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Introduction

Since the beginning of the European project, the EU has been described with the epithet ‘civilian power’ or ‘normative power.’ The latter refers to the ability of the EU to influence international norms and values through diplomatic means and initiatives. The purpose was to shape the global agenda without resorting to hard power instruments, thus exporting European norms of peace, stability, and cooperation. This approach has been foundational in establishing the EU as a leader in international relations, where soft power plays a crucial role.

However, over the years, various geopolitical challenges have imposed an identitarian rethinking of the EU, which is now forced to evolve gradually into a security actor. To do so, a common strategic culture is essential to ensure the coherence of foreign and defence policy on the international stage and its political autonomy.

In light of this, this paper examines the EU’s quest to develop a common strategic culture and the inherent challenges that hinder the achievement of this goal. To accomplish this, the paper proposes the following roadmap: the first section regards the analysis of the evolving security narratives; the second section concerns the recalibration of the Strategic Compass and its implications for the achievement of political autonomy; the third section will discuss the main challenges that hamper the development a coherent and shared strategic culture. By taking the war in Ukraine as a critical example, the paper advances the argument that several institutional and strategic challenges hinder the creation of a shared European position, thus increasing the EU’s capability-expectation gap and affecting the prospect of military coordination and interoperability. The final findings and considerations, which emerge from the analysis conducted, are then articulated in the concluding part of the text.

1. The Evolution of EU Security Narratives

In the dawn of the European project, soft power constituted the predominant method through which the EU asserted itself on the international chessboard, also exerting a significant influence on the narratives of its external action. This foreign policy philosophy was a defining feature of the EU’s external action, demonstrating not only its preference for diplomacy and regulation over military interventions but also reinforcing its role as a normative power that shapes global norms and values through its policies rather than through force. In this regard, the soft power dimension was very prominent in the first European security narrative, the European Security Strategy (ESS), published in 2003, where the EU was described as a ‘force for good’ (Council of the European Union, 2003). From this narrative, a precise iconography of the EU emerges, namely that of a value-promoter/

stability-building entity with a strong cosmopolitan and transformative ambition (Barbé & Morillas, 2019), committed to the construction of a more balanced world order through a system of rules (Mälksoo, 2016).

Over the years, the Union's ambition clashed with the geopolitical developments of the 21st century (for instance, Russia's annexation of Crimea and Eastern parts of Ukraine in 2014), which radically changed the self-perception of the EU (Barbé & Morillas, 2019). The annexations undertaken by Russia revealed the EU's limitations in exercising normative influence. Despite its commitment to acting as a force for good, the EU's response did not prevent the annexation, nor did it significantly alter Russia's aggressive policies, highlighting the challenges the EU faces in asserting its normative power in the face of geopolitical conflicts. In this regard, a new security strategy was developed in 2016, namely the EU Global Strategy (EUGS), which presented a more realistic connotation of European foreign and defence policy (European External Action Service, 2016). The cornerstone of this security strategy was the so-called 'principled pragmatism', which referred to a precise security philosophy that aimed to balance realism and idealism. In this context, the Union sought to recalibrate its approach by steadfastly aligning its strategic pursuits (state resilience, conflict resolution, regional cooperation and citizen protection) with its foundational values and ethical principles, embodying a form of *realpolitik* distinctively European in nature (Biscop, 2022). Consequently, the EUGS integrated political realism with strategic objectives, indicating a resurgence of hard power while aligning security imperatives and internal cohesion with the core values of the EU (Barbé & Morillas, 2019). In light of this, it can be stated that both "ESS and EUGS are important folios illuminating the ways the EU narrates its identity across the internal/external division (...) the EU's security strategies could be read as the Union's published 'autobiographies', outlining its conception of self as a security actor of a particular kind, with particular self-identity commitments in the world" (Mälksoo, p. 376, 2016).

2. The Recalibration of the Strategic Compass

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 has brought not only power politics on European soil but also the need for a more consistent and practical security strategy, namely the Strategic Compass (Council of the European Union, 2022). The latter represents an ambitious narrative aimed not only at enhancing the Union's foreign, security and defence policy by 2030 but also at fostering a common strategic culture (Scazzieri, 2020). Compared to the previous strategies, the Compass has been highly endorsed by the European Council for its pragmatic aspects that go beyond the mere coordination of defence efforts (Fiott, 2023). In this way, the Strategic Compass recognises "four strands of EU foreign policy, committing the EU to develop a rapid deployment capacity; to enhance its ability to

anticipate threats through greater intelligence sharing; to invest in technological capabilities and the military-industrial base; and to reinforce strategic partnerships” (Fabbrini, p.12, 2022). By defining these key pillars (act, secure, invest and partner), the Strategic Compass establishes a blueprint for European defence, presenting a strategic pathway that guides the development of the EU as a security actor and consequently of a common strategic culture.

Central to this securitarian framework is the presence, for the first time, of a shared threat assessment between the member states. This assessment helps to identify a range of threats, including geopolitical tensions, conventional military engagements, hybrid tactics, cyberattacks, and terrorism (Fiott, 2023). The purpose is to enable the EU to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to various scenarios that could threaten its security order (Rodriguez, 2022). Therefore, the Strategic Compass aims not only to cultivate a shared sense of direction and enhance alignment among the EU and its member states but also a more solid attempt to integrate concretely the hard power dimension in the European soft power rhetoric (Moser, 2020). By proposing a joint and integrated approach to defence and security, the Compass outlines a framework aimed at attaining strategic autonomy, setting the stage for the establishment of a future Defence Union. Hence, this strategy could represent an initial step toward the achievement of ‘political autonomy,’ which, according to Helwig (2020), represents a crucial element for the development of strategic autonomy. By promoting common priorities, a joint assessment of the threats and the harmonisation of defence strategies, the Compass seeks to increase the capacity of action and reaction of the EU. In this way, the Strategic Compass has the capacity to serve as a catalyst for political autonomy as it fosters the creation of a common strategic culture and greater political cohesion, thus solidifying the framework for collective defence within the EU.

3. Challenges to a Common Strategic Culture

Despite over the years, the EU has refined its security narratives, on the practical level, numerous challenges persist that prevent the Union from developing a unified and common strategic culture. Several of these challenges have manifested themselves precisely in the EU’s response to the conflict in Ukraine, which “has revealed several constitutional shortcomings in the EU, such as the lack of adequate supranational competencies, the difficulties of decision-making under the unanimity rule” (Fabbrini, p.11, 2022). In this regard, it is possible to identify two macro-challenges that limit the development of coherent political autonomy: one at the institutional level and the other at the strategic level.

Regarding the former, it should be recalled that the current EU Treaties stipulate that foreign, security and defence policies are under the aegis of the 27 member states, each with different national priorities (Fabbrini, 2020). As a result, decisions in these fields depend

on consensual and voluntary coordination among member states, which, having different strategic visions, often delay the development of a collective position in the international arena. Indeed, by invoking the veto and exploiting unanimity, some member states can diminish the coherence of European action. The presence of a veto represents a significant source of authority and power for member states, albeit at the price of greater collective unity. Moreover, unanimity has often hindered the agility of EU foreign policy and the pursuit of an 'ever closer Union,' leading to stagnation and collective silence (Pirozzi & Ntousas, 2019). Therefore, this intergovernmental logic often complicates the development of robust 'institutional autonomy' (Helwig, 2020), raising significant challenges in the formulation of a common strategic culture. Thus, the obstacle lies in the harmonisation of different national priorities and filtering them through institutional channels so that they converge with the Union's position. Institutional fragmentation caused by the retention of veto powers and the need for unanimous consensus makes the EU less cohesive when faced with situations that require quick and decisive decisions. This was most evident during the conflict in Ukraine, where European initiatives related to defence and sanctions were delayed due to vetoes imposed by Orbán's Hungary. Indeed, he frequently used it or threatened to use it to block military aid (for example, by blocking the repayment of military expenses incurred from supporting Ukraine for nearly a year within the framework of the European Peace Facility) (Psara, 2024) and financial aid (for example, by blocking an 18€ billion financial aid package) (Liboreiro, 2022). Therefore, Hungary's deployment of veto powers has significantly obstructed the decision-making process, thereby limiting the Union's ability to respond to the conflict in Ukraine (Fabbrini, 2022). This situation demonstrated "just how detrimental the unanimity requirement is to the EU's capacity to act" (Koenig, p.2, 2022) and consequently to the development of a coherent and unified position when dealing with external challenges. Thus, the presence of these institutional constraints not only delays decision-making but also weakens the EU's collective strategic goals and its responsiveness in the international arena.

From a strategic perspective, each member state, in addition to having different strategic interests, also perceives threats differently. This phenomenon is called 'strategic cacophony' and is a significant obstacle to the articulation of an effective common foreign and security policy and, consequently, a common strategic culture (Giusti & Grevi, 2022). Such strategic cacophony is particularly noticeable during the conflict in Ukraine, where the Union has struggled to align the European collective interest with the combination of different national strategic cultures (Fabbrini, 2024). In this regard, several Northern nations, including Germany, have argued that defence and security initiatives should continue to be funded from national resources (Fabbrini, 2024). In contrast, southern European nations have argued for the need to use common European debt to finance defence, stressing the importance of a joint and integrated approach (Fabbrini, 2024). Lastly, the Eastern European

member states, directly confronted with the Russian threat, have developed markedly different views of the danger: Poland views the Russian threat as critical to its national security, while Hungary views Russia as an essential ally (Fabbrini, 2024). This suggests that divergences among member states regarding the strategy to be adopted are deeply rooted in the historical-geographical specificities and singularities of individual countries. Such heterogeneity of strategic thinking complicates the adoption of a common line in EU foreign policy and, consequently, common strategic culture.

In light of this, the presence of these institutional and strategic challenges contributes to a widening of the EU's capability-expectations gap, namely a deep dichotomy between what the Union is expected to do and its actual operational capabilities (Hill, 1993). This difficulty in balancing the will and the ability to act complicates the development of a common strategic culture and, thus, political autonomy. Indeed, the inability to align aspirations with operational realities makes it difficult for the EU to position itself as a cohesive and influential actor (Fabbrini, 2022). This discrepancy between desires and concrete possibilities limits the EU's ability to formulate and implement policies that reflect a unified strategic vision and, consequently, exercise effective autonomy on the international stage. Even the former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs & Security, Josep Borrell (2022), recognised this problem by clearly stating that "security and defence is probably the area in EU integration with the biggest gap between expectations and results. Between what we could be and what citizens demand - and what we achieve".

Moreover, the lack of a proper common strategic culture in the EU could also affect the interoperability of military capabilities among member states. This discrepancy hinders coordinated defence efforts and the establishment of a unified front in international security matters. Without a shared and solid strategic framework, member states could find it challenging to effectively align their operational doctrines, which is crucial for conducting joint operations and responding to crises efficiently. Therefore, the convergence of the different strategic cultures could benefit military operations as it could "lead to a better common understanding of crises and conflicts, better preparations and readiness by aligning military doctrine and increasing interoperability between the armed forces, and to shortening decision-making cycles" (Zandee & Kruijver, p.31, 2019). Nevertheless, the development of a shared strategic culture that could help military coordination is still constrained by the member states' preferences. Indeed, an example of this is the strategic standoff between France and Germany over how to militarily support Ukraine and support the EU defence industrial base (Gallo et al., 2024; Besch, 2022). In this regard, "the dispute between Macron and Scholz during this acute crisis phase has significantly undermined the credibility of the European Union (...). The spectacle of a public dispute between the two largest countries of the Union reveals the risks of political fragmentation and institutional

disintegration” (Gallo et al., pp.6-7, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the EU’s intricate journey towards establishing a common strategic culture aimed at enhancing its political autonomy. Although, over time, the EU has reinforced its security narratives and integrated hard power more into its rhetoric, the conflict in Ukraine has made evident the presence of institutional and strategic challenges that complicate the realisation of a common position in foreign affairs. Vetoes, unanimity and strategic cacophony, prevent effective coordination and collective decision-making, widening the EU’s capability-expectation gap. Moreover, these factors also make military coordination and harmonisation of strategic doctrines difficult, complicating military assistance to a country in distress. In light of this, the paper has demonstrated that the heterogeneity of different strategic thinking combined with inflexible institutional mechanisms weakens the prospect of a common strategic culture, which is crucial for the EU to become a true security actor.

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