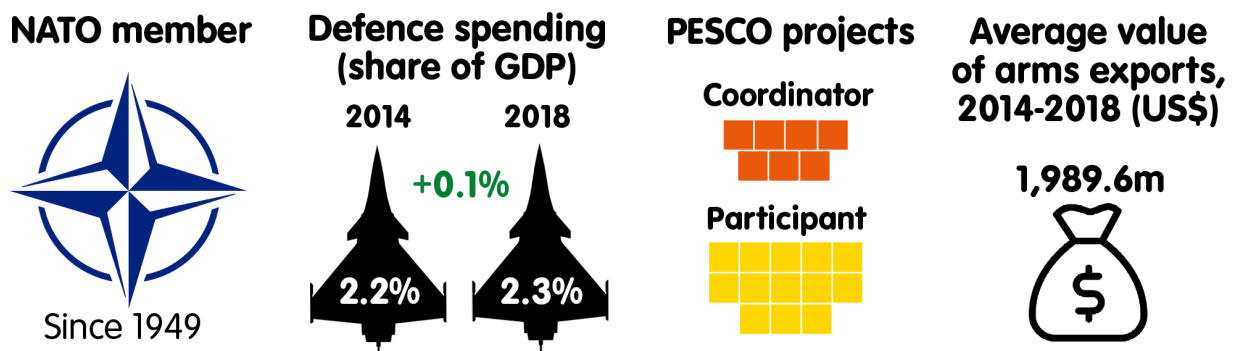
From the Finnish perspective, European strategic autonomy means that the EU would be able to contribute to peace and stability both within its borders and in the wider neighbourhood. Finnish policymakers often mention the 2011 Western intervention in Libya to illustrate the EU's need to improve its capacity to act autonomously. However, little has been said in Finland about the kind of concrete capabilities Europe (or Finland) should acquire to move towards ESA. Similarly, while

Finland appears to be increasingly interested in hybrid, cyber, and artificial intelligence issues, it has not yet spelled out their role in ESA in any detail.

Transatlantic dimension

Finland emphasises the positive effects that deeper EU defence cooperation has on NATO and the transatlantic relationship. The country strongly believes that strengthening European defence does not undermine the alliance. Quite the contrary: it sees ESA as being fully compatible with, and complementary to, NATO because a more capable and more integrated Europe would be a more valuable partner for the United States.

France



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

France is the leading proponent of European strategic autonomy (ESA), as it sees this as a continuation of its concept of national strategic autonomy. By the time it made its first appearance in official documents – in the country’s 1994 white paper on defence – the concept had been part of the French doctrinal debate for decades. It replaced the concept of “strategic independence” that had prevailed since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. France’s 2008 white paper on defence put forward the idea of the strategic autonomy of the European Union, which was designed to create autonomous and permanent European defence and strategic planning capabilities. In its 2017 Strategic Review, France shifted from “EU strategic autonomy” to an extended ESA, following the Brexit referendum. President Emmanuel Macron has promoted the concepts of ESA and “European sovereignty” as part of a larger project to create what he calls a “Europe that protects”. Paris sees Europe as having made significant progress towards its goal of achieving such autonomy.

Level of ambition

French defence strategists view ESA as important due to two factors: the emergence of new hybrid threats and the advent of a US administration that has strained transatlantic ties. For Macron, the “gradual and inevitable” US withdrawal from Europe necessitates the creation of a European defence architecture based on three pillars: the crucial role of NATO in providing collective and territorial defence; the EU institutional framework; and bilateral and multilateral cooperation, such as that

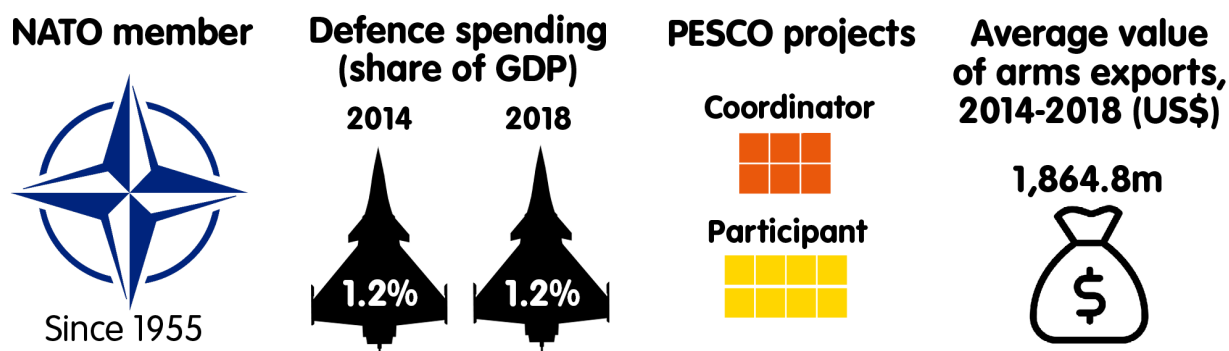
through the European Intervention Initiative.

For France, ESA is based on freedom of decision-making, which requires an integrated process and autonomy of action in conducting operations. For France, this freedom is necessarily linked to the capacity of the European defence technological and industrial base to provide the requisite operational capabilities. Paris has lamented the absence of a common strategic culture as the main obstacle to European defence cooperation. In this sense, it expects the European Intervention Initiative to enable participating countries to develop a European strategic culture by working on potential operational scenarios. France has proposed the establishment of a European Security Council to increase decision-making autonomy by including, or cooperating with, the United Kingdom. In March 2019, Macron inaugurated the Intelligence College in Europe, demonstrating that France considers information autonomy to be a policy priority too. Nonetheless, France still views coordination on intelligence sharing as a national prerogative.

Transatlantic dimension

For France, ESA is perfectly compatible with NATO membership because it will strengthen European countries' credibility as security actors and, eventually, allies who can take up their fair share of the burden of collective defence. By improving Europe's strategic autonomy, France aims to ensure that the continent can protect its security interests even if the United States and NATO do not or cannot act. Within the French vision, the goal is to create new capabilities and build up the political will to take greater responsibility for military affairs. France has neither the ambition nor the capacity to replace NATO. Accordingly, many recently published French and European defence documents underline the need to work in line with commitments to the US and NATO. For Paris, strategic autonomy has never been about strategic independence from the US but about choosing France's and Europe's level of dependence.

Germany



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

European strategic autonomy (ESA) is an important goal for Berlin, which feels duty-bound to help Paris provide leadership in the area. German policy experts and policymakers discuss ESA, albeit mainly in response to US criticism. Due to the increasingly tense relationship between Berlin and Washington – with US President Donald Trump often openly condemning Germany – the German media and public have taken some interest in the matter (if not necessarily using the term “European strategic autonomy”). Germany is slowly realising that both it and Europe may need to improve their capabilities to prepare for a future in which the US may be less engaged with Europe than it is now. At the same time, few German policymakers are prepared to significantly increase defence spending. Instead, they see ESA as a way to move towards a shared strategic culture in Europe and more efficient spending and interoperability in national defence capabilities.

Level of ambition

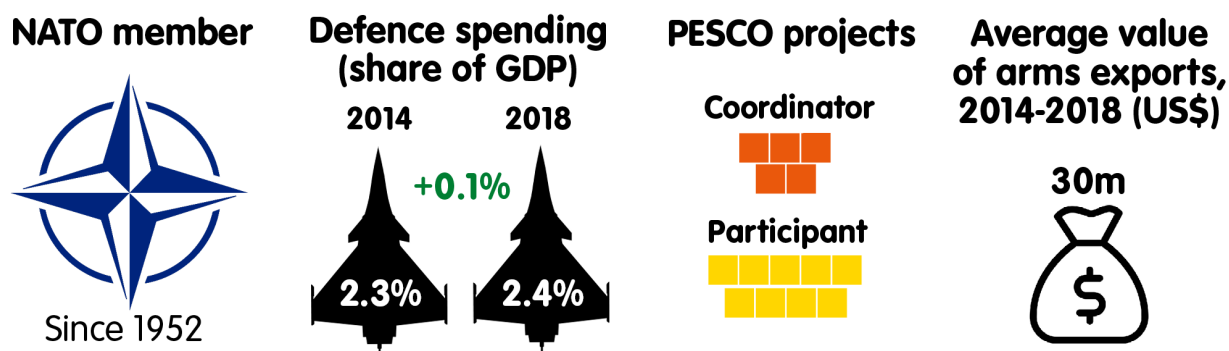
German policy experts sometimes note that the concept of ESA remains vague and, for the moment, primarily focused on defence questions. However, they also hope that, ultimately, Europe will find a common voice on geopolitical questions. The pursuit of autonomy in relation to the US is an important element of this, although Berlin does not see real European autonomy as a realistic goal. Therefore, Germany sees the ESA programmes that are developing, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund – and the debate around these – as steps in the right

direction.

Transatlantic dimension

The transatlantic relationship dominates the German debate on ESA. The process of drafting the EU Global Strategy, which initially laid out the concept, drew little interest from Berlin. The German discourse on ESA gained prominence only after Trump's election to the presidency. As such, this discourse is a reaction to the US in two ways. Firstly, as the US appears to be changing its view of alliances and rules-based multilateralism, Berlin now believes that it is important for Europe to take on a stronger geopolitical role. Secondly, due to recent US criticism of Europe's efforts to build up its defence capabilities – and due to Trump's focus on Germany in particular – German voters have gained an interest in ESA.

Greece



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

In Greece, discussion of European strategic autonomy (ESA) remains the preserve of a small group of policy experts and policymakers. But it is an important goal for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In fact, Greece plays a significant role in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), an initiative that it believes contributes to its national defence. Nevertheless, Greek officials follow the “single set of forces” principle, aiming to complement ESA with NATO. They are largely optimistic about the progress towards ESA that EU member states have made. They see cooperation on capability-related projects such as PESCO, and on joint deployments such as those under the European Intervention Initiative, as a significant part of this progress.

Level of ambition

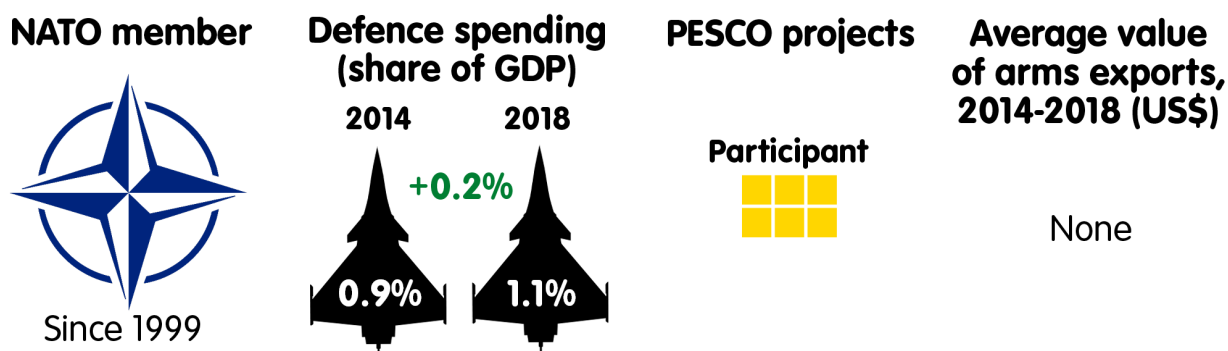
Greece would like to see ESA become a framework for territorial defence. The country’s main concern in this is Cypriot sovereignty in relation to Turkey, as well as the protection of its rights on the Aegean continental shelf and in the Greek exclusive economic zone. Greece believes that the EU should not directly intervene in warzones but instead engage in reconstruction and crisis management. Greek officials aim to ensure that PESCO, the European Defence Fund, and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence complement one another to their country’s benefit. Greece advocates for further integration of European defence industries and greater investment in research and development. The country also regards foreign policy, energy, and civilian capabilities as issues that concern ESA. It

argues that the European Union might need to invest more in intelligence, and operationalise its treaty provisions, to improve European solidarity on defence.

Transatlantic dimension

Greece aims to pursue ESA initiatives while maintaining a strong link to NATO. Athens stresses the need to avoid delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between the activities of the alliance and the EU. As it has long been a NATO member and is located near the Middle East, Greece attaches great importance to transatlantic security cooperation. Greeks believe that the United States' concerns about ESA are based on a misunderstanding that can be resolved if Europeans clearly explain the concept. Although they engage in little debate on nuclear deterrence, Greek officials see the topic as falling within the scope of ESA.

Hungary



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

There are few discussions of European strategic autonomy (ESA) in Hungary, but Budapest is less ideologically opposed to the concept than Warsaw. It has opted to wait for EU member states to develop a common understanding of ESA before clarifying its position. The nature of Hungary's attitude towards ESA will depend on an assessment of its impact on national sovereignty. While it continues to regard NATO as the cornerstone of national security, Hungary is aware of the United States' pivot away from Europe. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government sees defence cooperation as an area in which it is easy to play the role of a constructive partner for other European capitals without incurring any political costs at home.

Level of ambition

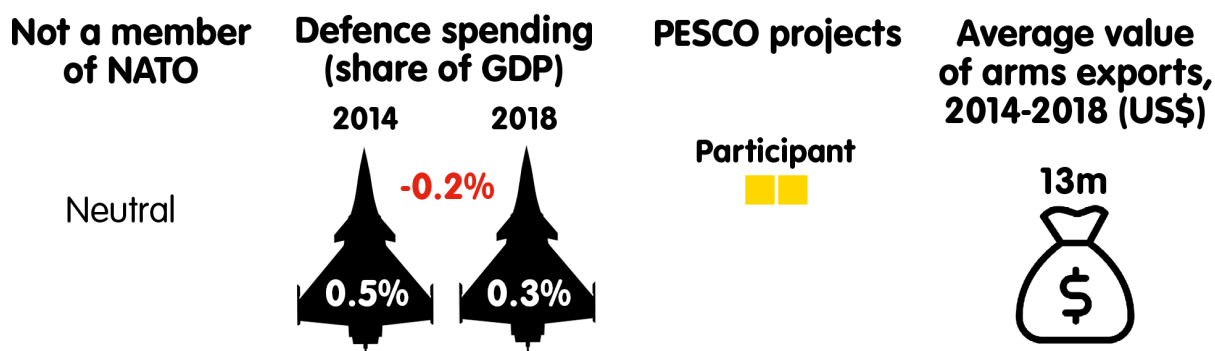
According to Hungarian foreign policy and defence officials, the European Union cannot – and should not seek to – rival NATO. Therefore, Budapest favours a modest level of ambition in ESA.

Geographically, it argues, this should be limited to Europe's neighbourhood and, possibly, also to cyber security. Functionally, ESA should focus on crisis management. But Hungary also takes non-military autonomy into account in its approach to ESA, notably on foreign policy, energy, and civilian capabilities. The country sees nuclear deterrence as out of the question in ESA – due to its assessment of Europe's reliance on the US arsenal.

Transatlantic dimension

NATO membership is the cornerstone of Hungary's security policy, shaping its position on defence cooperation in Europe. Budapest would view with suspicion any initiative that could jeopardise NATO. For the moment, however, Hungary believes that ESA efforts and NATO can be compatible, so long as Europe avoids delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. Budapest believes that the EU should make a greater effort to take US concerns into account in its decision-making on strategic autonomy. As such, Hungary is one of just eight EU members – alongside the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the UK – to take American misgivings about ESA seriously. But Hungary would like to participate in a European defence procurement market (largely for economic reasons) – which makes its position on the issue more nuanced than that of Poland.

Ireland



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

There is no extensive debate on European strategic autonomy (ESA) in Ireland, where the term is almost never used outside academic circles. As Ireland is a neutral, non-aligned country, European efforts to build up its military capabilities can be politically toxic. References to a “European army” have been particularly detrimental to the debate on strategic autonomy. Nonetheless, Ireland is involved in Permanent Structured Cooperation. Moreover, public support for Irish involvement in European defence efforts has increased, largely due to the United Kingdom’s impending departure from the European Union and the perceived unreliability of the United States. Nonetheless, ESA is not a significant topic in Irish politics.

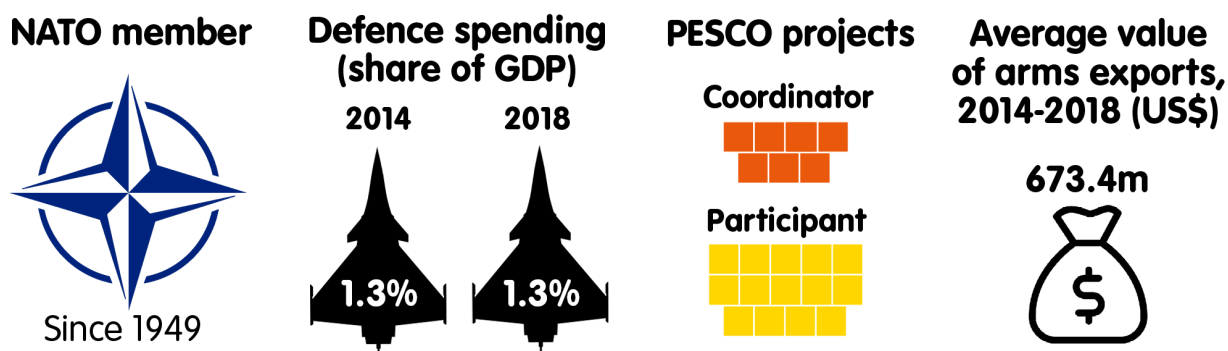
Level of ambition

Ireland believes that no country can respond to the broadening range of global security threats alone. Accordingly, Dublin is making a visible effort to lay the groundwork for constructive Irish engagement with the EU on defence cooperation. Given its neutrality and its strategically secure geographic location, Ireland focuses on crisis management and post-conflict stabilisation in Europe’s neighbourhood rather than on collective territorial defence. The inclusion of any nuclear component in ESA would be highly problematic for Ireland, which regards global nuclear disarmament as a foreign policy goal.

Transatlantic dimension

Ireland believes that economic concerns motivate US criticism of ESA efforts, as they are unlikely to threaten NATO. Washington's apparent unreliability as a partner has strengthened the voices of those in Ireland who support attempts to strengthen Europe's decision-making capabilities and geopolitical influence.

Italy



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Members of Italy's foreign policy and defence community do not directly discuss European strategic autonomy (ESA), but the topic is important to the country in relation to its defence priorities. In fact, as the country's 2015 white paper on defence states, there are two dimensions of defence capabilities that matter in the Italian security and defence strategy: the sovereign competencies that correspond to Italy's need to protect its national security; and the collaborative competencies – technologies and systems – that it implements through cooperation, especially at the European level. Overall, Italy's concept of ESA is limited to the complementarity between national and European priorities.

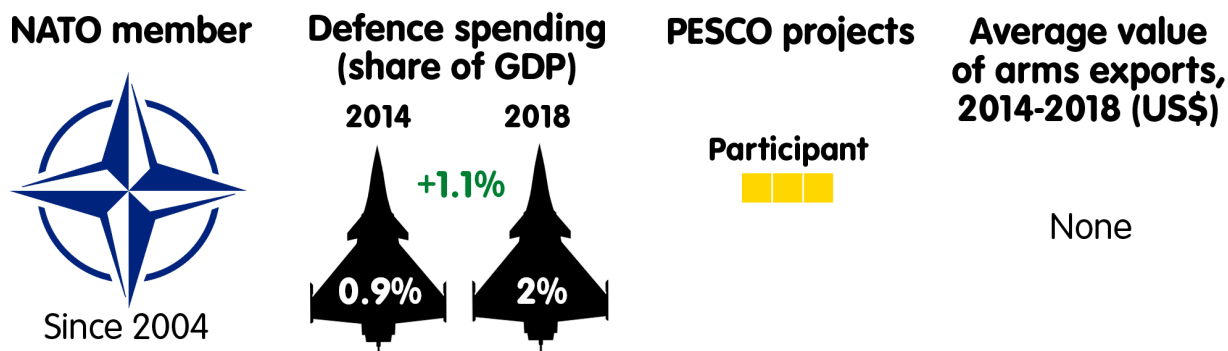
Level of ambition

Italy has merged its national guidelines on foreign policy and defence with its commitments to implement Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund. Italy's engagement with ESA efforts can be traced back to 2016, when it proactively contributed to the launch of the EU Global Strategy. Italy believes that Europe should become more involved in neighbouring regions, as well as sub-Saharan Africa. Italy would support the development of a European system for collective defence – as long as this does not compromise its NATO commitments. For Italian policymakers, it is crucial to pursue ESA through investment in information and decision-making autonomy, as well as autonomy of action. However, most Italian experts believe that Italy has a limited leadership role – and France and Germany crucial roles – in these areas.

Transatlantic dimension

Italy is strongly committed to the transatlantic alliance and does not see ESA efforts as a form of emancipation from US hegemony. Its 2015 white paper on defence and 2018 plurennial document on defence state that ESA is complementary to NATO, which should act with the European Union to reinforce Europe's role as a security provider. Rome believes that such cooperation should focus on new forms of warfare, especially those involving cyber threats. The country also holds that ESA efforts are the best response to US calls for Europe to take up a greater share of the defence burden.

Latvia



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Latvia's public discourse does not deal with European strategic autonomy (ESA) as an independent topic, despite experts' efforts to begin a debate on it. Latvians generally view NATO as a more natural and credible framework than ESA efforts for addressing their primary military concern: territorial defence against Russia.

Level of ambition

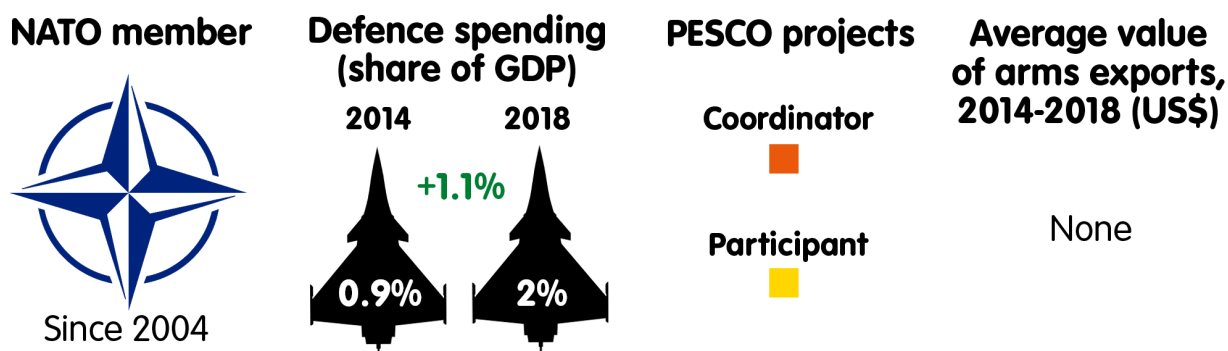
As it is located at the eastern flank of both NATO and EU territory, Latvia is particularly concerned about the Suwalki Corridor as a choke point in a potential Russian land invasion. Yet Latvian officials believe that ESA efforts should have a role in not only collective defence but also post-conflict stabilisation. They see air defence systems as the military capability their country needs most – a capability that, due to its costs, has always been underdeveloped in the Baltic states. They also perceive energy and the information sphere as important aspects of ESA. Latvian defence firms (most of which are small and medium-sized enterprises) have a growing interest in participating in common European defence production.

Transatlantic dimension

Latvian officials believe that collective defence commitments under NATO's Article 5 are enough to ensure European solidarity on defence and security. They also perceive NATO and ESA as compatible

with each other, so long as Europe avoids delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. Latvia believes that the European Union should take US concerns about ESA seriously, to sustain the transatlantic partnership.

Lithuania



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Discussions of European strategic autonomy (ESA) in Lithuania are often limited to the issues of the proposed European army or the initiative's potential to clash with NATO. Viewing Russia as the main threat it faces, Lithuania believes that NATO is an indispensable pillar of its security policy. However, Lithuania is supportive of European integration and, therefore, does not oppose collaboration within ESA. Lithuanian officials conceive of ESA as Europe's freedom to conduct operations but are sceptical about framing it as autonomy in relation to other powers. In fact, Lithuania would oppose any attempt to delink Europe from NATO.

Level of ambition

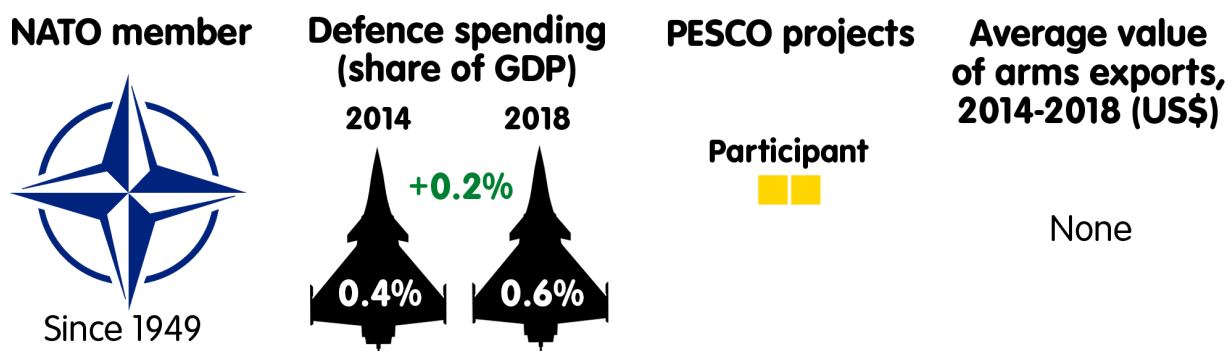
Lithuanian policymakers and policy experts consistently emphasise that NATO must remain the main guarantor of European defence and strongly oppose proposals to create a European army. They believe that ESA efforts should extend to regions neighbouring Europe – as well as sub-Saharan African countries – and should focus on post-conflict stabilisation, crisis management, and first-entry missions. Like many EU citizens, Lithuanians see autonomy of action as more important than decision-making autonomy or information autonomy. As they limit the scope of ESA to Europe's neighbourhood, they believe that the military capacity they need most is highly deployable light equipment. Lithuanian policymakers and policy experts perceive a wide range of non-military issues as being part of ESA: foreign policy, the threat from secondary sanctions, civilian capabilities, energy,

and hostile information operations. Vilnius stresses the importance of cybersecurity and aims to be an important actor in the field. The country advocates for greater investment in intelligence.

Transatlantic dimension

Strongly committed to NATO, Lithuania opposes any attempt to delink, duplicate, or discriminate between its activities and ESA efforts. Thus, Lithuanian officials perceive ESA as a pragmatic tool for Europe's neighbourhood, but never as a substitute for NATO. They see the United States as a key partner in defending their country against Russia. They also believe that Europe should make a greater effort to take into account US sensitivities when developing ESA.

Luxembourg



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Foreign policy discussions in Luxembourg remain superficial, particularly in relation to strategic autonomy. Indeed, the country's foreign policy discourse is mostly limited to the reproduction of statements made by the government or opposition political parties. This is due to the fact that Luxembourg has few military capabilities, relying on NATO as its primary source of defence from external threats. The country's political leaders believe that it should, as far as possible, meet its NATO obligations and simultaneously contribute to European cooperation on defence. Because it has been a NATO member as part of the international order that emerged shortly after the end of the second world war, Luxembourg appears to be reluctant to engage in strategic realignment and to view European defence cooperation as complementary to the alliance. This is reflected in the positions of the country's major political parties.

Level of ambition

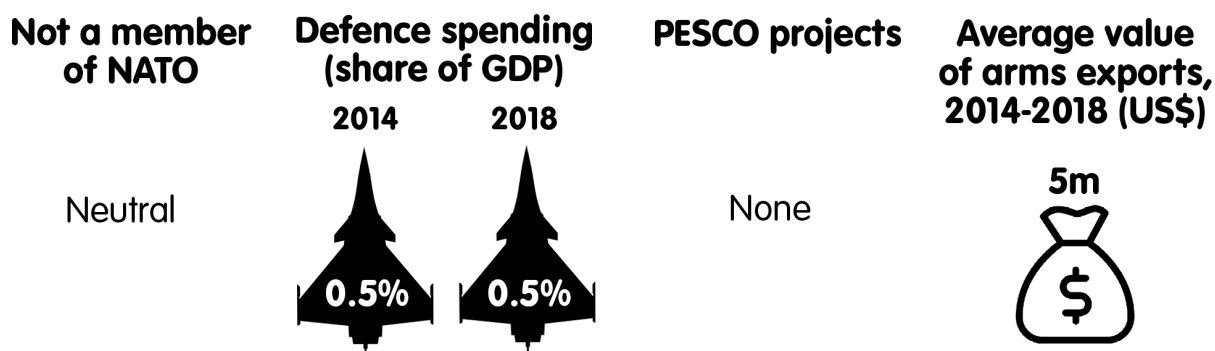
Luxembourg's leaders usually invoke the principle of European strategic autonomy (ESA) in the context of recent US political developments that have cast doubt on the NATO security guarantee, such as the election of President Donald Trump. When discussing ESA, Luxembourg argues that the European Union should not solely rely on the United States to provide Europe's security and defence capabilities but that NATO membership remains its most important means of strategic defence. The country emphasises the need for – but does not position itself at the forefront of – efforts to achieve

strategic autonomy and develop European military capabilities and defence cooperation.

Transatlantic dimension

Luxembourg's defence guidelines repeatedly stress the compatibility between its commitments to the United Nations, NATO, and the EU in its defence policy and objectives. Therefore, Luxembourg seeks to align NATO and European defence objectives, while positioning itself to avoid conflicts between them. Given its limited defence capabilities and resources, the country can make ad hoc contributions to various European or transatlantic initiatives without being forced into difficult strategic choices.

Malta



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Malta's constitutional commitment to neutrality predisposes it to guard against infringements of its sovereignty in national security matters. Thus, the country tends to view discussions of European strategic autonomy (ESA) through the narrow lens of national interest and the management of regional crises. The concept is largely unimportant to Malta's foreign policy.

Level of ambition

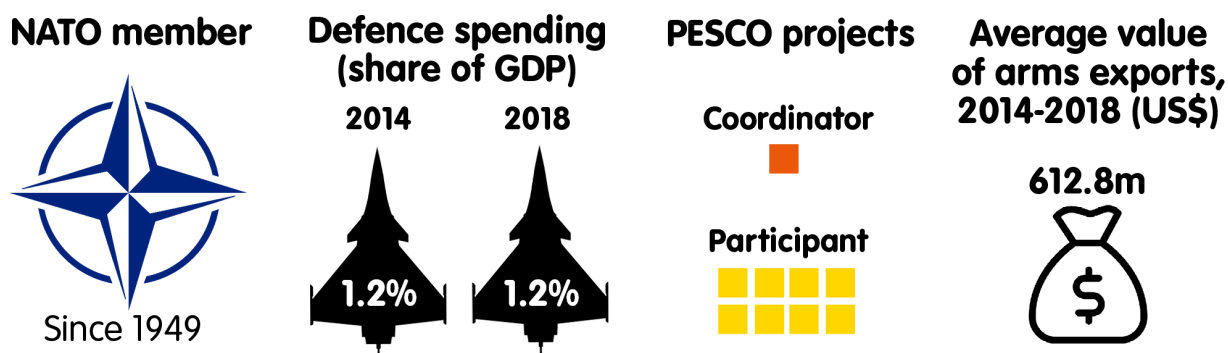
To the extent that Maltese officials and experts hold opinions on ESA, they usually see the immediate European neighbourhood (mostly states on the Mediterranean) as the appropriate area for such initiatives. They believe that ESA should be a particularly useful framework for crisis management. And they are among the few Europeans to consider increases in information autonomy, rather than decision-making autonomy or autonomy of action, as key to pursuing ESA. Reluctant to engage in joint military operations, Maltese politicians avoid commenting on the military capabilities Europe needs to develop to achieve strategic autonomy. However, they consider energy and manipulation of information to be elements of ESA and are also committed to limiting European arms exports.

Transatlantic dimension

Maltese officials believe that ESA efforts and NATO can be compatible, so long as NATO avoids delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. They see American concerns about

ESA as based on a misunderstanding that Europe needs to resolve.

Netherlands



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

The Netherlands is engaged in a wide-ranging debate on European strategic autonomy (ESA). At the centre of the discussion is the relationship that ESA efforts may have with NATO. Dutch policy statements portray ESA as a contested idea that lacks clarity. This explains why the Netherlands took the opportunity to discuss the meaning of the term at an informal meeting of the EU's Council of Ministers in Bucharest in January 2019.

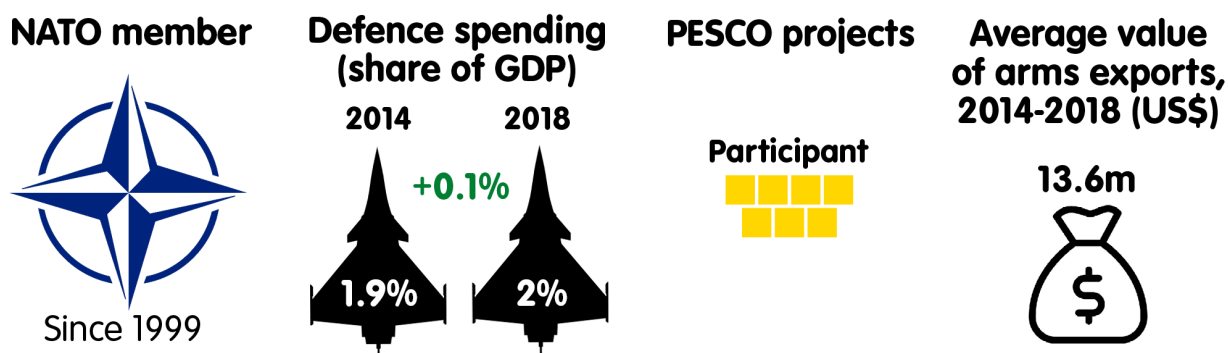
Level of ambition

Dutch officials believe that ESA initiatives should focus on Europe's neighbourhood – and, perhaps, sub-Saharan Africa, could also be envisaged. They see territorial defence as a task reserved for NATO. The Dutch adopt a pragmatic and capability-related approach to developing ESA, prioritising autonomy of action over decision-making autonomy and information autonomy. They view strategic transport and medical evacuation capacity, as well as improvements to military training, as necessary to achieve strategic autonomy. The Netherlands is in favour of European defence industry cooperation, so long as it can also collaborate with non-EU countries and maintain a level playing field in the sector. The country also sees non-military areas such as the economy and energy as elements of ESA. The Netherlands is one of just two European countries that question the need to increase EU investment in intelligence (the other is Sweden). The Dutch perceive this as a national sovereignty issue.

Transatlantic dimension

The Netherlands stresses that NATO should remain the cornerstone of Dutch and European security, and that the pursuit of ESA must not weaken NATO or delink European security from American security. As a consequence, the Dutch delegate nuclear deterrence to NATO and perceive ESA as useful for only post-conflict stabilisation and crisis management in Europe's neighbourhood. The Netherlands also sees an opportunity for ESA initiatives to assist NATO in areas in which the alliance has fewer capabilities or less experience than the European Union, such as counter-terrorism and civilian border patrol.

Poland



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Poland's few discussions of European strategic autonomy (ESA) have focused mainly on its potential to affect transatlantic relations. The Polish government perceives the current push for ESA as resulting from some member states' ambitions to end their dependence on the United States. This raises serious concerns in Warsaw, which has long seen the US security guarantee as crucial to Polish foreign and security policy. The ideological alignment between the Trump administration and the current Polish government is also a factor in these concerns. Poland is one of just six EU member states whose diplomats and defence experts regard ESA as a contentious issue (the others are Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom).

Level of ambition

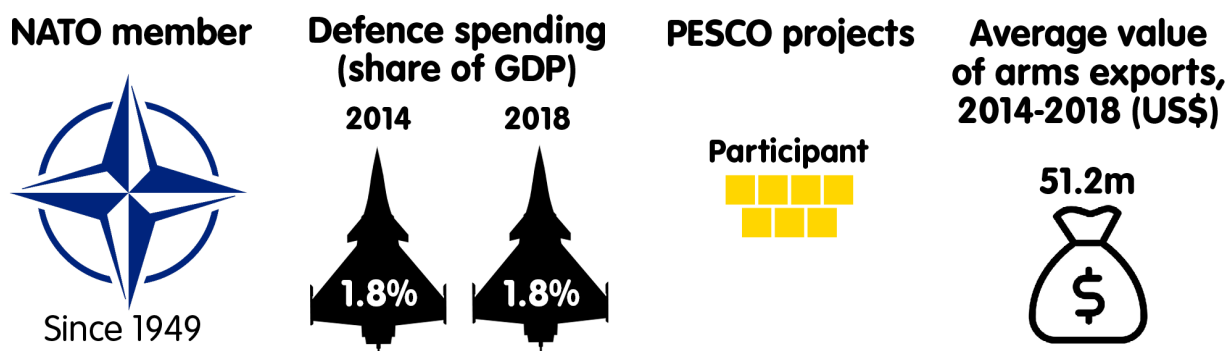
Poland's government believes that ESA should focus not on war-fighting and deterrence but less controversial areas such as post-conflict stabilisation and crisis management. This stems from Warsaw's strong pro-Americanism, as well as its assessment of Europe's military capacity to develop a credible alternative to NATO's collective defence capability. Poland sees ESA efforts as having a role to play in Europe's neighbourhood. And it advocates for better management of existing capabilities, remaining sceptical about the need to develop new military capabilities as part of ESA. The country believes that it is out of the question to involve nuclear deterrence in ESA. This is due partly to its reliance on the US security guarantee and partly to its perception of the French and British nuclear

arsenals as too small for the purpose – as well as uncertainty around Paris’s and London’s willingness to “Europeanise” their deterrence capabilities.

Transatlantic dimension

The Polish government will subscribe to ESA efforts only in so far as they complement NATO. Warsaw believes that they can be compatible, so long as Europe avoids delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. Many other European countries perceive Poland’s considerable engagement with Permanent Structured Cooperation as an effort to gain influence over the initiative’s overall direction and to ensure that EU defence integration does not clash with the NATO commitments. If it gains a new government, Poland will continue to view the US and NATO as pillars of its security policy – but could take a more positive approach to ESA than it does under the current leadership.

Portugal



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Portugal has occasionally discussed European strategic autonomy (ESA). It largely debates the political and operational impact of ESA at the governmental and military levels, and only rarely in parliament, media outlets, or other forums. Most mainstream Portuguese parties – including the governing Socialists, as well as the Social Democrats and the Christian democrats – accept the political value of ESA. The Left Bloc and the Communist Party have both warned against ESA efforts, which they see as the militarisation of the EU.

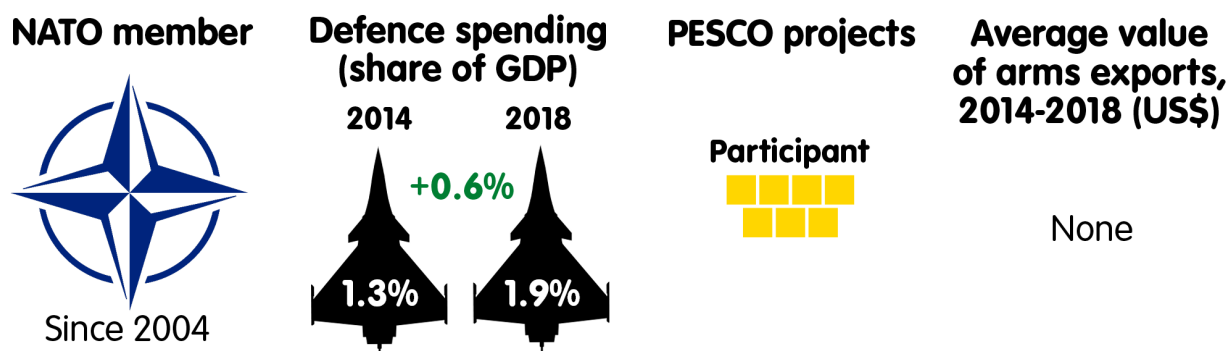
Level of ambition

Portuguese leaders see ESA not as a drive for perfect self-sufficiency but rather as the pursuit of a European Union that has the capacity to decide and act when and where it should. They also regard it as the capacity of not the EU per se but all its member states. Portugal believes that, partly due to the growing tension in international affairs, the EU cannot rely solely on soft power and normative leadership but a variety of military, political, economic, technological, and civilian tools. It believes that Permanent Structured Cooperation is a useful mechanism for reinforcing the standardisation, interoperability, and readiness of member states' armed forces, preparing them for more demanding cooperative missions. Moreover, Lisbon sees ESA efforts as an opportunity to integrate and strengthen the European defence industry.

Transatlantic dimension

Lisbon views ESA as complementary to NATO rather than a poor imitation of it. As the relationship with the United States is important to it, Portugal believes that ESA can only work if it enhances transatlantic security and defence cooperation. Lisbon views NATO as paramount in its foreign and security policy. Portuguese policymakers have made the case for the EU and NATO to work together more often and more effectively. For Portugal, ESA efforts and NATO are compatible if Europe avoids delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. Lisbon has said that ESA should enhance intergovernmental cooperation among member states rather than promote new areas of supranational integration.

Romania



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

In Romania, political elites and policy experts debate European strategic autonomy (ESA) but the public do not. These discussions mostly revolve around its implications for foreign policy, the relationship with the United States, and Romanian defence capabilities. Romanian elites see ESA as important to Europe's consolidation and coordination of its defence policies, but NATO as the only means to protect national security. They believe that Europe has made significant progress towards ESA in raising political awareness of the issue and fostering collaboration on capability-based projects such as Permanent Structured Cooperation.

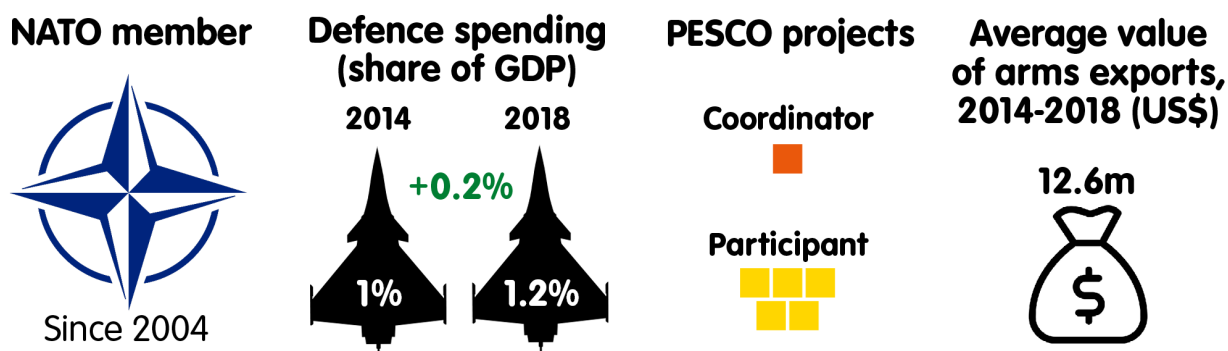
Level of ambition

From the Romanian perspective, the European Union should pursue ESA in its southern and eastern neighbourhood, and sub-Saharan Africa – as well as further afield, but only if it has the capacity to do so. Romania is among the few European countries that see ESA efforts as having a major role in first-entry missions and high-tech operations. For Bucharest, collective defence should be left in the hands of NATO, while ESA initiatives should prioritise military and civilian capabilities and readiness. Romanian officials argue that, in pursuing ESA, it is important to favour stronger EU capabilities. However, they worry that Europe will delink or decouple from the US in other fields. They do not see any value in attempts to add a nuclear component to ESA but favour greater cooperation on intelligence matters.

Transatlantic dimension

Bucharest would be concerned if ESA efforts served as a substitute for NATO or otherwise distanced Romania from NATO and the US. But it believes that ESA and NATO are compatible so long as Europe avoids decoupling, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. For Romanian officials, NATO is irreplaceable in the long term. Thus, they believe that European decision-makers should take US concerns about ESA more seriously than they do now.

Slovakia



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

There are only sporadic discussions of European strategic autonomy (ESA) in Slovakia. But specific issues related to ESA – from Permanent Structured Cooperation to building common capabilities – feature in both public and policy debates. The goal of achieving ESA is only “somewhat important” to Slovakia’s foreign and defence policy, with the Ministry of Defense attaching more importance to it than the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. Partly due to the European Union’s inability to resolve the conflict in Ukraine, Slovakia primarily defines ESA as the autonomy to conduct operations. Bratislava sees attempts to establish decision-making autonomy – and to maintain the political support of France and Germany – as a priority in pursuing ESA.

Level of ambition

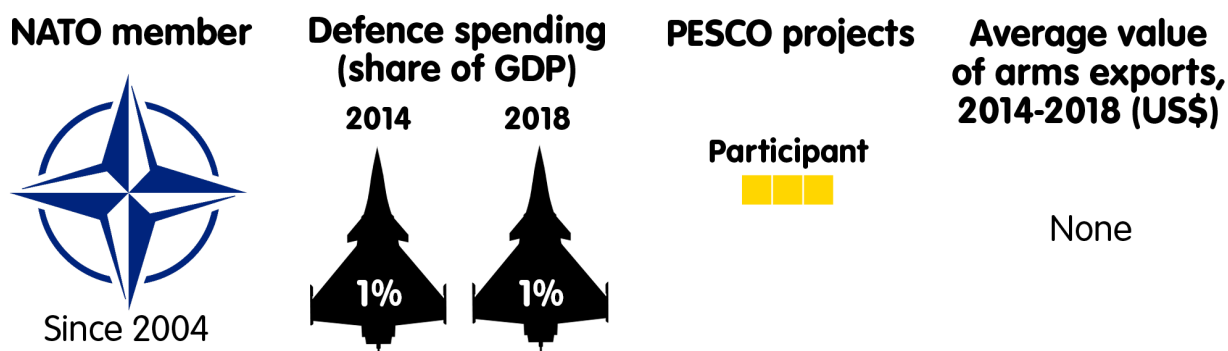
Slovak officials state that Europe is “somewhat moving towards the goal” of ESA in all areas – from political awareness and budgetary matters to operational collaboration. From their perspective, post-conflict stabilisation and crisis management should be the primary focus of ESA efforts, while the EU should develop capabilities that would enable it to intervene in crises near its borders, especially in the Balkans and in eastern Europe. Bratislava believes that nuclear deterrence is beyond the level of ambition that ESA efforts should focus on. Instead, ESA should cover various non-military areas, ranging from foreign policy and economic autonomy to civilian capabilities and energy security. Furthermore, there should be more effort to invest in technological innovation – in areas such as

artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology, and quantum computing.

Transatlantic dimension

Slovakia sees ESA efforts as compatible with NATO, so long as Europe avoids delinking, duplicating, or discriminating between their activities. Like four other EU countries (Bulgaria, France, Italy, and Slovenia), Slovakia regards US concern about ESA initiatives as “strange” because they answer Washington’s calls for Europe to take up a greater share of the defence burden. Indeed, one of the main reasons why Slovakia supports the pursuit of ESA is its recognition of the need to strengthen NATO’s European pillar. Bratislava is somewhat concerned about the idea of prioritising military purchases from European firms – mostly because it could lead to overpricing – so does not see this as important to achieving ESA.

Slovenia



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Slovenian policymakers and policy experts have not discussed European strategic autonomy (ESA) specifically, but they are engaged in a debate about the European Union's security and defence capabilities. They usually frame this in terms of the need for the EU to make a greater contribution to NATO. They regard more efficient decision-making on the EU level, and efforts to strengthen the EU's capabilities, as crucial to achieving this goal.

Level of ambition

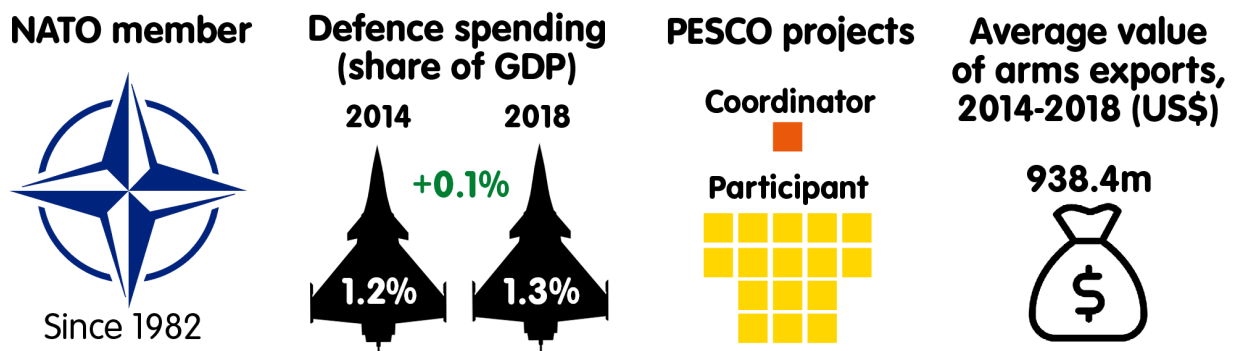
From the Slovenian perspective, ESA initiatives should be confined to the EU's neighbourhood – especially the western Balkans, followed by eastern Europe and the Middle East. Ljubljana regards ESA as a particularly useful framework for post-conflict stabilisation and crisis management, advocating for the development of European military capabilities in areas such as airlift. Slovenia would like ESA efforts to focus on research and development, seeing this as an opportunity for its companies.

Transatlantic dimension

According to Slovenian officials, ESA and NATO are perfectly compatible with each other, allowing for a division of tasks between the two. They regard NATO as a collective defence system that protects the EU from external threats, believing that ESA initiatives can enable Europe to play a stronger role

within the alliance and to become a security actor in its neighbourhood. As such, Slovenian officials have been surprised by US concerns about ESA, regarding it as the best way to answer Washington's calls for Europe to take up a greater share of the defence burden.

Spain



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Spanish officials see European strategic autonomy (ESA) as a “somewhat important goal”. Like most EU member states, Spain defines strategic autonomy as the freedom to both conduct operations and to operate independently of other powers. However, Spanish officials are aware of their lack of national strategic autonomy and, as such, favour engagement with multilateral defence initiatives. Spain is one of only a few member states that see Europe as having made significant progress towards strategic autonomy in budgetary matters (probably due to its small national defence budget). The country also believes that Europe has made similar progress in capability-related projects such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and bilateral initiatives. Nevertheless, Spain always seeks to maintain a balance between the European Union and NATO. For Madrid, ESA goes beyond military issues to encompass the EU’s capacity to protect its interests in economics, civilian capabilities, and technological innovation.

Level of ambition

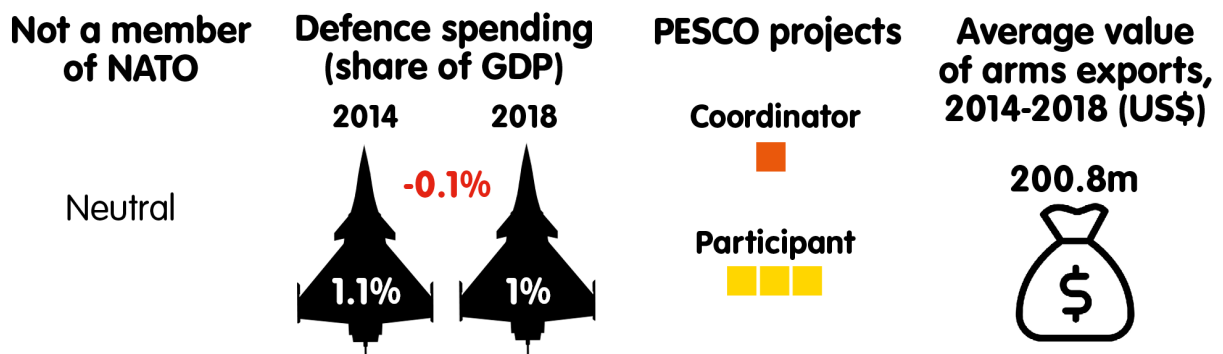
Viewing NATO as key to its security policy, Spain believes that ESA should focus on post-conflict stabilisation and crisis management in the EU’s neighbourhood, particularly the Mediterranean. In this, Spanish officials see information autonomy, autonomy of action, and decision-making autonomy as equally important. They advocate for the establishment of an EU military headquarters as a way to improve coordination between member states. And they regard investment in strategic deployment

and intelligence capabilities as necessary to achieving ESA, prioritising research and development in new technologies. Spanish officials believe that nuclear deterrence should not be part of ESA efforts. Spain is one of only seven countries that view greater solidarity on defence and security as necessary to achieving ESA.

Transatlantic dimension

The main discussion of ESA in Spain concerns the relationship with the United States – partly because its decision to join NATO was crucial in its post-Franco political transition. Spain relies on the NATO security guarantee in defending against external threats. It is also among the one-third of EU member states that see NATO and ESA as compatible with each other. Some Spanish officials even advocate for strengthening the European pillar of NATO. Madrid believes Washington's objection to ESA initiatives is driven purely by economic concern, given that they could help establish an autonomous European defence technological and industrial base.

Sweden



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

Sweden avoids using the term “European strategic autonomy” (ESA) and has a complex position on the concept. This is because the country fears that the pursuit of ESA could damage its bilateral relationship with the United States (which has grown stronger in recent years) and could threaten the European Union’s intergovernmental decision-making system. Stockholm recently emphasised operational autonomy in its conception of ESA, stating that the “EU should act with our partners [whenever] possible, but on its own if necessary”. However, Sweden has always had a complex, ambiguous relationship with European defence cooperation, acting as an engaged sceptic and mostly voting in line with the United Kingdom. However, Brexit has led Sweden to stress the importance of EU cohesion and operational autonomy like never before.

Level of ambition

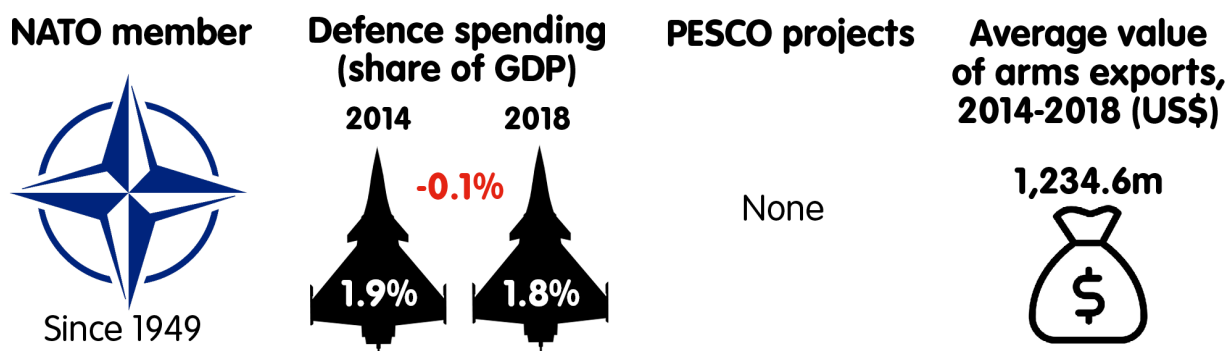
Although it is a non-aligned country, Sweden fears that ESA initiatives will duplicate those of NATO, arguing that territorial defence is not a task for the EU. Stockholm believes that these initiatives should only take place in Europe’s neighbourhood and, where possible, sub-Saharan Africa. However, it advocates for the EU to take on operations in the space and cyber domains, and to “independently carry out the most demanding missions”, such as post-conflict stabilisation, crisis management, first-entry missions, and higher-end operations. The country also believes that intelligence operations should largely be the province of national governments, but that the EU could improve its intelligence

capabilities to undertake demanding missions and address future crises. Sweden aims to protect the EU's intergovernmental decision-making system while also minimising the cost of doing so.

Transatlantic dimension

Sweden believes that cooperation with the US is central to European security and that cooperation within the EU should reinforce NATO. The country fears that ESA initiatives will duplicate the activities of the alliance and the US or otherwise delink Europe from them. Accordingly, Sweden maintains that collective defence is a task not for the EU but for the transatlantic alliance. To avoid duplicating NATO activities, Stockholm argues, the EU should not establish a European army nor add more layers of bureaucracy to its defence efforts. Sweden argues that the EU should take its relationship with the US into account as it moves towards strategic autonomy.

United Kingdom



Attitude towards European strategic autonomy

The United Kingdom sees European strategic autonomy (ESA) as a contentious goal at best, given the current confusion around Brexit and the country's future role in Europe. In theory, the UK wants EU member states to strengthen their military capabilities, if only so they can contribute more to NATO and assuage US concerns. Yet it is not in the UK's interest for member states to grow closer to one another in this area, potentially shutting the UK out of defence projects. Because of this, the country is closely monitoring the developments on the continent. However, London appears to have little confidence that the European Union's efforts to strengthen its defence capabilities – including through ESA initiatives – will amount to much.

Level of ambition

The UK must walk a tightrope between its historical partnership with the United States and its new relationship with the EU. It is unclear what role the UK can play in ESA, given other member states' diverging views of the question. The UK wants the EU to avoid taking over the responsibilities of NATO or duplicating the alliance's activities – most importantly, in collective territorial defence. Thus, the UK would like the EU to focus on crisis management and post-conflict stabilisation in Europe's neighbourhood, as a complement to NATO operations.

Transatlantic dimension

The UK primarily frames the debate on ESA within its relationship with the US. London fears – and,

to some extent, has always feared – that the EU’s ambitions for strategic autonomy (particularly in the context of French and German preferences for establishing greater defence capabilities) will weaken the transatlantic alliance. This concern has grown with Brexit, which has undermined the UK’s capacity to shape the European debate. The Trump administration’s unclear position on NATO, and on alliances in general, only makes this situation more difficult for the UK to handle.

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