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Towards an autonomous European defense? A comparative analysis of French, Polish and German perspectives in the post-Brexit era

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses why the EU has failed to become a defense actor independent from the US in the post-Brexit era. Applying the “supporter/spoiler/shirker” trilogy to the European context, the article highlights persistent divergences towards European integration in the defense sector in the post-Brexit EU. Accordingly, first, the article discusses the key differences between supporter, spoiler and shirker roles in world politics. Second, it focuses on France that tends to act as a persistent spoiler of NATO, while remaining an ardent supporter of an autonomous Europe of defense. Third, the article discusses the case of Poland that remains a loyal supporter of NATO and acts as a spoiler of the European defense initiatives. Finally, the article concentrates on Germany which acts as a shirker that is oscillating between NATO and the EU.

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Introduction

This article aims to tackle the overriding question of why the EU is still far from exerting itself as a strong defense actor independent from the US in the post-Brexit era. Over the last decade, several developments threatening regional and global stability have raised much debate about the EU’s need to adjust to the “new realities” facing Europe and the world. They include the withdrawal of the UK – a nuclear power that is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council – from EU membership, an increasing Russian foreign policy activism and conflict with Ukraine, the ongoing Syrian conflict and tensions within NATO due to diverging threat perceptions (especially, with Turkey), increasing criticisms of the US administrations about burden-sharing in Europe’s defense, Trump administration’s transactional alliance policy undermining the Atlantic Alliance and deepening the transatlantic rift, and a widespread perception about the emergence of a new (multipolar or non-polar) world order, among others. Acknowledging its need for greater strategic autonomy from the US, the EU is taking various initiatives towards deeper integration in the defense sector.

European officials including the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen claimed that Brexit would only empower the EU given the fact that

Britain as a strong Atlanticist would no longer stand as a stumbling block against the EU's defense integration (DW, 2019a). She also called for an independent European army asserting that Europe must learn the "language of power" (DW, 2019a). Now that Britain is out, one can expect a more assertive and unified EU in its defence policy. Besides, the rising uncertainty over the future of the Atlantic Alliance in the age of Donald Trump further motivates Europeans to tilt towards greater strategic autonomy. Trump's persistent demands for burden sharing with Europe in defense matters and his reluctance to maintain the US leadership in NATO provide a greater impetus for EU members to call for a powerful Europe in world politics. However, the EU is still far from becoming a credible defense actor autonomous from NATO. Recently, Europe-wide debates on European defense autonomy have been revitalized by French President Emmanuel Macron's controversial claim that NATO was becoming "brain-dead" (Economist, 2019). Drawing on the political discourses, key strategic documents and political analyses on European defense in France, Germany and Poland, the article will apply a new analytical framework that transcends the traditional "Europeanist vs Atlanticist" dichotomy.

Employing the trilogy of "supporter", "spoiler" and "shirker" put forward by the scholarship on rising powers, the article highlights three diverging attitudes towards European integration in the defense sector in the post-Brexit EU. Accordingly, the article focuses on the cases of France (spoiler of NATO and supporter of the EU), Poland (supporter of NATO and spoiler of the EU), and Germany (shirker between NATO and the EU). The perspectives of these three EU member states have proved influential in the development of European defense integration especially from the Ukraine crisis onwards. Acting as the "Weimar Triangle", France, Poland and Germany played an active role on behalf of the EU to "negotiate a political compromise and broker an agreement" to resolve the Ukraine crisis (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020, p. 16). Therefore, the divergence and/or convergence in their perspectives will largely determine the fate of the "Europe of defense".

By applying the "supporter/spoiler/shirker" trilogy to the European context, this study bridges the literature on rising powers with European security studies. While the former focuses on the non-Western states' increasing contestations against the US and the West in general, the latter suggests a closer focus on the transatlantic rift that is widening in the defense sector in the Trump era. Rather than taking the US and the West as a unified front that enjoys a shared predominance in the current global order, the article points to the rising contestations of the US hegemony among its European allies, including not only Europeanists like France but also Atlanticists such as Germany and Poland. By demonstrating that even the NATO allies of the US are divided among themselves in terms of "supporter", "spoiler" and "shirker" roles, the study will also contribute to a better understanding of the debates on Europe's regional integration and transcend the dichotomous accounts based on Atlanticism vs Europeanism.

The composition of the article is fourfold. First, the article reviews the main differences between supporter, spoiler and shirker roles in world politics in terms of motivations and strategies. Second, it focuses on France that tends to act as a persistent spoiler of NATO aiming to de-legitimize the US, while remaining an ardent supporter of an autonomous Europe of defense. Third, the article discusses the case of Poland that remains a loyal supporter of NATO and acts as a spoiler of the European defense initiatives. Finally, the article concentrates on Germany which acts as a shirker that is oscillating between NATO and the

EU. The diverse stances taken by key European states delay the development of European defense initiatives and limit the extent and scope of European defense autonomy from NATO. For instance, they have led to delays as in the case of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and confined European defense integration to *ad hoc*, consensus-based and differentiated cooperation mechanisms (Biscop, 2018). They have also led to multiple and conflicting interpretations of European “strategic autonomy” which further restrict their capability to act independently from NATO (Fiott, 2018).

The trilogy of supporter, spoiler and shirker in world politics

According to the literature on rising powers, the changing balance of power in the international system and the perceived decline of the US leadership have led to different roles among lesser powers as “supporters”, “spoilers” and “shirkers” (Schweller & Pu, 2011; Stephen, 2012; Goh, 2019; Newman & Zala, 2018). While the US allies such as Japan, Germany and Australia continue to support the US-led world order, others become “spoilers” who seek to destabilize the existing order by creating deadlocks in regional and global governance institutions (Stephen, 2012, p. 296). Spoilers aim at “changing the nature and purpose of major institutions, or introducing a new shared subjective framework” (Goh, 2019, p. 624). Therefore, they seek to forge anti-hegemonic cooperation at regional and institutional levels (Stephen, 2012). One of the main concerns of spoilers is the overrepresentation of the US/West in the current world order (Newman & Zala, 2018). Hence, by holding central places in the established organizations (such as a permanent membership in the UN Security Council), spoilers increase their agenda-setting power, promote their preferences and contain or balance the US/Western predominance from within (Cooper & Parlar Dal, 2016; Stephen, 2012). Hence, by remaining within the US-led organization, they increase their ability to put a brake on the US- and Western-led expansionist and ambitious initiatives.

Besides, regional challengers seek to “complicat[e] and delegitimiz[e] the hegemon’s exercise of power” in their region (Goh, 2019, p. 623). A spoiler’s “delegitimation strategy” relies on: (1) a “rhetoric of resistance” that seeks to “name and shame” the hegemon and put its moral leadership into question; and (2) “cost-imposing strategies” such as denying the hegemon’s access to their national markets or military bases or voting against the hegemon’s proposals at the UN and other international platforms. In response, this article argues that supporters pursue a “re-legitimization strategy” as a counter measure to negate the ill-effects of the spoiler activism against the hegemon. Unlike spoilers who feel entrapped by the hegemon, supporters exhibit a fear of abandonment by the hegemon. Therefore, they adopt a (1) “rhetoric of approval” emphasizing in their discourses why the hegemon is indispensable for international security, and (2) take “cost-reducing actions” to strengthen strategic ties with the hegemon. Supporters of the hegemon might even act as spoilers within rival institutions to prevent them from undermining the authority of the hegemon.

Schweller and Pu (2011, p. 49) differentiates between the “spoilers” who find the US-led world order illegitimate in normative terms and the “rightful resisters” who contest the uneven application of the rules in the existing order. In other words, “A rising power can try to reshape or replace (1) the form (or social structure) and (2) the content (or social compact), of the hegemonic order” (Goh, 2019, p. 641). Yet, today’s “rightful

resistors” may become tomorrow’s “spoilers” or “supporters” because their intentions are elusive (Schweller & Pu, 2011, p. 52). In this context, Goh (2019, p. 623) explains that the realist conceptions of rising power strategies “miss significant inbetween choices geared toward order-related goals rather than dyadic aims vis-a-vis one great power or another”. For instance, China embraces a double-track strategy. It complies with the existing order in order to legitimize its rise, while resisting certain norms and institutions within the order that it perceives as illegitimate (Goh, 2019). Moreover, rising powers like China and Russia contest the US-led world order while still relying on the US commitment to shoulder the heavy burden of the ailing post-WWII multilateral arrangements (Goh, 2019; Schweller & Pu, 2011). They often fall in an “in-between category” of “shirker” that is neither fully supporter nor fully spoiler (Schweller & Pu, 2011). Shirkers seek higher status in the international system while remaining reluctant to shoulder additional responsibilities in regional and global terms (Schweller & Pu, 2011, p. 42).

France as spoiler of NATO and supporter of the EU

The alliance of France with the US was called a “cold alliance”, an “improbable partnership”, a “troubled and uncertain friendship” (Cizel & von Hlatky, 2014). The reintegration of France into NATO’s integrated command in 2009 and French President Macron’s 2017 speech raised debates about whether France was moving towards “Atlanticism” (Valášek, 2017). However, Macron’s emphasis on European “strategic autonomy” and his support for a “true European army” implied a continuation of “Euro-Gaullist continentalism” (Sakwa, 2015, p. 7). French strategy transcends the Cold War’s bipolar structure and relies on a “dual strategy” of increasing French national power by bolstering an autonomous Europe of defense in an emerging multipolar world (The French Ministry of Defense, 2017, pp. 14, 54).

Macron states that “We need a Europe which defends itself better alone, without just depending on the United States”. (Euractiv, 2018). For him, the US does not share Europe’s concerns and problems due to its geographical distance and cultural difference (Macron, 2020b). Europe faces increasing instability in its neighbourhood due to the violent conflicts in Georgia, Libya, Syria, Sahel and Ukraine, refugee crisis, Islamist terrorism and cyber-threats (The French Ministry of Defense, 2017, p. 19). European security is not only jeopardized by the rise of Russia and China but also the “crisis of multilateralism” –undermining the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, the Open Skies Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF)– implicating the US. Accordingly, Europeans must take greater responsibility for their own collective defence and decrease their security dependence on NATO.

Referring to the US and Russian abandonment of the INF treaty, Macron insisted on the necessity to establish an autonomous European defense:

We have to protect ourselves with respect to China, Russia and even the United States ... When I see President Trump announcing that he’s quitting a major disarmament treaty which was formed after the 1980s Euromissile crisis that hit Europe, who is the main victim? Europe and its security. (Macron quoted in Chrisafis, 2018)

As America’s “oldest ally” in times of war and one of its worst adversaries in peacetime (Cizel & von Hlatky, 2014), France plays the “spoiler” role in NATO facing new security

threats and uncertainty. In line with “spoiler” strategy, it reintegrated into the military integrated command of NATO in order to constrain the expansion of NATO’s widening and deepening. It defended the preservation of NATO’s original *raison d’être* and *modus operandi* as a territorially-limited traditional collective defense system as opposed to the transformation of NATO into a global organization by expanding its membership to Japan and Australia and extending its missions to crisis-management and post-war reconstruction (Mazzucelli, 2013). As a spoiler in NATO, France used various “cost-imposing strategies” against the US hegemon by denying NATO bases on French territory and by refusing to participate in the NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group.

Besides, France frequently uses a “rhetoric of resistance” in terms of denouncing the US and NATO policies as undermining European security. Apart from the US retrenchment and “America First” policy, Trump’s reluctance to emphasize the centrality of NATO’s Article 5 for collective defense and his verbal attacks against NATO as “obsolete” have increased the uncertainty over the future of the transatlantic alliance (Wright, 2017). Furthermore, Turkey as the second largest standing military force in NATO purchased Russian missile defense system and conducted military operations against Syrian Kurdish forces reflecting an internal clash of strategic visions within NATO (The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019, p. 36). The President of the Foreign Affairs Committee at French National Assembly asks “does NATO still exist?” referring to the reticence of the NATO Secretary-General vis-à-vis Turkey’s unilateral operations in Syria (The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019). A member of the committee (Guy Teissier) suggests that NATO has contributed to the deterioration of the Middle Eastern and Eastern European security problems (The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019).

In particular, the NATO’s enlargement prospects towards Georgia and Ukraine was perceived by Russia as threatening Russian national security. French parliamentarian, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, argues that NATO is no longer useful and it harms European security rather than protecting it (The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019, p. 55). Trump administration’s unpredictable foreign policy increases French fear of entrapment into a US-provoked war in their neighbourhood. Both French Defense ministry and President Macron suggest establishing strategic dialogue and “constructive relationship” with both Russia and China, two rising powers who affect regional security in Europe, Asia and Africa (The French Ministry of Defense, 2017, pp. 42–43). According to Macron (2020a), a European-Russian strategic dialogue is necessary in a time when NATO fails to tame Russia and its sanctions policy towards Russia hurts Europe too. He argues that it is too risky for Europeans to confront an increasingly powerful Russia without a credible European defense capability (Macron, 2020a). Macron approaches Russia as a “necessary evil” to counter-balance the US hegemony. Although he perceives Russia as a credible security threat to Europe –unlike Polish leadership–, he believes in the possibility of peaceful co-existence with Russia through strategic dialogue in an emerging multi-polar order. Therefore, a common European defense would do much more than merely deterring Russia locally in terms of conducting global missions independent from the US.

As part of its “rhetoric of resistance”, France criticizes the US-led “burden-sharing” debate that has become the main issue in NATO agenda under Obama and Trump administrations. Instead of focusing on the need to revise the 2010 NATO Strategic Plan in line with the new security threats facing Europe, NATO succumbs to internal conflicts over “burden-sharing”. France fails to comply with the NATO norm of raising national

defense spending from 1.8 to minimum 2 per cent of GDP that is fiercely advocated by the US. Seeing the NATO norm of 2 per cent as serving the US aim to increase the US arms exports to Europe, French Parliamentarians warn against European military dependence on the US defense industry. Without an independent defense industry, Europeans lack the ability to conduct autonomous military operations without the US consent and they get penalized for defiance against US operations through US arms embargoes (The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019, p. 56).

According to many French parliamentarians, it is uncertain whether NATO can survive a US-Russia conflict (The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019, p. 36). The main reason is the divergence of strategic priorities and threat perceptions among NATO members. Baltic member states of NATO are primarily concerned about a conflict with Russia whereas Southern European NATO members perceive greater threat perceptions deriving from transnational terrorism and political instability in the Mediterranean region (The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019, p. 35). In the meantime, Turkey threatens to block NATO initiatives to enhance the Baltic and Polish defense unless NATO officially recognizes the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG as terrorists (Brzozowski, 2019). Given the internal divisions and weaknesses of the NATO alliance, France suggests that Europe can play an important role as a security-provider if it develops autonomous military capabilities, including the ability to intervene in medium intensity conflicts independently from NATO. According to Macron (2020a), a European Defense Union that takes responsibility for Europe's security would be useful for NATO too. It would not be seen as an alternative to NATO but as a complementary pillar of European defense (Macron, 2020a). Yet, as a French parliamentarian reminds, a more capable Europe would need NATO less (The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019).

In addition to delegitimizing the hegemonic organization through a "rhetoric of resistance" and cost-imposing strategies, spoilers seek central positions in that organization in order to reshape it from within. Accordingly, rather than abrogating its NATO alliance, France sought to attain a more central place within the NATO structures. This led France to actively contribute to post-Cold War NATO operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya and return to the military integrated command of NATO in 2009. With its active participation in NATO, France sought to "Europeanize" the NATO structures trying to take over the leadership role from the US and the UK. By reintegrating to NATO's military command, France also aimed to quell any concerns about a possible competition between NATO and the developing European defense integration (French Delegation to NATO, 2019). While some parliamentarians who remain disillusioned with the US predominance still call for withdrawing from the NATO's military wing again, the majority believes that France should try to increase its influence over NATO decisions from within (Lasconjarias, 2014; The Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019, p. 58).

Furthermore, spoilers establish counter-hegemonic alliances and create parallel organizations. Viewing itself as a "rightful resistor" against the US, France seeks to establish counter-hegemonic alliances with European countries that are increasingly skeptical of NATO's future. It takes both bilateralist and regionalist initiatives in the defense sector, seeking to recruit the UK and Germany that are "key European allies" and the countries that can contribute to the development of European defense industry and operational capability such as Italy and Spain. It strongly supports the EU-led initiatives such

PESCO, Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and European Defense Fund but it does not limit itself with the EU scope. It also develops and initiates complementary projects such as the 2017 European Intervention Initiative that is open to non-EU European states. Accordingly, France is a “supporter” of deepening European integration in terms of forging a common European strategic culture, defense industry and operational capability that would be autonomous from the US. It emphasizes the need to abandon the “unanimity rule” that becomes a hurdle against European adjustment to the new security environment (Macron, 2020a).

During the 2020 Munich Security Conference Macron insisted on the need to Europeanize the European defense policy as “we are entering a new era” (Macron, 2020a). He stated that Europe needs to develop “European” – “not transatlantic” – policy towards the Mediterranean and Russia in particular. Explaining that the economic crises and the migration crisis in Europe have reinforced the North–South and East–West divides within the European community, Macron argued in favour of a “multi-speed Europe” where the able and willing European “core countries” such as France and Germany could move faster in defense integration at European level. He insists that Europe cannot remain a “junior partner” of the US and should not lag behind other powers that are increasingly investing in armaments technology. He also suggests that French nuclear power can serve as a central pillar of the European security architecture in the post-Brexit era, which implies that France can pool its sovereignty over its nuclear policy with its European allies (Macron, 2020b). Yet, French emphasis on its “force de frappe” conflicts with German nuclear pacifism (Krotz, 2015, p. 92).

Overall, France adopted a “supporter” stance towards European defense autonomy relying on power-maximization strategy. As a spoiler of NATO-led security order in Europe, it stresses both the failure of the US leadership and the growing risk of entrapment into a US war against Russia. It therefore adopts a power-based approach to European defense integration, which implies increasing the European collective capability to produce armament and conduct military operations autonomously from NATO.

Poland as supporter of NATO and spoiler of the EU

Poland remains a staunch “supporter” of the Atlantic Alliance led by the US. The reason for such commitment lies in the historical threat perceptions against both Russia and Germany (Zięba, 2019, pp. 16–24). Located “in the vicinity of the most important European centres of potential and actual conflicts”, Poland had long been struggling to guarantee its security (Reeves, 2019, p. 1147). Hence, Polish Atlanticism is mostly threat-based and heavily motivated by security maximization. Regaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland chose to be associated with the well-established security umbrella of NATO rather than an infant security mechanism within the EU. It thus prefers a security dependence on the US as long as the US remains committed to defend Poland and Europe against Russia. In the post-9/11 period, Polish government demonstrated its attachment to the US by participating in the 2003 Iraqi war despite the protests of France and Germany.

Yet, Poland’s support for the 2003 Iraqi war did not yield tangible favours from the US such as visa waivers (Chappell, 2018, p. 216). After EU membership in May 2004, Poland aimed to play an active role within the EU’s security and defense structure. In particular,

between 2007 and 2014, the Polish leadership led by the Europeanist Donald Tusk showed disillusionment with the Atlantic Alliance in response to the NATO's and the US' failure to show a resolute stance against Russia's acts of revisionism in Georgia in 2008 and then in Ukraine and Crimea in 2014 (Kaminska, 2020, p. 66). In response, Poland pursued *rap-prochement* with the EU and showed great potential for becoming a leading member of the CSDP during this period (Chappell, 2018, p. 208). Poland was actively involved in the EUFOR overseas operations, acted as a leading figure in the EU's recent battlegroup concept and signed the Weimar Plus declaration of 15 November 2012 arguing that "We need more Europe also on defence matters. We are committed to work together in this direction". Some analysts argued that Polish Atlanticism was pragmatic and volatile and that Poland had shifted its loyalty to the EU (Chappell, 2018; Kaminska, 2020).

During its 2013 EU presidency, Poland helped the CSDP be discussed at the European Council for the first time since 2008 (Chappell, 2018, pp. 215–220). It refused to participate in the 2011 NATO operation in Libya which was seen as a significant departure from Atlanticism. Polish decision-makers mainly believed that their participation in previous overseas operations did not bring Poland much security gains, while "the security environment in Eastern Europe had deteriorated significantly in recent years" due to the increasing Russian revisionism (Reeves, 2019, p. 1159). Therefore, Poland tilted towards Europeanism when Polish decision-makers perceived a marked decline in the NATO's deterrence capability against Russia. However, this "Europeanist moment" in Polish foreign policy proved short-lived since the conservative take over of the Polish government by the Law and Justice party (PiS) helped rejuvenate the relations with the US from 2015 onwards. The EU's criticisms against the authoritarian practices compromising rule of law and civil rights in Poland pushed the PiS government to even more eagerly reach out to the US (Debating Europe, 2018).

The current Polish leadership explicitly reflects a strong image as "supporter" of the US leadership in the Euro-Atlantic community. They are not necessarily disgruntled with the Trump administration's reluctance towards the Atlantic Alliance. Rather than a lack of US commitment to NATO, they see a "lack of reciprocity on the part of some European allies" (Shotter, 2019). The Polish government fulfils its supporter role through a two-pronged re-legitimization strategy in response to France's spoiler efforts undermining NATO. First, countering the French "rhetoric of resistance", Polish decision-makers adopt a "rhetoric of approval" exalting the US-led Atlantic alliance and underscoring how indispensable the US is for European security. For instance, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki often stresses in his press statements why Europe should never abandon the US: "The US has always supported Europe, and if it was not for the help of the US, Europe would not have liberated itself from the German Nazi occupation" (Shotter, 2019). A recent report on the Polish view of the CSDP clearly indicates Poland's "rhetoric of approval" towards NATO while denigrating the CSDP as complementary at best: "[T]he CSDP has been considered an additional security mechanism for Poland, complementing the national defence capacity, membership in NATO and strategic partnership with the US" (Terlikowski, 2018, p. 2). The report also stresses Poland's desire for the CSDP to only focus on tackling "asymmetric and non-military threats to European security which could not (and should not) be tackled by NATO" (Terlikowski, 2018, p. 2).

Secondly, Poland takes “cost-reducing actions” to reconnect the US into European security with the promise of more equitable burden-sharing in Europe’s defense. The Polish president Andrzej Duda and the US President Trump signed a joint agreement in June 2019 authorizing the US to station 1000 more troops in the Polish soil in addition to 4500 already present with the objective of providing “additional defense and deterrence capabilities in Eastern Europe” against Russia (Lopez, 2019). The Polish government even invited the US to establish a permanent military base in Poland to be named “Fort Trump” and funded by the Polish money up to \$2 Billion (DW, 2018a). An increased US military presence in Poland is even supported by Radoslaw Sikorski, the former Polish Foreign Minister of the so-called “Europeanist” Tusk’s cabinet between 2007 and 2014. Declaring his full support for the Polish demand of a new US base, Sikorski stresses that Russia remains “the only conceivable threat to Poland” and Europe (DW, 2018b). The reaction of a Russian official confirms that the Russian threat is real: “the territory of Poland would become a clear target for a retaliatory strike, if there was suddenly an attack on [Russia]” (Tsvetkova & Osborn, 2019).

Another example of Poland’s cost-reducing actions is that it stands as one of the few NATO member states that meet the 2% threshold for military spending highlighting its strong commitment to NATO. The Polish government even frames France as a “spoiler” claiming that France deliberately fails to meet this threshold to destabilize the Atlantic Alliance (Shotter, 2019). Also, it disagrees with the Germany’s stance shirking some of its responsibilities towards NATO. Poland’s 2019 bilateral agreement with the US was seen as an Atlanticist answer to Germany’s call for “Europe United” against Trump’s “America First” (Buras & Janning, 2018).

While it is a strong “supporter” of the Atlantic Alliance against the rising Russian threat, Poland under the PiS government acts as a “spoiler” within the EU preventing it from reaching autonomous capabilities to undermine NATO. Accordingly, the PiS government cancelled its predecessor’s order of French Caracal helicopters, joined PESCO at the last minute and demanded non-EU member states such as the US, Norway and the UK to join PESCO (Buras & Janning, 2018, pp. 14–16). That’s why France did not invite Poland to join its extra-EU European Intervention Initiative. It is, therefore, no surprise Poland stands against a future European defense with capabilities independent from NATO and the US. Both former Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło and the current President Duda dismiss any attempts to build up an independent European defense as a threat to the deterrence and defense potential of NATO (Kunz, 2020). Protesting Macron’s comments about NATO’s “brain-death”, Polish political elites find his quest for building an autonomous European defense unrealistic and some even call Macron’s vision “suicidal for Poland” (Kunz, 2020). Prime Minister Morawiecki particularly opposes Macron’s call for conciliation with Russia and claims such partnership would only help finance “Russian weapons and Russian armour” (Shotter, 2019). Morawiecki argues that Macron makes such “irresponsible” remarks since “he does not feel the hot breath of the Russian bear on his neck” (Shotter, 2019).

Morawiecki’s remarks firmly emphasize Poland’s threat-based approach to alliance. Russia is still the most important threat for Poland and Polish political elite fears that an independent European defense union would not only fail to deter Russia, but also weaken NATO’s capability to do so. Therefore, unlike France, Poland is far from seeking to decrease its security dependence on the US. On the contrary, Poland rather

exhibits a fear of abandonment by the US. The words of the Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Bartosz Cichocki calling Poland “a kind of ‘substitute’ for the UK and Turkey in Europe” clearly reflects the Polish fear of abandonment (Buras & Janning, 2018, p. 12). This explains why the Polish political elites overlook Trump’s criticisms against the Atlantic Alliance. They rather adopt a “rhetoric of approval” and take “cost-reducing” measures to win back the US favours while spoiling the EU’s defense initiatives.

Germany as a shirker in NATO and the EU

Due to its reluctance to assume active role in defence, Germany has often been perceived by both its European and transatlantic partners “as a sleepwalking giant or a spectator of global affairs” (Gauck, 2013), if not “the shirker in the international community” (Gauck, 2014), with a “leadership avoidance complex” (Paterson, 2015, p. 316). After the WWII, viewing itself as a pacifist “civilian power” Germany put constitutional limitations on its army and took an Atlanticist stance in terms of relying on the US and NATO security guarantees (Krotz, 2015, p. 62). German strategic culture advocated “never again alone” and “never again war” (Krotz, 2015, p. 108). However, Germany was forced to assume a leadership role in response to the Russian revisionism in Ukraine (Forsberg, 2016; Fix, 2018; Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020). In line with its image as Europe’s “honest broker” (Hyde-Price, 2000, p. 75), Germany played a leading role for both the EU and NATO “as the key Western interlocutor with Moscow” during the Ukraine crisis (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020, p. 17). It simultaneously represented both the EU and NATO during deliberations with Russia and worked towards building consensus within the EU and NATO on how to resolve the crisis (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020).

Russia’s aggressive acts in Ukraine, to the German mind, “constituted a profound existential challenge to the norms, values and institutions of post-cold war Europe’s rules-based multilateral security order” (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020, p. 16). Therefore, it declared a “reset” in its approach to foreign and security policy promising a greater commitment to both the CFSP and NATO at the Munich Security Conference in February 2014 (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020). In the 2014 Wales summit of NATO, it agreed to be a Framework Nation for NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. It began to participate in NATO and European missions such as the NATO Mission Iraq, EU training mission in Mali and the French-led operation in Sahel. According to the former German President Joachim Gauck, Germany should deny the “guilt for its past as a shield for laziness or a desire to disengage from the world” and “take more resolute steps to preserve and help shape the order based on the European Union, NATO and the United Nations” (Gauck, 2014). This resonates well with the then German Defence Minister von der Leyen’s support for the idea of an “EU army” proposed by the then President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker.

Over the last decade, Germany’s strategic thinking based on “never again war” evolved into “never again Auschwitz” implying that Germany should be ready to use force in order to prevent massacres in Europe and elsewhere (Gaskarth & Oppermann, 2019). Accordingly, Germany joined France in its ambition for an autonomous European defense and supported Europe-wide defense cooperation initiatives such as PESCO, EEI and bilateral cooperation projects such as German-Dutch and German-Polish agreements, asserting a leading role as part of the “Franco-German engine”. In 2019 it signed the Aachen Treaty

that renewed the Elysée Treaty in terms of deepening the Franco-German alliance with the possibility of a joint nuclear capability. When Germany did not annex a letter stating its strong commitment to the NATO alliance, some analysts thought that Germany was moving away from the US and inclining towards the French approach (Trippe, 2019).

Similar to France's "spoiler" role, Germany adopts a rhetoric of resistance and cost-imposing strategies that delegitimize the US predominance in the Euro-Atlantic community. Rejecting a trade-off between NATO and the EU, Germany has long prioritized the NATO alliance in the defense sector. However, the Trump administration's ambivalent approach to NATO led German Chancellor Merkel to declare that Germany and Europe can no longer rely on the US and NATO (Clark, 2017). According to the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas "Donald Trump's egotistical politics of 'America First', Russia's attacks on international law and state sovereignty, the expansion of gigantic China" led to the demise of the rules-based world order and the coming of a post-Atlantic era for Europe (Escritt, 2018). In particular, the US' withdrawal from the INF treaty alarmed Germany that viewed it as the US' disregard for European security interests (Maas, 2018).

As regards Russia, like France, Germany shows a fear of entrapment into a US-Russia conflict. Openly criticized by the US for its energy dependence on Russia (The White House, 2017), it advocates a strategic dialogue with Russia. Former Foreign Minister and current President of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated that "We have to find a path to each other and we have to work together!" (quoted in Eberle & Handl, 2020, p. 55). In terms of cost-imposing strategies against the US, Germany refused to participate in US military operations such as Iraq and Libya (von Weitershausen, 2016). It also takes a "free riding" (Hyde-Price, 2015, p. 601) approach to NATO remaining far below the NATO's targeted benchmarks of national defense spending and deployable armed forces (% 1.3 instead of 2 per cent of GDP –NATO, 2019, and 10 per cent instead of 50 per cent of total armed forces –Gaskarth & Oppermann, 2019, p. 617). Overall, Germany's multilateralist approach clashes with the US' unilateral and transactional policies under Trump administration. Hence, Germany supports "Europe United" as a "counterweight" against the US hegemon in order to maintain regional and global stability (Maas quoted in Escritt, 2018).

However, there are important differences between German and French approaches to European defense integration and transatlantic alliance. When Macron called the NATO alliance "brain-dead", German Chancellor Merkel openly disagreed with him by stating that "Such a sweeping attack is not necessary" (DW, 2019b). Germany sees both Europe and NATO as two "cornerstones" of its multilateralist foreign policy (Gaskarth & Oppermann, 2019, p. 11). Merkel explains that European and American security are embedded and Europe needs the US military support in fighting against global terror (Merkel, 2017). By building a "separable but not separate" army, Europe can be a more credible and valuable ally for the US. Accordingly, German approach to a common European Defense union differs from the French vision of power maximization. At national level, the French vision reminds the Euro-Gaullist ambition of a French-led "Europe puissance" as an independent "third force" during the Cold War (Leruth & Startin, 2017). At European level, France's power maximization strategy aims to turn Europe into a distinct power centre in an emerging multipolar world. Alternatively, German view is based on power legitimization – associated with "a more flexible interpretation of military restraint" (Koenig, 2020).

At national level, Germany aims to legitimize German power within Europe through an inclusive and self-restraining policy. For instance, Germany's main motivation for non-compliance with the NATO norms relies on its self-consciousness and concerns about increasing the threat perceptions of its neighbours by investing in German armed forces (Janning, 2019). Hence, Germany's traditional commitment to multilateralism and reluctance for regional hegemony persists (Helwig, 2020; von Weitzershausen, 2016). Refusing a realist definition of German power as a "normal" state that seeks selfish interests, Germany defines its national interests at European/regional level and emphasizes "shared responsibility" rather than domination (Eberle & Handl, 2020). Besides, Germany advocates for an inclusive European defense union that would not alienate small European states nor the post-Brexit UK (Billon-Galland & Quencez, 2017). The French proposal to insert high entry criteria and strong military commitment for the PESCO was thus rejected in favour of Germany's "inclusive approach" that is flexible and pragmatic in terms of allowing participant countries to decide on their own timeline and goals (Billon-Galland & Quencez, 2017). Given the European Defence Agency's flexible "géometrie variable" approach (Drent & Zandee, 2016) and the "ad hoc" nature of the European Peace Facility at the EU level (Mogherini, 2019), France fears a "Germanization" of the European strategic culture in the making. While needing the German power to support its EU and extra-EU European initiatives, it complains about Germany's slow and half-hearted response to European defense initiatives (Trippe, 2019).

At European level, the German "power legitimization" strategy implies forging an autonomous European defense union that will be seen as legitimate by the US and NATO partners. Germany embraces a balanced approach between NATO and the EU. Accordingly, its approach to Europe of defense is more in line with Mogherini's "cooperative autonomy" (2019) than Macron's ambitious view of "strategic autonomy". An autonomous European army would neither act unilaterally nor independently from the UN and NATO and "a stronger European Union means primarily a more reliable and cooperative partner in global security affairs" (Mogherini, 2019).

We should be confident in our means, while recognizing that we need each other, and we need to be as close as possible to our partners, starting with our oldest and strongest partner, the United States. This is Europe's cooperative autonomy. (Mogherini, 2019)

Mogherini's statements echo the 2016 German White Paper NATO which insists that NATO remains "an indispensable guarantor of German, European and transatlantic security". Hence, rather than abrogating the transatlantic alliance, Germany aims to "strengthen NATO's European Pillar" while contributing to the European defense union efforts. Merkel (2017) similarly stated that: "I firmly believe that European defence capability can never be seen as an alternative to NATO, but must always fit in with NATO's capabilities". In this context, Germany's role can be seen as "in-between" French and Polish roles. It puts a brake on the French ambition for a strategically autonomous and close-knit Euro-Defense club that might undermine NATO. It tries to ensure that all European initiatives are "inclusive", pragmatic and flexible, which may frustrate France by diluting and slowing down the integration. While Germany participates –albeit selectively– in NATO missions, yet its role is not similar to Poland either. It rejects the Polish strategy of preferring NATO over European defense capability.

Table 1. Diverging motivations and roles in the European army debate.

Cases	France	Poland	Germany
Driving logic	Power maximization	Security maximization	Power legitimization
Main motivation	Strategic autonomy	Security dependence	Cooperative autonomy
Role in NATO	spoiler	supporter	Shirker
Role in the EU	supporter	spoiler	Shirker

In brief, Germany acts as shirker in its approach to both NATO and the EU, since it is reluctant to pay the cost of choosing one over the other. Not only the German failure to meet the US expectations but also the frequent crises over the EU budget between France and Germany reveals the persistence of German shirking. Both organizations provide legitimacy and credibility to the peaceful and multilateralist image that Germany wants to reflect. Besides, Germany was able to represent both while negotiating with Russia over the Ukraine crisis. Therefore, Germany, as a shirker, only demands “cooperative autonomy” for Europe of defense which could be “separable but not separate” from NATO.

Conclusion

This article discussed why the EU has failed so far to exert itself as a strong defense actor in the post-Brexit era by focusing on the persisting divergent stances within the EU. Applying the trilogy of “supporter”, “spoiler” and “shirker” into the Europe-of-defense debate, the article highlights the multiplicity of discourses and strategies among France, Poland and Germany as influential members of the EU (see [Table 1](#)).

France plays the role of a spoiler within NATO since it feels entrapped by the US dominance of the Atlantic Alliance. It frequently resorts to a rhetoric of resistance and cost-imposing strategies to delegitimize the US leadership. It reintegrated with the military command of NATO in order to gain more authority to constrain the US hegemony and prevent NATO from overstretching. Since its understanding of security is primarily guided by power maximization, France aims for a strong European defense mechanism independent from the US where it could be on the steering wheel. French dual role of “spoiler” within NATO and “supporter” within European defense integration has become much more visible after Brexit. In the post-Brexit EU, France is the only member state that is both a nuclear power and a UNSC permanent member. It is also the only EU country that holds permanent military bases in the Indo-Pacific region with the proven ability to conduct long distance long-run military operations. It can thus play a key role as a security provider and a role-model for other European states. Besides, Germany’s reluctance to take up an active leadership role in both regional and global order pushes France to assert itself more strongly as a “core” nation of Europe that can accelerate European power maximization.

Poland, on the other hand, plays a role diametrically opposed to France. Especially, the current Polish government acts as a strong supporter of NATO and conducts a re-legitimization strategy to win over the US and reinforce the US leadership in the Euro-Atlantic community. Contrary to France that focuses on power maximization, its main stance is guided by security maximization due to the imminent Russian threat. Therefore, whereas France exhibits a fear of entrapment into a US-provoked conflict with Russia, Poland shows a fear of abandonment by the US in case of a Russian aggression. That’s

why Polish government adopts a “rhetoric of approval” and takes “cost-reducing” measures in order not to alienate the US and ensure the continuation of NATO security guarantees. Contrary to those who claim that Polish allegiance had shifted away from NATO to the EU, this study argues that Poland has acted as a “spoiler” in the European context. Hence, it sought to gain authority and increase activism within the European defense cooperation initiatives in order to prevent the EU from reaching a capability to duplicate and undermine NATO. Therefore, as long as the US security guarantees against Russia persist, Poland remains the loyal “supporter” of NATO and a “spoiler” of the Europe of defense.

Finally, Germany acts as a shirker that is oscillating between NATO and the EU. It is interested in gaining a privileged status within both organizations, but is accused of remaining reluctant to take additional responsibilities associated with it. While the US criticizes its failure to meet the NATO norms, France is critical of Germany’s “inclusive” and flexible approach that slows down and dilutes the Europe of defense. The last decade has shown an increasing effort by Germany to raise its profile as an international power that actively contributes to both NATO and European defense initiatives. Emphasizing its dual commitment to both NATO and Europe of defense, Germany is advancing Europe’s “cooperative autonomy” instead of strategic independence from NATO. Balancing the supporters and spoilers that assume a trade-off between NATO and European integration, Germany’s position is crucial to determine the direction of the EU’s defense policy. By aligning with either France or Poland, Germany may disrupt the relationship between NATO and the EU. Alternatively, it may continue to free ride and contribute to the dualistic regional security order in a selective manner.

Overall, the article suggests that the EU is still far from building up autonomous defense capabilities in the post-Brexit era, because the multiplicity of visions within the EU as in the cases of France, Poland and Germany, survived Brexit. The EU will hardly ever become a prominent security actor, as long as the motivations and strategies of supporters, spoilers and shirkers within the EU remain divergent. However, this does not mean that the development of future autonomous defense capabilities at EU level is unattainable. Critical developments in both Europe and the US may turn the tide in favour of an autonomous European defense. For instance, the reelection of Trump and a critical escalation of transatlantic tensions may force Germany and France to revisit their differences in favour of an autonomous European defense. This could be bolstered by a liberal Polish government as previously observed during the Tusk government (2007–2014). Moreover, global factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the decline of the liberal world order and the rise of non-Western powers such as China and Russia may either hinder or accelerate the European efforts towards defense autonomy.

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