EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY REVISITED: UNDERSTANDING ITS MEANING FOR FRANCE AND POLAND

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the concept of European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) is interpreted by two key EU Member States: France and Poland. While ESA has evolved beyond its original focus on defence to encompass sectors such as technology and energy, it remains ambiguously defined and contested among EU members. France and Poland are frequently portrayed as being on opposing sides of this debate—France as a strong supporter, Poland as sceptical. However, this study demonstrates that their perspectives are more nuanced than this simple distinction implies. Through a comparative case study and congruence analysis, this research applies four conceptual frameworks—geopolitical actorness, strategic culture, the Atlanticist–Europeanist divide, and the capability–expectation gap—to assess national discourses on ESA across the defence, technology, and energy domains. The findings show that France frames ESA as a means of strengthening EU sovereignty and global influence, whereas Poland presents it in more limited and pragmatic terms, with greater emphasis on specific sectors rather than a broad strategic vision. The analysis reveals that their understandings of ESA are influenced by a combination of historical experiences, threat perceptions, strategic orientations, and material capabilities. This thesis contributes to the ESA debate by offering a multidimensional understanding of national positions and what that means for future cooperation.

Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, **Eslem Nur Timofei**, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled "European Strategic Autonomy Revisited: Understanding Its Meaning for France and Poland" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

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Vienna, 23.05.2025

Eslem Nur Timofei

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Introduction

"The West, as we knew it, no longer exists," stated European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on April 16, 2025, while also emphasizing that "[s]trategic autonomy is no longer a luxury. It's a necessity" (EUToday Correspondents 2025). Changing transatlantic relations, with the re-election of Donald Trump, have made Europe once again reconsider its global strategy and the consequences of its dependencies on others. In this context, the idea of European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) has re-emerged as a central theme in European political discourse. In the literature, ESA often referred as the European Union's (EU) ability to act independently on the global stage without relying on others (Michaels and Sus 2025; Marusic and Brudzinska 2021; Michaels and Sus 2024; Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022). Although the term originally emerged within the context of security and defence policy, it has gradually evolved into a more comprehensive framework due to growing concerns over global supply chain disruptions, technological dependencies and energy crises. Therefore, today ESA includes objectives not only related to enhancing defence capabilities but also to economic resilience, energy security, and technological sovereignty (Miró 2023).

Despite its rising prominence, ESA remains an ill-defined and often misunderstood concept. Therefore it has been referred as "ambiguous" (Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2019), "undefined"(Zandee et al. 2020), and even a "buzzword" (Järvenpää, Major, and Sakkov 2019). In order to fully understand what ESA means, the questions of autonomy from whom, for what purpose, and in which policy areas should be answered (Koenig 2021, 58). However, the answers to these questions differ among EU Member States, contributing to the varying interpretations and understandings of the term.

A significant amount of existing research on ESA discusses the positions of EU Member States by dividing them into two camps: proponents and sceptics of the concept. France and Poland are often portrayed as representing the two ends of this spectrum, with France seen as a strong advocate of strategic autonomy and Poland as a sceptic (Gajauskaitė 2022; Zandee et al. 2020; Marusic and Brudzinska 2021). However, this narrative is largely limited to the defence domain and fails to explain how and why France and Poland differ in their interpretations of ESA across a broader range of sectors. Analysing ESA across different sectors is particularly significant considering the current geopolitical developments. Changing transatlantic dynamics highlights the need for greater European responsibility in defence (Daalder, Grand, and Schwarzer 2025), while Russia's aggression towards Ukraine exposes the critical importance of achieving energy security (Kuzemko et al. 2022). Simultaneously, the rise of China and its ambitious industrial and technological policies raises pressing questions about Europe's technological dependencies (Jakobsson and Stolz 2021). Therefore, the central research questions guiding this thesis are:

- *How do France and Poland interpret the concept of European Strategic Autonomy across the domains of defence, technology, and energy?*
- *What shapes their divergent understandings and priorities?*

To answer these questions, this thesis draws on a set of conceptual tools: geopolitical actorness, strategic culture, the Atlanticist–Europeanist divide, and the capability–expectation gap. These conceptual lenses are not integrated into a single theoretical framework. Instead, they are employed separately to offer distinct perspectives on the reasoning behind the divergent views on ESA. Geopolitical actorness helps to contextualize the EU's evolving role and strategic ambitions and how this changing role effects the Member States positions. Strategic culture allows for an understanding of how national histories and threat perceptions shape the preferences of Member States. The Atlanticist–Europeanist divide is a useful tool for

explaining the ideological divergence in EU Member States' strategic orientations, particularly in relation to the transatlantic relations. Finally, the capability–expectation gap sheds light on material constraints that affect Member States' position towards ESA. Together, these tools offer a multi-layered perspective on how and why France and Poland engage with the idea of strategic autonomy. To better capture the analytical contribution of this study, the method of congruence analysis is used to assess the explanatory power of the chosen conceptual frameworks. In accordance with this method, the study derives expectations from each framework and compares them to the empirical findings. The goal is to determine how well each framework answers the research questions, as well as to what degree the observed discourses match theoretical expectations.

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 provides a literature review on ESA. Chapter 2 presents the study design, explains the application of congruence analysis, and describes the data sources used and limitations. Chapter 3 introduces the conceptual frameworks guiding the analysis and outlines the expectations derived from each concept. Chapters 4 and 5 examine how France and Poland, respectively, interpret and understand ESA across the domains of defence, technology, and energy, and assess how well the empirical evidence aligns with the expectations derived from the conceptual frameworks. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the findings and concludes by reflecting on the broader implications for EU policymaking.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Strategic autonomy refers to an actor's capacity to operate independently within a specific sector, area, or policy domain, setting its own priorities and making decisions without significant external influence (Hadfield et al. 2023, 24). The term officially became a part of EU's discourse with the adoption of the Global Strategy in 2016, where Member States recognized the importance of strategic autonomy in enhancing Europe's capacity to promote peace and security both within and beyond its borders (European External Action Service 2016). However, since its introduction, strategic autonomy has not been properly defined, making it a highly debated and contested concept.

Initially, ESA emerged within the EU's security and defence framework which has been traditionally seen as one of the Union's weakest areas. Strengthening capabilities in this domain was viewed as essential for enhancing the EU's geopolitical power (Zandee et al. 2020). These ambitions raised concerns in some Member States about the potential impact on transatlantic relations, given the NATO's and the United States (U.S.)' longstanding role as Europe's primary security provider (Varma 2024, 72). However, over time, the concept of ESA evolved beyond the domain of defence, as it became increasingly evident that security is no longer just about military capabilities. A series of global crises and geopolitical shifts exposed the EU's vulnerabilities across multiple sectors, pushing the Union to think about the autonomy in various areas. The COVID-19 pandemic was the first major event that showed the fragility of global supply chains and highlighted the weaknesses of infrastructures (Dupré 2022). Soon after, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine significantly impacted Europe by revealing the EU's heavy dependence on Russian energy supplies (Guerrieri and Padoan 2024, 3). Moreover, the EU's initiatives toward environmental and digital transformation have clearly exposed its heavy reliance on critical raw materials, as the growing demand is largely met through imports from outside the Union, primarily from China (Guerrieri and Padoan 2024,9). Furthermore,

this dependency to Chinese suppliers is not limited to raw materials; it extends deeply into the field of advanced technologies. This dual dependence on China has heightened a growing sense of strategic vulnerability within the EU. The intensification of technological rivalry between the United States and China has exacerbated these concerns, and Europe has found itself in a difficult position, reliant on external actors for technologies that are vital to its economic security and political autonomy (Edler 2024).

As a result, the concept has significantly evolved from its original formation outlined in the 2016 Global Strategy. By 2020, the European Commission's "New Industrial Strategy for Europe" explicitly reframed the objective of strategic autonomy as "reducing dependence on others for the things we need most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security, and other strategic areas"(European Commission 2020, 13).

Against this background, the existing literature on EU Member States' positions and understandings of ESA remains limited, with most studies emphasizing the contrasting approaches of Poland and France within a narrow foreign and security policy framework. For example, a study by Franke and Varma (2019) examined how national governments across the EU define and support ESA based on expert interviews. The findings reveal that ESA is predominantly interpreted through a defence and security framework. In this context, France and Poland are presented as opposing poles: Poland's scepticism is rooted in its strong transatlantic orientation and concerns about security guarantees, while France's support focuses on building a European defence architecture and promoting military autonomy.

Similarly, another report examining views across Europe on ESA describes France as the "staunchest proponent" of ESA (Zandee et al. 2020, 1) and places Poland at the opposite end of the spectrum due to its firm alignment with the United States (16). However, this report also focuses almost exclusively on defence and security, without addressing the broader dimensions

of ESA. Other studies tend to reinforce this binary framing, emphasizing France's and Poland's divergent positions on ESA, with the focus on their visions about the future of European defence (Gajauskaitė 2022; Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022; Marušić and Brudzińska 2021).

To sum, despite the broadening of the ESA debate within EU discourse, existing literature falls short in exploring how France and Poland interpret ESA across various sectors. Most analyses remain limited to the security and defence dimension, overlooking the wider strategic, technological, and energy-related aspects. Moreover, there is a limited amount of recent academic research on ESA that reflects the shifting geopolitical landscape, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Revisiting the ESA debate has become increasingly important considering the evolving security challenges for Europe. This study seeks to address these gaps by offering a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of both countries' positions on ESA. By moving beyond the dominant binary narrative, it aims to provide a more comprehensive and balanced explanation of their approaches and interpretations.

Chapter 2: Methodology

A case study is a research method that involves a small number of cases examined in depth, with extensive and diverse empirical observations, and a strong focus on connecting these observations to broader theoretical concepts (Blatter 2012, 4). A comparative case study applies this method to at least two cases and involves systematically comparing them, treating each with equal analytical weight (Beck 2017, 537). This research fits the definition of comparative case study approach, as it examines France and Poland to identify how strategic, geopolitical, and sectoral factors shape their respective understandings of the concept.

The selection of France and Poland is significant for two main reasons. First, they represent opposing positions in the ESA debate: France is a leading advocate for advancing ESA, while Poland remains sceptical, particularly toward initiatives seen as weakening NATO. Second, they embody different geographical and geopolitical perspectives within the EU—France from Western Europe and Poland from Central and Eastern Europe. While countries like France and Germany have shaped the ESA discourse, the views of Central and Eastern European (CEE) states are still underrepresented in the literature. Including Poland as a case study helps address this gap and offers a more comprehensive understanding of how ESA is perceived across Europe.

2.1. Research Strategy

This study adopts congruence analysis as its principal methodological approach. Congruence analysis is a small-N research design that evaluates the explanatory ability of theoretical frameworks by systematically comparing case study data to a set of expectations derived from the theories (Blatter 2012, 11). It employs logic of retroduction to evaluate how closely empirical data matches theoretical expectations, emphasizing the fit between theory and evidence (Sinkler 2011). The analysis process consists of two steps: deriving expectations from

broader theoretical frameworks, and then evaluating how well these expectations correspond with the actual empirical findings (Blatter 2012, 12). In order to evaluate the relevance of theories, it is necessary to formulate concrete, observable expectations based on each theoretical perspective that can then be compared with empirical findings (J.Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010, 3).

The aim of applying congruence analysis in this thesis is to provide a conceptually informed empirical analysis of how Member States interpret and respond to ESA. Specifically, this approach allows the study to assess how well various conceptual frameworks explain the observed discursive patterns in France and Poland. Rather than attempting to contribute directly to theoretical debates, this thesis seeks to use these frameworks as analytical tools for interpreting empirical findings, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how these two countries understands ESA.

2.2. Data

This research will be based on combination of primary and secondary qualitative sources. Primary data consists of official policy papers, government strategies, public speeches, and press releases from key national institutions in France and Poland. These materials are used to trace how the concept of ESA is framed, understood, and debated across the three sectors under study: defence, technology, and energy. In addition to this, secondary sources, such as academic articles, policy briefs, and reports from relevant think tanks, are used to provide context and help explain the historical, political, and strategic factors shaping each country's position. After analysing these documents, the findings will be interpreted through the lenses of conceptual frameworks. The findings will be assessed in light of the research questions, in order to answer how and why France and Poland differ in their understanding of ESA.

2.3. Limitations

This study does not trace the causal mechanisms behind national discourses but rather compares theoretical expectations with observed discursive outcomes. It focuses solely on how France and Poland frame ESA in official discourse, without examining how these narratives are constructed. Additionally, it does not assess actual policy behaviour, which may differ from discourse. Therefore, the findings reflect rhetorical positions rather than concrete actions.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

This chapter introduces four key analytical lenses: geopolitical actorness, strategic culture, the Atlanticist–Europeanist divide, and the capability–expectation gap. At the end of each concept section, a set of expectations will be outlined, based on the conceptual logic and the broader national contexts of France and Poland. These concepts are chosen because they are well-established within the EU foreign and security policy debates, yet they have rarely been applied together in the context of ESA, particularly across multiple domains. One of the key contributions of this thesis is to bring these distinct but complementary frameworks into dialogue, and to assess how they help explain the discursive patterns observed in the two case studies. Taken together, they offer a balanced analytical perspective that captures both ideational and material factors shaping Member States' approaches to ESA.

3.1. Geopolitical Actorness

The European Union was established through an elite-driven process grounded in a specific set of normative values (Manners 2002, 241). The promotion of these values constitutes the foundation of the EU's normative power, which refers to its ability to shape international standards of legitimacy by institutionalizing its core norms and principles (Pace 2007). While this normative role has traditionally defined the EU's external identity, it has increasingly been challenged by a range of external and internal factors. Externally, the liberal international order that once underpinned the EU's normative influence is in decline. Specifically, the U.S., one of the key architects of this system, has shown diminishing commitment to its maintenance (Johansson-Nogués et al. 2020, 2). Internally, these same values have come under pressure from rising populist parties and anti-globalization movements across Member States (Johansson-Nogués et al. 2020, 3). These shifting circumstances have forced the EU to adopt

a more assertive and strategic role on the global stage. A key manifestation of this shift is President von der Leyen's vision of a "Geopolitical Commission" (Rieker and Giske 2024, 60). This approach signals a redefinition of the European Commission's priorities, emphasizing the need for the EU to take stronger geopolitical initiative. In 2019, von der Leyen outlined such ambitions, calling for the promotion of fair and open trade, the shaping of global regulatory standards, the strengthening of technological capacities, and the enhancement of autonomy in security and defence (Koenig 2019, 1). As evident in these ambitions, this emerging geopolitical actorness is broad in scope, encompassing various areas such as defence, technology and energy, which are central to the analysis in this thesis.

While security concerns remain central to the European Union's efforts to position itself as a credible geopolitical actor (McNamara 2024, 2372), the EU's geopolitical ambitions has expanded beyond traditional defence to include domains such as technology and energy. In the technological sphere, the EU has sought to assert greater influence due to growing concerns about China's dominance in critical sectors, as well as Russia's use of cyberattacks and disinformation. In response, the European Commission has launched several initiatives to strengthen its global technological presence and geopolitical influence, including digital partnerships with Japan and Singapore, the Strategic Compass, and the Global Gateway (Ringhof and Torreblanca 2022, 2-3). In terms of energy, the Russian invasion of Ukraine fundamentally challenged one of the core assumptions of the liberal international order: that economic interdependence fosters peace. In reality, the EU's energy dependence on Russia exposed a critical vulnerability, as Russia weaponized this interdependence (Skalamera 2023). In response, the EU has intensified efforts not only to diversify its energy sources but also to invest in the development of clean and renewable energy (Skalamera 2023). Moreover, this shift is not entirely new. Energy policy has long been intertwined with the EU's environmental and climate agenda. The pressing challenges of climate change has pushed the EU to

institutionalize environmental protection through treaty commitments and to take an active role in global climate governance. As a result, the EU has gradually emerged as a leading actor in international environmental diplomacy and sustainable energy policy (Melchiorre 2025, 6).

In sum, the EU's emergence as a geopolitical actor marks a profound shift in its external identity and strategic objectives. It has expanded its engagement beyond normative influence to assume a more proactive role in areas such as security, technology, and energy. This framework is closely tied to the broader debate on ESA. Member States's support for ESA may depend on how the EU's role as a global actor is perceived within national discourse.

Expectations: In the area of defence, France, as a country with global ambitions, a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, nuclear capabilities, and a tradition of strategic independence that is rooted in Gaullism, is expected to frame ESA as a means of enhancing the EU's international role. Its overseas military presence further supports the expectation that France views the EU as a legitimate and necessary actor in global security. In contrast, Poland, which does not have comparable global status or capabilities is expected to be more hesitant in supporting ESA from a geopolitical perspective. Its strategic focus in defence is expected to remain regional. In technology, ESA is expected to be presented in France as a tool for enhancing Europe's strategic independence and global competitiveness, while Polish discourse could place greater emphasis on economic development and modernization, with less focus on geopolitical autonomy. On the other hand, in the energy sector, France is expected to link ESA more to climate and sustainability goals than to geopolitical urgency, whereas Poland may frame energy autonomy as a strategic necessity, particularly considering its historical energy dependence on Russia.

3.2. Strategic Culture

Booth (1990) defines the strategic culture as "nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behaviour, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force" (121). While strategic culture can be shaped by a variety of internal and external factors, such as political institutions, geography, and alliances, the main explanatory factor is country's historical experiences. Wars, occupations, alliances, and major security crises all leave lasting marks on how a state thinks. Therefore, strategic culture offers a valuable framework for understanding state behavior. It serves as a guide to help explain why different countries respond differently to similar situations, and why they often have diverging preferences in international and security policy (Komrij 2012).

While strategic culture has traditionally been associated with military affairs, its analytical utility extends well beyond that. Strategic culture reflects how a nation defines and responds to security threats, and in the contemporary geopolitical landscape, a wide range of issues, such as energy and technology, are increasingly subject to processes of securitization. This necessitates the understanding of strategic culture more broadly. Hadfield (2016), for instance, applies the concept of strategic culture to the energy sector. The analysis how the EU and Russia construct energy policy as a matter of strategic interest. Her work shows that energy, can be framed through long-standing cultural patterns and historical experiences, thus becoming embedded in strategic thinking.

This perspective is particularly relevant today, as the EU's pursuit of autonomy in areas such as technological sovereignty and energy resilience signals a wider understanding of what constitutes security**.** Therefore, in the context of ESA, the way member states answer the key

questions, autonomy from whom, for what purpose, and to do what, can be explained by their strategic cultures and threat perceptions (Jakobsson and Stolz 2021).

Expectations: In the field of defence, France, considering its strategic culture that is marked by a tradition of independence, global engagement, and a preference for strategic autonomy, is expected to frame ESA as a means to strengthen European sovereignty and enable the EU to act independently on the global stage. In contrast Poland, given its strategic culture shaped by historical experiences of occupation, strong threat perceptions toward Russia, and deep reliance on NATO, expected to approach ESA in defence with caution and prioritize territorial security and transatlantic ties over EU-led strategic autonomy. When it comes to technology, ESA is expected to be articulated by France as part of a broader strategy for securing technological sovereignty. Meanwhile for Poland, technology-related ESA is expected to be discussed more in terms of practical development and modernization, without the strategic or ideological weight that characterizes the French framing. In the energy domain, Poland's historical dependence on Russian energy is expected to lead to stronger security-oriented narratives around the need for energy autonomy while France is likely to just associate ESA with the EU's energy transition agenda.

3.3. Atlanticist-Europeanist Division

The Atlanticist and Europeanist division within the EU provides a helpful framework for understanding why Member States often remain divided on ESA issue (Jakobsson and Stolz 2021). For Atlanticists, the transatlantic relationship is seen as the cornerstone of European security. They view NATO, and particularly the U.S., as the main guarantors of peace and stability in Europe. From this perspective, efforts to build a more independent European role in defense and security are often viewed with suspicion, as they may weaken the transatlantic bond or duplicate existing NATO structures (Střítecký and Hynek 2009). Many Central and

Eastern European countries are strong supporters of the Atlanticist position. Their views are shaped by historical experiences, especially their past under Soviet influence, and by a strong threat perception of Russia. For these countries, the U.S. plays an essential role not only as a military ally but as a nuclear umbrella that they see as vital for their national survival and regional stability (Střítecký and Hynek 2009). Therefore, they prefer NATO at the center of European security policy, rather than shifting too much focus toward autonomous EU defense structures.

On the other hand, Europeanists support deeper European integration and a greater role for the EU in shaping its own defense and security policies. They argue that the Atlanticist security framework was created under very different historical conditions, and that it no longer fully reflects the interests or needs of today's European Union. When NATO was established, Europe lacked the political and economic capacity to build its own defense structures. But circumstances have changed. Europeanists believe that the EU should now take on more responsibility for its own security, develop stronger defense capabilities, and reduce its dependence on the U.S. for protection and strategic direction (Voskopoulos 2013; Theussen 2022). Traditionally, France is the leading state on this camp, which also includes countries like Luxemburg, Spain and Belgium. This ideological divide has long been a barrier to the development of a cohesive European defence policy and continues shape Member States perceptions towards ESA.

Expectations: In the domain of defence, France is expected to support ESA by framing growing U.S. unpredictability and long-term strategic disengagement as signals that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own security. Poland, on the other hand, reflecting an Atlanticist orientation, is expected to view ESA in defence with scepticism, prioritizing NATO and the U.S. as essential to its security and expressing concern that ESA may weaken transatlantic ties or concentrate power in Western Europe. In the field of technology, France is

expected to frame ESA as a way of reducing Europe's dependence on external powers. Poland, while supporting ESA in this sector, is expected to see it as a means to boost economic modernization rather than autonomy from the U.S., and will continue to value technological partnerships with the United States. In the energy domain, both countries are expected to support ESA, though framed through different lenses. France is likely to emphasize long-term climate goals with limited focus on transatlantic dynamics. Poland, consistent with its Atlanticist stance, is expected to see energy autonomy as a matter of national security and resilience, while continuing to seek close cooperation with the U.S. as a counterbalance to past energy dependence on Russia.

3.4. Capability-Expectation Gap

Another important concept that needs to be discussed in the context of strategic autonomy is the “capability expectation gap”. The term is introduced by Hill in 1993, where he argues that there exists a significant gap between the expectations placed upon the European Community (EC) and its actual capacity to fulfil those expectations. According to him, the EC is expected to perform various tasks demanded by both internal actors and external partners. However, its ability to meet these expectations is constrained by several factors: “its ability to agree, its resources, and the instruments at its disposal”(Hill 1993, 315). The "ability to agree" specifically refers to the challenges the EU faces in effectively reaching consensus among its member states. In terms of “its resources”, the EU consists of economically developed member states; however, allocating these resources at the EU level, particularly for foreign and security policy, remains challenging. Lastly, when it comes to "the instruments at its disposal" the EU lacks the structures and procedures necessary within its foreign policy domain (Martill and Sus 2019, 3).

Since Hill introduced this concept, the EU has launched numerous initiatives aimed at reducing the capability-expectation gap. The establishment of the European Defence Agency (EDA), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) represent significant efforts towards enhancing the EU's defence capabilities. Despite these efforts, similar challenges persist within these frameworks. For example, within the EDF, member states continue to face difficulties in agreeing on as project selections or funding mechanisms. Similarly, with PESCO, a notable gap remains between ambitions and practical realities, with member states holding divergent approaches to the implementation of initiatives due to their distinct strategic cultures and orientations (Martill and Sus 2019, 12-13).

Moreover, while the EU attempts to address the capability-expectation gap through these initiatives, expectations have simultaneously increased due to a series of internal and external challenges. Developments such as the rise of China, the Arab Spring, Russian aggression toward Ukraine, the Trump administration and shifting transatlantic relations, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic have collectively heightened demands for the EU to adopt a more decisive and autonomous role in global security and defence. Yet, the EU's actual capabilities continue to lag behind these growing expectations (Martill and Sus 2019, 16).

The continuation and even expansion of the capability-expectation gap are highly relevant to the ongoing debate on ESA, yet their relationship has not been extensively discussed in the literature. Member states that are sceptical of ESA often perceive it as overly focused on territorial defence capabilities, which they argue Europe either should not or cannot achieve (Martill and Sus 2019). The perceptions of EU Member States regarding the capability-expectation gap and their perception of the EU’s industrial and political capacity to overcome it play a crucial role in shaping their interpretations and conceptualizations of strategic autonomy.

Expectations: In defence, France is expected to frame ESA as a realistic and necessary solution to closing existing capability gaps. This expectation stems from France's well-established military-industrial complex and nuclear capabilities. Moreover, closing the capability gap at the EU level is expected to also close the gap for France itself by strengthening its defence industry and enhancing its influence within the EU framework. Poland, in contrast, is expected to view ESA in the defence with greater scepticism. With a less developed defence industrial base and a strong reliance on U.S. defence systems, Poland may perceive EU efforts to build strategic autonomy as insufficient or even counterproductive. Rather than reducing its vulnerabilities, closing the EU-wide capability gap may, from Poland's perspective, widen the gap between itself and more advanced member states like France. In the fields of technology and energy, both countries are expected to support ESA, though with different priorities. Poland is likely to back initiatives that provide access to EU funding and help overcome national-level structural weaknesses. France, by contrast, is expected to take a more proactive stance, viewing EU-wide efforts to reduce dependence on external actors as aligned with its national strengths and strategic ambitions.

Chapter 4: France Case Study

This chapter examines France's understanding and framing of ESA by analysing key policy documents and speeches. It aims to reveal significant insights into how the concept is defined and understood within its national discourse, and the motivations behind this understanding. The section focuses on three strategic sectors: defence, technology, and energy. It applies the conceptual frameworks introduced in the third chapter to identify the most relevant framework(s) for addressing the central research questions of this thesis.

4.1. Defence

In French discourse, defence is framed as a core part of ESA. As highlighted in the National Strategic Review of 2022, "European strategic autonomy depends on robust European defence industry capabilities that meet its own needs" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 43). This reflects the view that a strong defence base is essential for reducing dependency and enhancing Europe's ability to act independently. Similarly, the 2017 review emphasizes that "Europe's progress on defence must be further consolidated. We have laid the foundations for its strategic autonomy" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2017, 6). This perspective shows that strengthening Europe's defence capabilities are seen as crucial part of creating a more independent and autonomous Europe.

The push for a more autonomy is closely linked to the aspiration for a more geopolitically assertive role for the EU, as actorness requires the ability to act independently. In this context, the importance of developing a "real politico-military action capability for Europe in its immediate environment" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 13) is emphasized. This capability would enable the EU to expand its influence globally, aligning with France's vision for a stronger, more self-reliant Europe. President Macron has reinforced this view, by

emphasizing "the European Union is a credible player and the one at the relevant scale" (2021). This reflects an understanding of the EU as a geopolitical actor, capable of influencing the global affairs.Therefore, in French discourse, ESA is framed as a critical framework for enhancing the EU's geopolitical actorness.

Another significant concept shaping France's approach to ESA is strategic culture. French strategic culture is deeply rooted in the principle of national independence, reflecting a long-standing commitment to autonomy and self-reliance (Zarobny 2018, 282). Moreover, French defence policy is underpinned by a strong normative dimension, emphasizing values like human rights, democracy, and international law, which often justify its support for humanitarian interventions and military missions abroad (Biehl, Giegerich, and Jonas 2013). These elements form a distinctive strategic culture that blends national autonomy, European leadership, and global responsibility. This is clearly articulated by the statement, which identifies "the strengthening of our strategic autonomy; attaining European sovereignty and consolidation of our alliances; and the preservation of a stable international order based on respect for the law and multilateralism" as core pillars of French defence strategy (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 19).

Historical experiences and geographical considerations also shape France's strategic culture, influencing its threat perceptions and approach to alliances. Before the war in Ukraine, France did not view Russia as a primary security threat. Instead, as President Macron described, Russia was considered "a part of Europe from a geographical and historical point of view" (2021) which reflects an understanding of Russia as a potential partner rather than a direct adversary. On the other hand, "jihadist terrorism" was identified as the most immediate threat to French security (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2017, 9), while maintaining influence in regions like Africa and the Indo-Pacific was stated as a critical priority, given France's

significant military presence and long-standing strategic interests in these areas. Yet, the Ukraine war marked a turning point in French threat perceptions, described as a "major shift in strategy" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 7), while reinforcing the importance of NATO for European security.

Moreover, France remains cautious about being constrained by the priorities of its allies. This position is clearly articulated in a statement which asserts that "France, a balancing power, refuses to be locked into bloc geopolitics. This has always been France's position, and it is important that it is maintained in the search for a balanced relationship with our allies" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 15). Moreover, the ambitions and priorities of NATO and the U.S. are not always consistent with those of France. Therefore, strengthening the capabilities of the "European pillar" is important, as the Atlantic alliance "rules out an extension to other geographical areas and, in particular, the Indo-Pacific" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 41). As a result, France's interest in regions beyond NATO's framework is a significant factor in its divergence from NATO and its Europeanist position.

Nevertheless, French discourse remains clear that ESA is not intended as an alternative to NATO but as a complementary effort. This approach is reflected in statements such as "[c]loser cooperation between the EU and NATO will be essential to further strengthen European strategic autonomy and the transatlantic relationship" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 14). Macron has similarly emphasized that ESA is "absolutely not just compatible with NATO, but totally consistent with NATO" (2021). This nuanced stance highlights that the Atlanticist–Europeanist framework alone may not fully capture the complexity of France's position, which is not simply Europeanist but pragmatic, seeking to balance European independence with transatlantic relations.

Finally, the need to enhance EU defence capabilities is a recurring theme in French discourse on ESA, often framed within the context of addressing the capability-expectation gap. It is acknowledged that the "development of common defence capabilities" is essential "for greater interoperability" among EU Member States (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 20). While there is recognition that current capabilities are insufficient, the overall tone remains optimistic. For instance, recent initiatives are viewed as significant steps forward, with the 2022 review noting that "a great deal of progress has been made in recent years in the field of European defence, both in terms of capability – creation…implementation…as well as operationally" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 13). This suggests that while France sees gaps in European defence capabilities, it also believes these can be effectively addressed through continued investment and cooperation.

The findings regarding the ESA in defence align mostly with the initial expectations outlined in the third chapter. Geopolitical actorness accurately captures France's push for ESA as a means of enhancing the EU's global influence. The findings also align with the expectations derived from the strategic culture framework, as France consistently emphasizes self-reliance and strategic autonomy. Moreover, as expected capability–expectation gap lens captures France's recognition of existing EU defence shortcomings, while maintaining a positive outlook on addressing these gaps through continued investment and integration. However, the Atlanticist–Europeanist divide provides only partial insight, as France's position is more pragmatist, focused on balancing European independence with transatlantic cooperation, rather than fitting into this binary framework.

4.2. Technology

Technology emerges as a critical component of ESA in French discourse, closely linked to strategic autonomy. On a national level, France views technological autonomy as a crucial part

to its strategic autonomy. As stated in the 2017 National Strategic Review, "[f]or France, strategic autonomy rests on a political foundation comprised of two pillars: a high degree of industrial and technological autonomy on the one hand, and the means and resources to ensure operational autonomy on the other" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2017, 52). This statement highlights the centrality of technology in France's strategic perspective. At the EU level, this connection between technology and defence is similarly emphasized, as it is stated that "[t]he EU must continue on the path towards greater technological autonomy which goes hand-in-hand with the development of the European defence industry" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 43). This reflects an understanding of technological capabilities as essential for enhancing the EU's capacity for independent action.

France's self-perception as a technological leader further reinforces this link. It sees itself "as a major technological power" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2017, 63), with its "technological excellence" described as a critical element that "acts as a catalyst of European defence" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2017, 64). This reflects France's confidence in its ability to drive EU defence capabilities, highlighting a more optimistic perception of the capability-expectation gap in the technological domain.

However, this confidence is tempered by concerns about rising technological dependencies, as emergence of new technologies also poses risks. They are "… while offering opportunities, also undermine the technological superiority of Western armed forces and challenge their defence industries" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2017). This shows concerns about maintaining technological leadership in the face of competition from emerging powers like China, emphasizing the link between technological sovereignty and geopolitical influence. Therefore, in French discourse, ESA in technology is framed not just about economic competitiveness but about preserving Europe's capacity to act as a credible global actor.

Moreover, the ambitions to reduce technological dependencies aligns closely with France's strategic culture, which prioritizes autonomy and self-reliance. This commitment to technological independence significantly shapes its approach to ESA in the technology domain. As Macron emphasized, "I think on technology… we have to put ourself in a situation to cooperate if we decide. But we have to avoid in any way to depend on a 100 percent Chinese solution" (2021). This statement ties into the European debate on technological sovereignty, which France strongly supports. Macron has framed this as a foundational step towards greater autonomy, stating that "… we began to lay the foundation of greater technological and industrial sovereignty. No other region in the world, other than Europe, would have accepted to the extent that we do, to be dependent on others for vital products and essential components" (2024). Moreover, in the technology debate, Macron also explicitly stated, "I don't want to depend on 100 percent U.S. decision. Otherwise, I will be put in a situation not to decide for the European continent itself" (2021). Avoiding dependence not only on China but also on U.S. reflects a Europeanist approach, positioning France as an advocate for a more autonomous Europe, while being less reliant on its Atlantic partners for critical technologies.

To sum up, the French approach to technology within ESA aligns with the expectations regarding each of the conceptual frameworks mentioned previously. The emphasis on technological independence reflects a deep-rooted commitment to self-reliance, consistent with France's strategic culture. Meanwhile, the focus on maintaining technological leadership and reducing dependencies aligns well with the geopolitical actorness framework. The generally optimistic view of the EU's ability to close its technological capability gaps aligns with the expectation about the capability-expectation gap framework. Additionally, Macron's explicit concerns about reducing dependence on U.S. decisions reveal a distinctly Europeanist orientation. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how France frames ESA and position itself within the debate.

4.3. Energy

Energy is a critical component of ESA in French discourse, closely linked to both strategic autonomy and geopolitical influence. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, energy supply was recognized as "…another area of major strategic competition" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2017, 30). However, the war in Ukraine further emphasized the strategic importance of energy, reminding Europe that "[e]nergy has once again become a key issue and a geostrategic lever" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2022, 13). This positioning is clearly articulated by President Macron, who stated that "the days of Europe buying its energy and fertilizers from Russia, outsourcing to China and relying on the US for security are over" (Macron 2024). By placing energy independence alongside other strategic priorities, Macron highlights the critical role of energy in the ESA debate.

Energy sovereignty also emerges related with France's strategic culture, which prioritizes independence and self-reliance in critical sectors. This is evident in the goals of the multiannual energy programming, which aim to make it "possible to build a coherent and credible strategy for decarbonising the French energy mix and strengthening the country's energy sovereignty by exiting fossil fuels" (Directorate-General for Communication 2024, 6). This reflects efforts to reduce reliance on external energy sources, which consistent with France's strategic culture. This perspective extends to the European level as well, where Macron has argued that "fossil gas is imported and thus degrades the French and European trade balance, while also presenting climate and energy sovereignty issues" (Macron 2024). This framing connects the energy debate on many layers, including security, economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability. This reinforces the idea that energy sovereignty is a critical component of strategic autonomy.

The capability–expectation gap framework is also relevant in the context of France's energy discourse. Unlike many other EU Member States, France's heavy reliance on nuclear power provides it with a strategic advantage in terms of energy security. This commitment to nuclear energy has reduced France's exposure to supply disruptions: "France's energy security is dependent on reliable supply, i.e. supply free from political contingencies, at an affordable cost for business. This was the rationale for France's adoption of nuclear power in the 1970s…" (France Ministry for the Armed Forces 2017, 30). This capability has proven important, as demonstrated during the winter of 2022/2023, when France avoided a major energy crisis despite "the very sharp drop in Russian imports" thanks to "the resilience of our infrastructure" (Directorate-General for Communication 2024, 206). This puts France to relatively less exposed to energy supply shocks than many of its European counterparts, leading it to view energy sovereignty as a more achievable goal.

However, despite this relative advantage, France remains supportive of EU efforts to reduce dependency on external energy sources, particularly in the context of the green transition. Macron has called for Europe to become "a world leader in five of the most emerging and strategic sectors by 2030," including new energy technologies (Macron 2024). This ambition reflects a desire not only to secure energy supplies but also to enhance Europe's competitive position in the global energy market. As Macron has stated, "[w]e have a price-competitiveness problem when it comes to energy because we are dependent and because, today, we do not produce fossil fuels. The sooner we make the transition, the sooner we will regain this competitiveness" (2024). This framing connects energy sovereignty directly to the broader goals of economic resilience and geopolitical influence, aligning closely with the geopolitical actorness framework.

In summary, France's approach to energy within the ESA framework reveals a more complex picture than initially expected. Energy is not only framed within climate and sustainability goals but also as a strategic area. Strategic culture framework emerged as a more relevant than anticipated, as French discourse consistently emphasized energy independence, aligning this with France's tradition of autonomy and self-reliance in critical sectors. Moreover, geopolitical actorness framework proved to be more significant than expected, with energy framed not just in terms of reducing dependencies, but also as part of a broader strategy to position Europe as a global leader in emerging green technologies. The capability–expectation gap framework aligns as expected, with France's strong nuclear infrastructure reducing its immediate energy security concerns, allowing it to approach the energy sovereignty debate with a relatively optimistic outlook. Finally, as anticipated, the Atlanticist-Europeanist divide plays a limited role in France's energy discourse. Unlike the defence and technology sectors, energy security is framed primarily as a European challenge, without significant reference to transatlantic dependencies.

Chapter 5: Poland Case Study

As in the previous section on France, this part of the chapter focuses on Poland's understanding and framing of ESA through an analysis of national policy documents and public speeches. It aims to reveal how the concept is defined and interpreted within Poland's national context, and the motivations behind this perspective. The analysis focuses on same strategic sectors, and same conceptual frameworks will be used to assess which are most relevant for understanding Poland's position and for addressing the central research questions of this thesis.

5.1. Defence

Poland's approach to defence within the ESA framework is deeply shaped by its strategic culture, which is heavily influenced by a consistent threat perception of Russia. Russia, with its "neo-imperial policy," is described as "the most serious threat" to Poland's national security (Ministry of National Defence 2020,6). This position is rooted in Poland's strategic culture, which is driven by two key factors: "the fear of great power intervention" and "the fear of abandonment by allies" (Doeser 2018, 458). These concerns are deeply embedded in Poland's historical experience, including its occupation by the Soviet Union and the trauma of being left vulnerable by its Western allies. These historical experiences have created a strong emphasis on territorial defence and a reliance on external security guarantees (Doeser 2018, 459-460).

In this context, NATO emerged as a central role in Polish defence policy. Poland is one of the most Atlanticist-oriented EU Member States, reflecting a deep reliance on the U.S. and the NATO alliance for security guarantees. This position is frequently emphasized in Polish political discourse. For example, President Duda recently stated that "[t]here is a magic word we use in NATO. It is the word deterrence" (Duda 2023), highlighting Poland's reliance on NATO's collective defence capabilities as a critical deterrent against Russian aggression.

Capability–expectation gap plays a significant role in defining Poland's position on defence issues. Poland views NATO as having the proven capabilities required to counter Russian threats, while remaining sceptical about the EU's ability to provide the same level of security. In this context it is mentioned that "NATO remains the world's most powerful military alliance, and Poland will make every effort to ensure that it remains a guarantor of peace and prosperity in Europe" (Ministry of National Defence 2017, 44). The strength of NATO's capabilities, including its technological and operational superiority over Russia, is also frequently highlighted in Polish discourse: "The number of NATO aircraft is three times the number of aircraft in service with the Russian army" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2024, 9).

However, Poland's support for EU defence initiatives is not entirely absent. Despite its strong Atlanticist orientation, Poland acknowledges the potential benefits of a stronger EU defence posture, particularly in light of the evolving security environment. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs stated, "[f]aced with new challenges, we must improve the effectiveness of European defence cooperation…We will make use of the opportunities offered by the EU Common Security and Defence Policy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2024, 12). This reflects a pragmatic approach that is willing to engage in EU defence efforts as long as they complement NATO and contribute to Poland's territorial security. This pragmatism is explicitly stated in Poland's defence strategy, which calls for "pragmatic engagement in the development of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy" (Ministry of National Defence 2020, 24).

However, this support for EU defence initiatives remains conditional. Poland's position is guided by the criteria that any EU military efforts remain compatible with NATO. Development of Common Security and Defence Policy capabilities in EU "to engage in

autonomous operations" is framed as "in the Polish interest", but if it maintains "complementarity with the North Atlantic Alliance" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2017, 8). This reflects Poland's willingness to support EU in "autonomous operations", as long as it doesn't contradict with NATO framework. Rather than outright rejecting ESA, Poland adopts a cautious approach, emphasizing that EU capabilities should complement, rather than replace, NATO's security guarantees. This perspective is consistent with Poland's strategic culture, which prioritizes external security guarantees and views NATO as the cornerstone of its national defence

While the term "strategic autonomy" is largely absent from Polish defence discourse, there is an implicit recognition of the need for greater European military capacity, particularly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As former Minister Rau noted, "… we will have to face the threat of another Russian attack. And Europe should be capable of resisting such conventional aggression on its own" (Rau 2023). However, this call for greater European capacity is framed as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, NATO's role. This approach is evident in the Polish government's emphasis on "strategic harmony between NATO and the European Union" rather than full autonomy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2024, 7).

To sum up, the findings from the Polish case mostly align with the initial expectations outlined in the thesis. Poland's support for ESA in defence is conditional rather than outright opposed, primarily focused on ensuring that any EU initiatives remain firmly aligned within the transatlantic framework. This reflects the role of strategic culture in shaping Polish defence policy, which prioritizes territorial defence and deeply values NATO's security guarantees in its national security. The Atlanticist–Europeanist framework also plays a significant role, as Poland's strong Atlanticist orientation makes it cautious about any moves that might weaken

NATO's central role in European defence. As expected, the capability–expectation gap framework is highly relevant, as Poland remains sceptical about the EU's ability to match NATO's military capabilities. Lastly, the geopolitical actorness framework proved to be less relevant in the Polish context, as there is limited support for the idea of a more geopolitically assertive EU. Overall, the Polish case demonstrates a more cautious and pragmatist approach to ESA, driven by security concerns, historical experiences, and a strong reliance on NATO as the cornerstone of its defence strategy.

5.2. Technology

For Poland, ESA in technology is primarily understood within the context of economic competitiveness. This competitive dimension is seen as crucial for the EU's geopolitical strength. As stated in Polish discourse, "[t]he EU should react adequately to emerging crises. That is why Poland will support a realistic reform of the EU which will contribute to increasing its competitiveness and power" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2024, 19). This perspective highlights that, contrary to initial expectations, Poland also views technology as a critical aspect of geopolitical influence, recognizing that falling behind in technological capabilities can undermine Europe's strategic position. This is further reinforced in statements emphasizing that "Europe risks lagging behind unless urgent action is taken" due to "the dynamic development of new technologies and disruptive innovations" (Ministry of Economic Development and Technology 2019, 2). This framing indicates that Poland sees ESA in technology not just as an economic goal, but also as a geopolitical necessity, aligning more closely with the geopolitical actorness framework than initially anticipated.

However, Poland's support for EU technological initiatives is also conditional. It is cautious about the fairness and inclusivity of these projects and concerned about deepening economic disparities within the Union. This is particularly evident in Poland's approach to Important

Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI), where it emphasizes that "there is no justification for state aid to one industry or technology area. It is more rational to define which value chain or network is crucial for Europe or, in other words, which projects are of common interest, which is a prerequisite for the admission of 100% of state aid" (Ministry of Economic Development and Technology 2019, 3). Poland argues that the benefits of these initiatives should be more evenly distributed, noting that "it is important to ensure that the benefits of IPCEI implementation are evenly distributed, so that the initiative does not contribute to the further aggravation of economic development disparities between EU countries" (Ministry of Economic Development and Technology 2019, 4). This reflects a scepticism about whether these projects will genuinely support all EU Member States, including Poland, which lacks the same technological capabilities as some of the more advanced Western economies.

Moreover, Poland's Atlanticist orientation significantly influences its approach to technology. It explicitly emphasizes the importance of strong ties with the U.S. in technological cooperation, stating that it aims to "develop bilateral relations with Washington" in areas like "economy, energy, innovations, and new technologies" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2024, 12). Poland views cooperation with U.S. as a critical component of closing its own capability gaps, emphasizing that it wants "not only to use American technologies, but also to participate in their development" (Nowak 2022). This reflects a strategy of leveraging US technological strength to overcome its own limitations, and reinforces its preference for strong transatlantic partnerships.

To sum up, Poland's approach to ESA in technology reflects a conditional form of support, aligning with some of the initial expectations while also revealing unexpected dimensions. Contrary to the initial assumptions, the findings indicate that geopolitical actorness is more relevant than anticipated, as Poland recognizes the strategic importance of technological

leadership. As expected, Poland's Atlanticist orientation plays a critical role, reflecting its strong reliance on the U.S. for technological cooperation. Strategic culture proved less relevant in this context, as Polish discourse on technology focuses more on practical economic concerns than on broader security narratives. The capability–expectation gap framework also proved relevant, though in a different way than expected. Rather than viewing EU funding as a means to overcome national limitations, Polish discourse highlights concerns about the fairness and inclusivity of EU technological initiatives, emphasizing the need for a more balanced distribution of benefits. This has led Poland to seek closer technological cooperation with the U.S., which it views as a more reliable and capable partner in addressing its technological challenges.

5.3. Energy

Energy is strongly linked to security in Polish discourse, mainly due to Poland's energy dependence on Russia, which it views as a primary security threat. This connection is clearly reflected in Polish strategic thinking, where energy sovereignty is considered as a critical element of national security. As former Deputy Prime Minister Sasin emphasized, "Polish citizens and companies operating in Poland should not suffer from brutal actions and delusional ambitions of Russian leaders. Real energy security must be based on energy sovereignty" (2022). This statement highlights the importance of energy independence in Poland's strategic culture, where it is seen as essential for national resilience and security.

Poland's support for energy autonomy within the EU is also evident, even if the exact wording is not used. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs clearly articulated this position, stating that "Poland will support the development of the Energy Union through its continued efforts to liberalise the EU market, diversify supply sources, and develop transit infrastructure" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2017, 15). This indicates a recognition that a more

self-sufficient European energy system can reduce the leverage of external powers like Russia. This aligns closely with the geopolitical actorness framework, as Poland explicitly frames energy as a strategic tool, noting that "[i]t is crucial for Poland to ensure energy security. The markets of Poland and other countries of the Central European and Balkan regions are dominated by gas and oil supplies from the Russian Federation… Nord Stream 2… will generate the risk of using selective gas supplies as an instrument of political pressure" (Ministry of National Defence 2020, 8). This reflects an understanding that reducing energy dependence is not just about economic stability, but also about reducing vulnerability to external pressure, reinforcing the strategic importance of energy within ESA.

However, as with other sectors, Poland's support for ESA in energy is conditional. This caution is largely driven by its perception of the capability–expectation gap. Poland remains sceptical about whether EU energy initiatives will adequately consider its specific needs, given its reliance on coal and the economic challenges associated with transitioning to renewable energy. This concern is clearly articulated in the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology's position that "the implementation of the policy of reducing environmental burdens, limiting the role of coal in the economy and low emissions must take into account the diverse economic, geographical and social circumstances of all Member States" (Ministry of Economic Development and Technology 2019, 11). This reflects Poland's concern that EU climate policies may disproportionately impact its economy and may fail to address the unique challenges faced by Central and Eastern European countries.

Moreover, while Poland shares the European goal of energy sovereignty, its path toward achieving this goal diverges from that of the EU. Due to its continued dependence on coal, Poland finds it difficult to fully align with EU energy policies. This tension is clearly articulated in statements calling for a "fundamental revision of the existing climate and energy policies

ensuring they are not detached from geopolitical reality" (Sasin, 2022). Sasin further highlighted this concern, stating that "Poland bears significant costs related to the CO2 emissions trading system that is reflected in high energy production cost. We struggle to accept that model in times of war and energy crisis. It is time we changed this damaging model" (Sasin, 2022). This highlights Poland's scepticism toward EU climate policies, which it views as economically demanding and difficult to implement.

Poland's Atlanticist orientation also plays a significant role in its energy strategy. This transatlantic focus is evident in its emphasis on strong energy ties with the United States. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly states that "one of the energy priorities will be to strengthen the ties with our allies in the US" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2024, 25). This Atlanticist approach is further reflected in Poland's aim to "ensure the greater diversification of energy resources," with the acknowledgement that "the commitment and support of the USA to our efforts in this regard is of critical importance" (Nowak, 2022). This partnership is growing, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes that "now primarily based on LNG purchases, the energy partnership between Poland and the US is expanded into nuclear energy cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2024, 25). This reflects Poland's strategy to reduce reliance on a single energy source or region, consistent with its long-standing strategic culture of seeking multiple security guarantees and reducing the risk of dependence. As in the case of defence, this involves combining EU efforts with U.S. capabilities to achieve energy security that is free from Russian influence.

To sum up, ESA in energy is supported by Poland, but this support remains conditional. As expected, energy sovereignty is framed as a critical security issue, reflecting Poland's strategic goals of reducing dependence on its main security threat, Russia. The geopolitical actorness framework is highly relevant, as Poland clearly views energy as a geopolitical tool and supports

EU actions that reduce Russian influence. The Atlanticist orientation also proved significant, with US relations mentioned even more frequently than anticipated. This reflects Poland's preference for transatlantic partnerships in its energy strategy. Strategic culture framework is also significant, as Poland's focus on energy sovereignty reflects its tradition of seeking multiple alliances and avoiding dependence on a single power. Meanwhile, the capability–expectation gap remains a critical factor, as Poland remains sceptical about the EU's ability to address its specific energy needs, particularly given the economic challenges of transitioning away from coal.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of France and Poland has once again revealed that the two countries do not share the same level of support for, or understanding of ESA. Their answers to the questions—autonomy from whom, for what purpose, and in which sectors—differ significantly. For France, ESA is framed as independence from all external actors, across all sectors, with the aim of becoming a more geopolitically active and influential player. In contrast, Poland views it primarily in relation to Russia, while its autonomy from United States remains unquestioned. Poland expresses more support for ESA in technology and energy than in defence, but even then, its ambitions are more aligned with goals of economic resilience and development, rather than geopolitical influence. France's understanding of ESA is more ambitious, placing strong emphasis on independence and sovereignty. Poland, on the other hand, maintains a more moderate stance, expressing caution, and prioritising resilience, economic development, and strategic cooperation. However, while their positions diverge, they are not entirely opposite. Both countries share similar concerns about global developments and agree that Europe must take further steps. Where they differ is in how to achieve these goals and which priorities to address first.

The divergence between France and Poland is shaped by several factors, all of which are well captured by the conceptual frameworks employed in this study. One key reason lies in material conditions. France and Poland differ substantially in their capabilities, infrastructure, and levels of strategic development. These asymmetries influence how each perceives the feasibility of ESA in different sectors. France tends to be optimistic about the achievability of ESA-related goals, backed by its established military-industrial base and strategic resources. Poland, however, is more sceptical. It lacks many of the structural capabilities needed to support full autonomy and thus perceives ESA initiatives with caution. Even in areas such as technology

and industrial policy, where EU funding mechanisms are available, Poland remains cautious, questioning both the fairness of the allocation process and whether these initiatives truly align with its national interests. This leads to its more conditional and moderate level of support.

Strategic culture offers further explanatory depth. Poland's historical experiences, marked by external domination and broken alliances, have created a strong sense of caution and mistrust. The fear of abandonment by allies and its threat perception towards Russia continues to shape its reliance on NATO and the United States. Poland's strategic outlook remains focused on territorial defence, with limited interest in projecting global influence. France, in contrast, draws from a Gaullist tradition that places emphasis on national autonomy and global leadership. France has strategic interests beyond Europe, including in Africa and the Indo-Pacific. These interests often diverge from those of the U.S., strengthening France's preference for an autonomous EU. These historical traditions strongly influence how each country understands and positions itself in relation to ESA. France sees ESA, particularly in defence, as a means of expanding its global influence, whereas Poland sees it as a potential risk. Moreover, Poland's historical experiences have shaped a scepticism toward EU-led initiatives, which also influences its position on ESA in non-defence sectors. This mistrust, rooted in concerns over fairness, representation, and national interest, leads to a more cautious and conditional support for ESA. France, by contrast, views ESA in other sectors as a continuation of its strategic tradition of autonomy, with a clear priority on reducing dependence on external powers.

These findings closely relate to the geopolitical actorness framework. France supports a more geopolitically active EU because it aligns with its national interest. Across all three sectors examined, France consistently views ESA as a tool to enhance the EU's leadership on the global stage. For Poland, the geopolitical dimension of ESA is far less pronounced. While it

accepts the EU's role as a global actor, its support for ESA is primarily framed in terms of how it serves national interests, rather than the EU's global presence.

The Atlanticist–Europeanist divide is also useful in explaining these divergences, particularly Poland's firm alignment with the U.S. and NATO. However, this framework alone is insufficient, as the positions of France and Poland do not reflect a strict binary divide but rather a spectrum. Both cases demonstrated pragmatic flexibility depending on the sector and the issue. For instance, although France strongly advocates for autonomous EU capabilities in defence, it does not reject the value of NATO. Similarly, while Poland remains committed to transatlantic ties, it does not entirely dismiss EU initiatives. This pragmatic posture in both cases highlights the limitations of using the Atlanticist–Europeanist alone to capture their positions.

By bringing together these four conceptual frameworks—geopolitical actorness, strategic culture, the Atlanticist–Europeanist divide, and the capability–expectation gap—and applying them across multiple policy domains, this thesis makes a methodological contribution. These lenses, while present in broader EU debates, have rarely been used in combination to explain Member State discourses on ESA. This multidimensional approach offers a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing national positions and demonstrates the value of using multiple frameworks together in EU studies.

This analysis also reveals several important insights into the ongoing ESA debate. As widely discussed in the literature, France and Poland represent contrasting approaches to ESA. However, this study has shown that their positions are not simply dichotomous as pro-ESA versus anti-ESA. Instead, they differ in their priorities, capabilities, and strategic outlooks. Understanding these distinctions is essential for the future of EU policy. The findings suggest that convergence is possible, even among Member States often portrayed as being on opposite

sides of the debate. ESA can gain broader support if EU initiatives are responsive to national concerns. Even a country like Poland, traditionally seen as firmly Atlanticist, can support ESA, when its interests are acknowledged and addressed. Further research could expand the scope beyond France and Poland, incorporating additional cases from Northern, Southern, or smaller Member States to explore whether similar patterns hold. Because understanding how its members conceptualize autonomy, and under what conditions they are willing to support it, will remain critical, as the EU continues to navigate an increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape.

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