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European strategic cultures in flux? Case study on the European peace facility

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine catalysed a shift in the security and defence policies of the European Union (EU) and its member states. Notably, the deployment of the European Peace Facility (EPF) to finance lethal military materiel for Ukraine has been described as a gamechanger for the EU. This article explores to what extent and how the policy shift regarding the EPF signals broader evolution in EU strategic agency. Contributing to the study of European strategic cultures, the article investigates dynamics of change and convergence in the strategic discourses of the EU and selected member states regarding the EPF amid the exogenous shock and policy shift. Specifically, the article first traces the evolution of the EU's strategic narrative and its use of the EPF before and after the invasion. Second, drawing on interview data, it analyses four member states' approaches to this instrument. The findings point to a changed strategic narrative and an evolving practice regarding EU military assistance, highlighting the EU institutions' initiative-making power in crisis. While the member states continue to use the EPF for varying purposes, the joint experience of using the tool contributed to shifting national perspectives and growing consensus on the utility of EU security agency.

Keywords: CSDP; European Union; military assistance; strategic culture; Ukraine

> *It was a historic decision. It was the first time to finance lethal aid to partner states. I remember the discussions, that some member states were unwilling because there was no such tradition, and a legal barrier, and a psychological barrier, but it was overcome. And we are positively surprised that the EU managed to transfer itself and show flexibility.*
>
> Two senior officials, a Polish national security organisation, October 2023

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shattered Europe's security order and catalysed major security and defence policy changes both at the national and at the EU level in Europe.[1] The escalated war was quickly interpreted as a wake-up call for the EU regarding strategic agency, i.e. the ability to formulate common security and defence ends and means to achieve them.[2] This also re-energised discussion concerning the EU's and the member states' strategic cultures, captured in their norms,

[1]Jana Wrange, Rikard Bengtsson, and Douglas Brommesson, 'Resilience through total defence: Towards a shared security culture in the Nordic-Baltic region?', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:4 (2024), pp. 511–532.

[2]Steven Blockmans, 'Editorial: The birth of a geopolitical EU', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27:2 (2022), pp. 155–160; Per M. Norheim-Martinsen, *European Strategic Culture revisited: The Ends and Means of a Militarised European Union* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 2007), p.15.

values, and perceptions regarding security and defence, and the way these constrain and enable joint action. Early on after the full-scale war onset some commentators noted 'remarkable' reversals and rapid evolution in Europe's strategic culture as a response to the war.[3] The tone has since become more sceptical, however. Experts point to the critical defence deficits and dependencies of Europe and the divergent views regarding the support measures and priorities of the EU.[4]

One concrete EU policy change and instrument that encapsulates these dynamics is the European Peace Facility (EPF). Since the start of the full-scale war, the EU has approved €11.647 billion[5] of military support to the Ukrainian defence forces, including lethal support, through the 2021 established Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) off-budget tool. The provision of lethal aid to an external partner represents an unprecedented step for the EU, traditionally considered a civilian actor and previously lacking such means.[6] The former EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy (HR/VP),[7] Mr Josep Borrell, referred to the use of the EPF in support of Ukraine as breaking of taboos and as a gamechanger for the EU as a security actor. The Council has since adopted decisions on the provision of lethal support also to other partners. Nevertheless, the use of the EPF to support Ukraine has met with increasing difficulties due to (re-)emerged disagreements among the member states.[8]

This article is interested in the extent to which and how the shift in policy regarding the EPF indicates a change in the EU's strategic agency. This research puzzle is approached from-within the theoretical discussion on (EU) strategic culture. Instead of explaining a political actor's use of force and other means of managing insecurity solely based on material resources and relative capabilities, strategic culture places attention to the role of ideational factors such as history, identity-derived norms and values, and the discourses and practices that embed them.[9] In the case of the EU, strategic culture directs us to examine the (shared) norms and traditions that shape what is perceived as legitimate security and defence action for the EU, and the interplay between the discourses and practices that construct and constrain EU strategic agency.[10]

[3]Niklas Nováky and Peter Hefele, 'Russia's war against Ukraine is changing Europe's strategic culture', *Martens Centre InBrief*, (March 2022).

[4]Niklas Helwig, 'Culture shock: The EU's foreign and security policy and the challenges of the European Zeitenwende', *Zeitschrift Für Politikwissenschaft*, 33 (2023), pp. 487–497; Milan Igrutinovic and Slavana Curcic, 'The strength of the intergovernmental principle in the common security and defence policy and the weakness of the EU's strategic autonomy ambitions in the context of the Ukrainian crisis', *Medjunarodni Problemi*, 76:2 (2024), pp. 223–248; Tyyne Karjalainen 'EU Support for Ukraine: The Paradox of Insufficient Assistance', *FIIA Briefing Paper*, 385 (2024).

[5]This figure covers solely funding through the EPF, plus the €5 billion 'Ukraine Assistance Fund' which was established under the EPF in March 2024. See Bruno Bilquin, 'Ukraine, the European Peace Facility and additional financing', *European Parliament Research Service: At a Glance*, (September 2024).

[6]It is exceptional also considering the target region, the Eastern neighbourhood, where the EU previously has avoided military activity. See Tyyne Karjalainen and Katariina Mustasilta, 'European Peace Facility: From a conflict prevention tool to a defender of security and geopolitical interests', *TEPSA Briefs,* (May 2023); Catherine Hoeffler, Stéphanie C. Hofmann, and Frédéric Mérand, 'The Polycrisis and EU Security and Defence Competences', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31:10 (2024), pp. 3224–48.

[7]The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP).

[8]European Commission, 'Service for foreign policy instruments: European Peace Facility', available at: https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/european-peace-facility_en, accessed 10 November 2024.

[9]Colin S. Gray, 'Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back', *Review of International Studies*, 25:1 (1999), pp. 49–69; Brigitte E. Hugh, 'Growth and refinement across the field of strategic culture: from first generation to fourth', in K. M. Kartchner, B. D. Bowen and J. L. Johnson (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 31–46.

[10]Norheim-Martinsen, *European strategic culture revisited*; Alessia Biava, Margriet Drent, and Graeme P. Herd, 'Characterizing the European Union's strategic culture: An analytical framework', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49:6 (2011), pp. 1227–1248; Christoph O. Meyer, 'Nature, Emergence, and Limitations of an EU Strategic Culture', in K. M. Kartchner, B. D. Bowen & J. L. Johnson (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 106–120.

Thus far, studies on the EU's strategic culture have focused on exploring the strength and nature of EU strategic culture as a whole.[11] The analysis has centred on the issue of convergence versus divergence of member states' national strategic cultures and on capturing EU strategic culture in public narratives and EU crisis management action.[12] While perspectives on the outlook differ, some scholarly consensus can be found on a nascent yet evolving EU strategic culture, characterised by the historical idea of EU as a peace project, a comprehensive and multilateralism-focused approach to foreign and security policy, and evolving security and defence capabilities that are constrained by versatile member states' perspectives on the role and priorities for the EU.[13]

We build on and contribute to these insights by moving the focus from the strength of EU strategic culture to the mechanisms through which it evolves. Specifically, we leverage recent strategic culture scholarly debates to explore the interplay of exogenous shocks, changes in dominant strategic narratives, and evolving strategic practices in the case of the EPF.[14] Moreover, we contribute to understanding agency in strategic culture change by shedding light on the EU institutions' agency and exploring the interplay of member states' perspectives of the EPF. Empirically, the article analyses the EU institutions' strategic narratives concerning the EPF before and after the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine, using Last's analytical framework of system, identity, and issue plot narratives and exploring how changes in these interact with policy and practice change.[15] Moreover, to shed light on the interplay between the evolving EU-level discourse on military support and the member states dynamics we draw on novel interview data to analyse four member states' strategic narratives and policies regarding the EPF in pre- and post-invasion periods.

We first review the relevant literature on European strategic cultures and set the theoretical and analytical framework for the analysis. The analysis then traces the evolution of the EPF from the EU institutions perspective: it identifies a change in the strategic narrative and, to a less clear extent, practice concerning the EPF after the onset of the war. The analysis also points to initiative-making agency of the EU institutions in times of crisis. The second analytical section turns to the member states perspectives with a focus on Germany, Poland, France and Finland. It demonstrates converging systemic narratives among the member states, as well as evolving perceptions regarding the EU as a security actor, even when national divergences concerning the use of the EPF and approach to the EU persist. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between EU-level and national dynamics of perceptual lenses, norms, and practices regarding the EU's strategic agency. The Conclusion discusses the implications of the key findings for the EU's strategic agency and culture evolution.

EU strategic culture: from a paradox to an evolving discourse and emerging practice?

The extent to which the EU can be considered a strategic actor in foreign and security affairs has been (ir)regularly debated since the late 1990s and the first attempts to formulate the Union's

[11]See Meyer, 'Nature, Emergence, and Limitations'.

[12]Christoph O. Meyer, *The Quest for a European Strategic Culture: Changing Norms on Security and Defence in the European Union* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Thierry Tardy, 'The European Union: from conflict prevention to "preventive engagement," still a civilian power lacking a strategic culture', *International Journal*, 62:3 (2007), pp. 539–558; Laura Chappell and Petar Petrov, 'The European Union's crisis management operations: Strategic culture in action?', *EIOP European Integration Online Papers*, 18 (2014), pp. 1–24; Xue Mi, 'Strategic cultures between the EU member states: convergence or divergence? *European Security*, 32:4 (2022), pp. 558–582.

[13]Per M. Norheim-Martinsen, 'EU strategic culture: When the means becomes the end', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 32:3 (2011), pp. 517–534; Biava et al., 'Characterizing the European Union's strategic culture'; Mi, 'Strategic cultures between the EU member states'.

[14]See Iver B. Neumann and Henrikki Heikka, 'Grand strategy, strategic culture, practice: The social roots of Nordic defence', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 40:1 (2005), pp. 5–23; Jeannie L. Johnson, *The Marines Counterinsurgency and Strategic Culture: Lessons Learned and Lost in America's Wars* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018); Edward D. Last, *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-state Actors: A Comparative Study of Salafi-Jihadist Groups* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[15]Last, *Strategic Culture*, pp. 31–32.

common security and defence policy. The most sceptical views link strategic agency exclusively to nation states and their fully-fledged military forces, leaving little room for an analysis of an international organisation such as the EU.[16] Most scholars today, however, adopt a broader view and study the unity, strength, constraints, and motivations of the EU in the field of security and defence.[17] They approach the strength and evolution of EU strategic agency through analysing whether it '(1) has a capacity to formulate common security interests (ends), and (2) may generate relevant capabilities (means) to defend these common interests'.[18] The scrutiny is on the priorities and objectives (ends of strategy) of the EU and how it uses diverse instruments of power (military and civilian) to achieve those ends.[19]

This brings in the concept of strategic culture and more specifically the idea of a shared EU strategic culture.[20] Strategic culture can be understood as the historically constructed and identity-derived ideational grounds that enable and constrain a political actor (or community) in formulating security ends and means. The concept dates to the 1970s and Jack L. Snyder's groundbreaking study[21] of Soviet nuclear arms strategy that set the scene to study how socialisation into different organisational and politico-historical contexts shapes strategic choices. Snyder defined strategic culture as 'the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other'.[22] The concept calls for attention to the historical experiences and identity-shaped norms, values, rules and practices that frame foreign and security policy choices.[23]

By extension, EU strategic culture can be thought of as such common norms, values, and experiences that shape the EU's management of strategic insecurity.[24] Studies have marked the EU's historical ethos as a peace project as well as its comprehensive and multilateralism-focused approach as underlining the EU's agency.[25] At the same time, assessments of the strength of shared EU strategic culture have mostly ranged from cautious to highly sceptical. Scholars point to the member states' divergent strategic cultures regarding the use of military force and approaches to transatlantic security cooperation, for example, attesting that shared strategic culture can at best be

[16]See Sven Biscop and Per M. Norheim-Martinsen, 'CSDP: the strategic perspective', in Kurowska, X., Breuer, F. (eds.) Explaining the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 63–85.

[17]Christoph O. Meyer, 'Convergence towards a European strategic culture? A constructivist framework for explaining changing norms', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:4 (2005), pp. 523–549; Meyer, *The Quest for a European Strategic Culture*; Tardy, 'The European Union'; Norheim-Martinsen, *European Strategic Culture revisited*; Norheim-Martinsen, 'EU strategic culture'; Charles C. Pentland, 'From words to deeds: Strategic culture and the European Union's Balkan military missions', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 32:3 (2011), pp. 551–566; Chappell and Petrov, 'The European Union's crisis management operations'; Janne Haaland Matlary, 'When soft power turns hard: Is an EU strategic culture possible?', *Security Dialogue*, 37:1 (2006), pp. 105–121; Paul Cornish and Geoffrey Edwards, 'The strategic culture of the European Union: A progress report', *International Affairs*, 81: 4 (2005), pp. 801–820; Adrian Hyde-Price, 'European Security, Strategic Culture, and the Use of Force', *European Security*, 13: 4 (2004), pp. 323–343.

[18]Norheim-Martinsen, *European Strategic Culture Revisited*, p. 15.

[19]Chappell and Petrov, 'The European Union's crisis management operations'.

[20]We prefer the term shared EU strategic culture rather than European strategic culture, contending that such agency is not merely a sum of member states cultures but also influenced by the supranational EU institutions and communities. See Meyer, 'Nature, Emergence, and Limitations' for a discussion.

[21]Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1977).

[22]Snyder, The Soviet Strategic Culture, p. 8.

[23]Gray, 'Strategic culture as context'.

[24]Biava et al., 'Characterizing the European Union's strategic culture', p.8.

[25]Chappell and Petrov, 'The European Union's crisis management operations', pp.7–9; Biava et al., 'Characterizing the European Union's strategic culture', p.18.

found at the level of the lowest common denominators.[26] The diverging national strategic cultures are understood as among the key impediments of effective EU security and defence action.[27]

Since Snyder's elaborations, the study of strategic culture has undergone several generations of scholarly debates.[28] Recently, the so-called fourth generation scholars have directed attention to contestation within strategic cultures, the interplay between discourse and practice in constituting strategic culture, and related mechanisms of change in strategic culture.[29] Questioning the monolithic and static nature of strategic culture, studies have approached strategic culture as consisting of diverse schemes or sub-cultures with somewhat different interpretations of the world, the actor's role in it, and the preferred modes of action and that compete over influence in explaining, justifying, and providing answers to strategic needs and questions.[30]

These later iterations of debate have opened space to study dynamics of strategic culture in a more nuanced manner, both in terms of the levels of strategic (sub-)culture as well as regarding strategic culture dynamics in specific issues. These approaches are useful in studying the EU and its inter-governmental and supranational nature that almost by definition invokes the notion of strategic cultural heterogeneity. Johnson and Berrett, for example, posit that the dynamics of competition among strategic sub-cultures may vary across specific situations and issues of interest.[31] Albeit encultured and socialised within the broader political community, political and military elites, expert communities, and other *agents of change* may shape strategic culture from-within their strategic sub-cultures and social practices.[32] Drawing on these approaches, our study builds on three specific notions that provide theoretical and methodological direction for our analysis of the evolving EU strategic agency and the EPF as a case study.

First, whilst diverging national norms related to the use of force certainly matter for joint EU action, shared EU-level strategic culture does not demand a complete convergence of member states' strategic cultures. As Meyer notes, EU-level strategic agency is better thought of as 'a separate layer in which there is agreement between the member states concerning what the EU's interests are, what type of action should be taken in various circumstances and the partners with which the EU should work'.[33] In other words, what matters is not whether the national strategic cultures

[26]Hyde-Price, 'European Security'; Tardy, 'The European Union'; Chappel and Petrov, 'The European Union's crisis management operations'; Howorth, 'EU–NATO cooperation: the key to Europe's security future', *European Security*, 26:3 (2018), pp. 454–459.

[27]See Thierry Tardy, 'Does European defence really matter? Fortunes and misfortunes of the Common Security and Defence Policy', *European Security*, 27:2 (2018), pp. 119–137. Much of the empirical scrutiny on converging EU strategic culture dates to the early 2000s and 2010s and its strategic, institutional, and capability environment. See Hyde-Price, 'European Security'; Frank, 2011, 'Comparing Germany's and Poland's ESDPs. Roles, path dependencies, learning and socialization', in Harnisch, S., Frank, C. and Maull H. W. (eds.) *Role Theory in International Relations* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 131–146; Chappel, *Germany, Poland and the Common Security and Defence Policy: Converging Security and Defence Perspectives in an Enlarged EU* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Heiko Biehl, Bastian Giegerich, and Alexandra Jones, *Strategic Cultures in Europe Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent* (Potsdam: Springer, 2013).

[28]See Alistair Johnston, 'Thinking about strategic culture', *International Security*, 19:4 (1995), pp. 32–64; Gray, 'Strategic Culture as Context'; Stuart Poore, 'What is the context? A reply to the Gray-Johnston debate on strategic culture', *Review of International Studies*, 29:2 (2003), pp. 279–284; Hugh, 'Growth and refinement across the field of strategic culture'.

[29]Alan Bloomfield, 'Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33(3), pp. 437–461; Neumann and Heikka, 'Grand strategy, strategic culture, practice'.

[30]ibid; Tamir Libel, 'Strategic culture as a (discursive) institution: a proposal for a falsifiable theoretical model with computational operationalization', *Defence Studies*, 20:4 (2020a), pp. 353–372; Tamir Libel, 'Explaining the security paradigm shift: strategic culture, epistemic communities, and Israel's changing national security policy', *Defence Studies*, 16:2 (2016), pp. 137–156; Tamir Libel 'Rethinking strategic culture: A computational (social science) discursive-institutionalist approach', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43:5 (2020b), pp. 686–709; Last, *Strategic culture*; Johnson, *The Marines Counterinsurgency and Strategic Culture*.

[31]Jeannie Johnson and Matthew T. Berrett, 'Cultural topography: A new research tool for intelligence analysis', *Studies in Intelligence*, 55:2 (2011), pp. 1–22 (p.6).

[32]Last, *Strategic Culture*, p.19; Neumann and Heikka, 'Grand strategy, strategic culture, practice'; Libel, 'Strategic culture as a (discursive) institution', Libel 'Rethinking strategic culture'.

[33]Meyer, *The Quest for a European Strategic Culture*, p. 7; see also Meyer, 'Convergence towards a European strategic culture?'.

converge *per se* but whether, when, and how convergence takes place in member states' dominant ideas, norms, and practices regarding the role of the EU.[34] In this regard and acknowledging the time-variant dynamics of strategic culture competition,[35] the dynamics of convergence among member states can vary and be studied across specific strategic issues on the EU's agenda, such as with regard the EPF.

A second theoretical underpinning acknowledges the agency of the EU institutions – alongside the member states – in shaping EU strategic culture. Previous research suggests that EU institutions can act as norms producers and facilitators of change, pushing forward common EU approach and shaping member states' policies and (strategic) identities in doing so.[36] Convergence of strategic cultures may come about from-within EU-level supranational norms and practices diffusion rather than solely through the member states.[37] This alludes to the EU strategic culture being more than the sum of member states' histories, norms, and practices. Rather, it is also (re)constructed through the socialisation and institutionalisation of a distinctive identity, norms, and practices of the EU.[38] The role of EU institutions and other agents of change can be particularly influential in times of external shock and increased uncertainty, that challenge the dominant narratives and policy repertoires and open competition for (latent) strategic sub-cultures and their representatives with diverse norms and practices.[39]

Third, strategic culture (change) consists of interplay between strategic discourse and practice.[40] As a system of statements, discourse refers to the shared social rules of a setting on what, how and by whom something is conceived/talked/acted about. It is the ideational and linguistic vehicle that embeds the dominant norms, values, and beliefs within a strategic culture.[41] Discourses enable, give meaning to, and justify practices, i.e. socially recognised patterns of behaviour. However, rather than a one-way street from discourse to a set of practices, the latter ultimately define strategic culture and reconstruct and reshape the discursive part.[42] Practices feed back to dominant beliefs on the appropriateness and purpose of action.

Notably, strategic practices should not be conflated with any specific policy response nor does a policy change necessitate strategic cultural change.[43] First responses to environment changes do not automatically lead to deeper practice or discourse changes in strategic cultures and can simply remain at the level of policy changes with diverse, encultured ways to interpret them.[44] In the case of the EU, policy changes and evolving EU practices may be enabled from-within diverse national strategic cultures even without convergence of these. Policy responses may, however, signal or induce shifts in the dominance of diverse strategic sub-cultures and/or contestation within strategic culture, catalyse new or changing practices, and through these mechanisms gradually influence strategic culture.[45] Hence, whilst not a constitutive element in changing strategic culture, policy shifts may become instrumental steps in the process of strategic culture change.

[34]See also Mi, 'Strategic cultures between the EU member states'.

[35]Bloomfield, 'Time to move on'; Johnson, *The Marines Counterinsurgency and Strategic Culture*.

[36]Norheim-Martinsen, *European Strategic Culture Revisited*.

[37]Alessia Biava, 'The Emergence of a Strategic Culture within the Common Security and Defence Policy', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 16 (2011), pp. 41–58.

[38]ibid. This connects to the broader discussion on the role of epistemic and expert communities in shaping strategic culture. See for example Cross, for a study on the EU Military Committee as a transnational epistemic community shaping EU norms and culture on security and defence. Mai'a K. Davis Cross, 'The military dimension of European security: An epistemic community approach', Millenium, 42:1 (2013), pp. 45–64.

[39]Libel, 'Explaining the security paradigm shift'; Cross, 'The military dimension'.

[40]Neumann and Heikka, 'Grand strategy, strategic culture, practice'; Last, *Strategic Culture*; Charles P. Pentland, 'From words to deeds: strategic culture and the European Union's Balkan military missions', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 32:3 (2011), pp. 551–566.

[41]Neumann and Heikka, 'Grand strategy, strategic culture, practice', p.11.

[42]Iver B. Neumann, 'Returning practice to the linguistic turn: the case of diplomacy', Millenium, 32 (2002), pp. 627–52.

[43]Bloomfield, 'Time to Move On', p.439, 448–49.

[44]Chappell and Petrov, 'The European Union's crisis management operations', p.6.

[45]Last, *Strategic Culture*.

We follow Last and others in empirically focusing on the evolution of strategic narratives alongside policy shifts and broader strategic practices.[46] Strategic narratives are considered as the declaratory and somewhat aspirational expressions of strategic discourse, as the 'key mechanism through which strategic cultures reproduce, expand or limit the cultural boundaries for what a strategic actor can or is expected to do'.[47] Narratives are a storied way of articulating one's view of the world, including oneself, and the appropriate ways of acting.[48] As a form of communication, strategic narratives both indicate the purpose and goals of strategic behaviour as well as give interpretation to the chosen action.[49] The relationship between strategic narratives and practices requires empirical scrutiny, as incoherences between the two may suggest ambiguity, weakness, or change within strategic (sub-)cultures.[50] In the case of the EU, scrutiny is needed not only in the relationship between dominant EU strategic narrative and evolving patterns of behaviour but in how national storylines accommodate, justify, and shape EU action. In the analysis we investigate strategic narratives at the EU and member states level regarding the EPF, how these correspond to the policy shift and subsequent practice evolution regarding military support, and what this tells us about the strategic cultural dynamics of agency, convergence, and change.

The EPF as a case study – methodological framework

This study explores strategic culture dynamics as captured in the strategic narrative and practice evolution regarding the use of the EPF before and after the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine. As of its adoption as an off-budget CSDP tool in March 2021, the EPF has served as the EU's key financial instrument covering common military and defence (support) action outside the Union's borders.[51] The facility consists of two pillars: one for the common costs of CSDP operations, and an assistance measure pillar for financing support to third parties and their peace operations. Functionally, the EPF broadens the EU's capability to act by having a global scope and allowing financing of lethal materiel support to EU partners.

We approach the EPF as a case of the EU's doctrine on military and defence assistance, paying attention to strategic culture dynamics in a specific strategic issue rather than as a whole.[52] As an intergovernmental tool that requires unanimous decision-making to be deployed[53], the EPF constitutes a fruitful case study of the shared rules, norms, and habits regarding the EU's military support to partners as well as the convergence among member states over this. The EPF represents a longer-term attempt to strengthen the EU's security and defence agency, alongside initiatives such as Permanent Structured Co-Operation (PESCO) or the European Defence Fund (EDF).[54] The sudden policy change with the EPF in the face of the war presents an opportunity to compare the pre- and post-onset narratives and practice around the EPF.

The analysis consists of two parts and levels. The first part compares the key elements in the EU institutions' strategic narrative regarding the EPF in pre- and post-onset periods and discusses these in connection with how the instrument is used. Following the theoretical considerations, we

[46]Last, *Strategic Culture*; Mi, 'Strategic cultures between the EU member states'; Pentland, 'From words to deeds'; Chappel and Petrov, 'The European Union's crisis management operations'.

[47]Norheim-Martinsen, 'EU strategic culture: When the means becomes the end', p.521.

[48]Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006); Jens Ringsmore and Berit Kaja Borgesen, 'Shaping public attitudes towards the deployment of military power: NATO, Afghanistan, and the use of strategic narratives', *European Security*, 20:4 (2011), pp. 505–528.

[49]Last, *Strategic Culture*.

[50]Ibid.

[51]The EPF was adopted by the Council in March 2021. It replaced two existing financial instruments covering the Union's common costs' regarding military operations and military and defence support: the Athena mechanism and the African Peace Facility.

[52]See Johnson, *The Marines Counterinsurgency and Strategic Culture*.

[53]Its in-built flexibility allows states to constructively abstain from the joint decisions.

[54]Katariina Mustasilta, 'Preventing What for Whom?: EU Conflict Prevention Efforts in Pursuit of Autonomy', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27 (Special Issue, 2022), pp. 39–60.

approach the EU institutions' – including the Council's – narrative on the EPF as more than the sum of the member states' inter-governmental negotiations and pay explicit attention to the role of the EU institutional foreign policy heads in shaping it. Second, to capture the dynamics of convergence and divergence of member states' strategic cultural approaches to the EPF in response to the war as well as the interplay between the EU- and national level strategic cultures, the second part of the analysis zooms into EU member states, Germany, France, Poland, and Finland in particular, and their strategic narratives and policies on the EPF. The country selection follows a most diverse cases selection method in that it covers major, small, Eastern, Central, Western, old and young EU members, the perspective of the key funders of the instrument, and countries with a tradition of giving military support and not giving it (to Ukraine).[55]

Throughout the analysis, we follow Last, who adopts a three-dimensional analytical framework of strategic narratives, divided into system, identity, and issue narratives.[56] System narrative – corresponding to perceptual lens or worldview[57] – refers to an actor's view of the strategic environment in which it acts. To capture it we focus on pre- and post-invasion storylines on the European security environment. Specifically, we analyse how the EU and the member states narrate logics characterising relations between states (e.g. cooperative or competitive) in the European security system and the key threats and challenges in the security environment. Identity narrative refers to an actor's self-image and narrated key values (including underlying objectives) as a strategic actor. This directs us to identify role and value assignments regarding the EU: what's the EU's role in the world in the national and EU-level strategic narratives, how is it portrayed as an actor regarding its objectives and values? Finally, issue narrative captures the purpose, norms, and functions concerning the issue at stake.[58] It's the most central narrative for us to examine how the purpose and key functions of the EPF are communicated and emphasised. What is the EPF aligned with as a tool and policy for the EU? What specific objectives and issues are assigned to it? Following this framework allows us to systematically analyse and categorise EU narratives on the EPF in pre- and post-onset periods and examine their change, convergence, and connection to how the EPF is used.

The data of this first part of the analysis includes the Council Conclusions to set up the EPF, strategic orientation document regarding the EPF, the Strategic Compass and its annual update report, fact sheets on the EPF, CFSP priorities report, and statements of the Presidents of the Commission and Council as well as the HR/VP in the wake of the war. We limit our analysis to cover documentation from the adoption of the EPF (March 2021) until early 2024 (the lifespan of the EPF at the time of the analysis). Alongside the qualitative narrative analysis of the documentation, we track the concrete EPF policy in pre- and post-war periods to identify changes in broader practices regarding the EU's military assistance to third parties. We focus particularly on the assistance measures pillar and the issue of lethal aid support, as it represents the clearest departure from the EU's business as usual action as a foreign and security policy actor.

The second part of the analysis employs a data set of 40 interviews conducted with member state and EU officials: nine interviews with German stakeholders (10 interviewees), nine interviews with French stakeholders (10 interviewees), five interviews with Polish stakeholders (7 interviewees), six interviews with Finnish stakeholders (7 interviewees), six interviews with EU officials, two interviews with Ukrainian stakeholders and three interviews with other member state representatives. Interviews in EU institutions, other member states, and Ukraine enhance credibility of the data by providing an external perspective on the strategic cultures of the focus countries. Most of the

[55]Southern Europe is omitted due to interview data availability restrictions. Yet, regarding the issue of EU military support, capturing France and Germany was considered the key, as they constitute major EU powers and have diverse historical approaches to EU security agency. The inclusion of Finland and Poland introduces further variance regarding strategic cultural traditions in military support, interventions and alliances.

[56]Last, *Strategic Culture*, pp. 31–32.

[57]See Johnson, *The Marines Counterinsurgency and Strategic Culture*; Hugh, 'Growth and refinement across the field'.

[58]Last, *Strategic Culture*, pp. 31–32.

interviewees work for foreign or defence ministries or their diplomatic representations, or for the EU institutions. All interviewees had been involved in or had closely followed the decision-making on the EPF and the evolution of related national policies. The interviews were conducted as thematic interviews during the spring, summer, and autumn of 2023. Full anonymity was granted to the interviewees to ensure that they can speak freely. Supplementary Material, Annex 1–2 provide a list of interviewees and present the applied general interview structure.

The interviewees are viewed both as informants and as agents constituting strategic culture. As such we feel confident that the source and substance of the interview data can provide valuable and credible material regarding the EPF-relevant national beliefs and the narratives communicating these, even when such data arguably differs from that of official strategic documents as data for analysis of strategic narratives. The analysis of the interview data, which consisted of several rounds of qualitative analysis informed by the strategic narrative framework, proceeded from data compilation and organisation into pre- and post-onset notions regarding the EPF to subsequent identification and categorisation of the core elements and trends in the narratives for each country case. In the analysis, we present narrative elements that rise from the data as a whole and exemplify this with direct quotations. The high number of interviewees is due to broad agenda of the interviews (see Supplementary Material, Annex 2), which were conducted as part of a broader project on the EU's and its member states policies. Some of the interviews covered EPF in detail whilst some more marginally.

As the interviews were only conducted after the full-scale invasion, remarks by the interviewees about the pre-war period need to be interpreted as retrospective reflections and possibly shaped by on-going developments on the ground. Moreover, the member state perspectives on the EPF should be understood as filtered through the interviewed officials: another sample of data could have underlined other strategic cultural aspects; this analysis should be read as one informed by the 46 officials, demonstrating dynamics of convergence, divergence, and change in strategic narratives rather than painting a holistic picture of the core components of the member states' and/or EU's strategic agency.

Analysis part I: EPF – an instrument in search of a strategy no more?

From pre-onset ambiguity to a policy shift and post-onset confidence in strategic narrative

When first proposing the EPF in 2017, the former HR/VP Federica Mogherini (2017) justified the tool on the grounds of the changed international system and the ambition set in the Global Strategy for the EU to strengthen its security and defence capabilities.[59] Member states perceptions of ineffective security support by the EU to its external partners in Central Africa, the Horn and in the Sahel, motivated the initiative. The EU was considered weak in relation to its geopolitical competitors (e.g. Russia, Turkey) in the realm of security partnerships.[60] The concrete set-up of the EPF reflects this will to strengthen the EU's military and security support mechanisms.

As Table 1 depicts, despite having its background in security and geostrategic interests of the EU, the strategic narrative regarding the EPF upon its adoption in the pre-onset period was considerably vague and peacebuilding focused. The Council Decision 2021/509 establishes the EPF to 'preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security' in accordance with the Treaty of the EU. It ties the EPF primarily to the EU's conflict preventor role and to the principles set out in the EU's Integrated Approach to external conflicts and crises, reinforcing 'the linkages

[59]Federica Moghereni, 'Speech by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the 'Building on vision forward to action: delivering on EU security and defence' event', Brussels, 13 December 2017.

[60]The Treaties of the EU forbid the EU budget to be used for military ends and the former instruments did not allow for lethal materiel provisions. See e.g. Paul D. Williams and Hussein Yusuf Ali, 'The European Union Training Mission in Somalia: An Assessment', *SIPRI Background Paper* (December 2020).

Table 1. Pre- and post-onset strategic narratives on the EPF. The cells present core elements regarding the EU's narrative on the EPF, categorised into the three narrative elements and pre- and post-onset eras. Data sources (acronyms for the table): EPF fact sheets (FC) 2021, 2023, 2024; Strategic Compass 2022 (SC); Strategic Compass Annual Update (SCU) 2023; Council Conclusions 2021 (CC); Strategic Orientation (SO) for the EPF 2022; CFSP-report: Our priorities – document 2023 (OP).

Strategic narrative on the EPF	Pre-onset of the war	Post-onset of the war
System/worldview narrative	More challenging global environment (FS 2021); increasing security threats against Europe (SC); a shifting geopolitical landscape (SO)	Era of strategic competition (FC 2023), complex security threats; return of war in Europe (SCU)
EU identity narrative (including values and objectives)	Conflict preventor, responsible contributor to international peace and security (FC 2021; CC); evolving global security provider (FC 2021); in accordance with human rights obligations (CC; FC 2021); coherent and holistic actor (CC); need to strengthen role in security and defence (SO)	Provider of security for citizens and partners, in accordance with human rights obligations (FC 2023); contributor to European and international security (SCU); better security partner, strengthened geopolitical posturing (SCU)
Issue narrative (plot regarding the EPF)	Enhanced reliability and predictability (FS 2021, SO), effective and rapid crisis response and conflict prevention (FS 2021; CC), long-term capacity building (SC; CC; FS 2021); more robust mechanism to support CSDP military operations and partners (SO); part of the Integrated Approach (CC; SO), linked to civilian CSDP and development cooperation (CC); military support first in association with CSDP operations (CC, SO); capacity building of partners; contributing to peace-support operations; priority in AU support (SO)	Ensures all types of equipment (including lethal) and infrastructure to armed forces of partners (FS 2023); delivery of equipment and infrastructure prioritized (FS 2023); game-changer in military assistance and making 'train and equip' model real (SCU); stepping up as a partner (SCU); lethal support to Ukraine and more broadly possible (SCU); lethal aid radical paradigm shift in foreign and security policy (OP); military support to African peace-support operations (OP)

between sustainable development, humanitarian action and conflict prevention and peacebuilding'.[61] Close connection is drawn between the EPF, civilian CSDP, and development cooperation tools of the Union – the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – as well as Security Sector Reform framework.[62]

There is also an emphasis on continuity, starting from the EPF's name: following the African Peace Facility, the EPF is presented as a more effective version of the EU's contribution to peace support operations and conflict prevention capacities of partners around the world. How exactly the enhanced military support to partners is to be used in conflict prevention remains undefined and the lethal support possibility under-emphasised in the narrative. Situations that present critical security threats to the Union are mentioned as priorities for action, and the commitment to African-led peace support operations and the Union's neighbourhood is reiterated.[63] The Union's own and international law, particularly regarding human rights, are highlighted in connection to the assistance measures.[64] Even in the Strategic Compass (published just after the onset of the

[61]The Council of the EU, 'Council Decision 2021/519 of 22 March 2021 establishing a European Peace Facility and repealing Decision (CFSP) 2015/528', 3, available at https://www.stradalex.eu/en/se_src_publ_leg_eur_jo/toc/leg_eur_jo_3_20210324_102/doc/ojeu_2021.102.01.0014.01, accessed 13 November 2024.
[62]Ibid.
[63]Ibid.
[64]Ibid., article 56.

full-scale war) the EPF is primarily presented in connection to the Integrated Approach and as a capacity building tool alongside the NDICI.[65]

There is a clear shift in the EU's strategic narrative regarding the EPF after the onset of the full-scale war and the decision to use the EPF to provide lethal aid to Ukraine, as Table 1 showcases with the pre- and post-onset narratives. With regard to the story regarding the system/security environment, the somewhat vague references to a shifting and 'more challenging environment' change into clearer notions of 'era of strategic competition' and 'return of war in Europe' in the post-onset period.[66] In general, the system narrative shifts from holding on to a logic of cooperation to recognising competition as the increasingly central logic in the system.

In terms of the EU's identity narrative, there is a less drastic yet interesting shift from a primacy on conflict prevention and peace and security preservation to a story about a provider of security and growth as a security and geopolitical actor. Most glaringly, the issue narrative regarding the EPF – i.e. the norms and purpose concerning the EPF – undergo a change from the ambiguous and continuity-focused narrative to a more confident story that emphasises the new military assistance possibilities. The annual progress report of the Strategic Compass in 2023, for example, emphasises the EU's enhanced ability to provide robust materiel to partners and does not mention the Integrated Approach.[67]

These shifts are clear when comparing the EU's EPF fact sheets in different periods. Whereas the early fact sheet frames the facility as a conflict prevention tool, the post-onset iterations have dropped references to conflict prevention and peacebuilding altogether. Instead, they introduce the EPF first and foremost through reference to the system-level threat and the need to protect EU and partner states: the facility 'expands the EU's ability to provide security for its citizens and its partners'.[68] The previously under-emphasised new mechanism of more flexible assistance measures is now highlighted, with the EU being able to provide 'all types of equipment and infrastructure to the armed forces of EU partners'. Beyond Ukraine, the robust assistance measures are more broadly at the forefront of the narrative.

EU leaders' statements reinforce the changed narratives. At the Schuman Security Forum in 2023, the HR/VP credits the use of the EPF to provide lethal support to Ukraine (and potentially others) as rectifying and renewing from the perspective of the EU's geopolitical posturing.[69] According to the President of the Commission the use of the EPF in Ukraine marks a 'watershed' moment for the EU.[70] This is not to say that the EPF would be completely disconnected from the EU's traditional identity as a conflict prevention and peace actor. Yet, the earlier emphasis on continuity has clearly given away to an emphasis on the EU's growth as a security and geopolitical actor.

What do these narrative changes tell us about the EU's strategic agency? First, the ambiguity regarding the pre-onset narrative can be argued to reflect a broader tension in the EU's strategic agency. Despite acknowledging the need to strengthen the EU's means to respond to security threats, there is a hesitance to move away from the traditional narrative highlighting the EU's

[65]The Council of the EU, 'A Strategic Compass for security and defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens values and interests and contributes to international peace and security', (2022), available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf, accessed 12 November 2024.

[66]European External Action Service (EEAS), 'The European Peace Facility', (first version 2021, updated 2023, 2024), newest version available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2025/EU-peace-facility_2025_2.pdf, accessed 16 June 2025; EEAS, 'Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence', (2023), available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/StrategicCompass_1stYear_Report.pdf, accessed 16 June 2025.

[67]EEAS, 'Annual Progress Report'.

[68]EEAS, 'The European Peace Facility'.

[69]Joseph Borrell, 'Speech at the Schuman Security and Defence Forum', Brussels, 21 March 2023.

[70]Ursula von der Leyen, 'Statement by President vond er Leyen on further measures to respond to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', Brussels 27 February 2022.

conflict prevention and peacebuilding identity in the pre-onset period. As the next section demonstrates, this is connected to the divergences among the member states about the nature of the security system in which the EU operates. The EU's venturing to the sphere of militarised support sparked controversies within the EU institutions and member states and was strongly criticised by European peacebuilding organizations.[71] This ambiguity regarding the EPF may help understanding the hesitancy to highlight the new assistance measure possibilities and the conservative attitude regarding their use: no lethal materiel was allocated during the first year of the EPF. As with earlier security and defence capabilities such as the Battles Groups concept, the EPF seems to have remained a tool without a clear strategy in the early days of its adoption.[72]

Second, while the post-onset change in the system narrative can be explained by the drastic change in the EU's strategic environment due to the full-scale invasion, the shifts in the identity and plot narratives are more clearly linked to the EU's own policy response to the full-scale invasion. The decision to use the EPF to finance weapon deliveries to the Ukrainian defence forces was an unprecedented and creative response to the war, as the next sections elaborate. From the narrative perspective, it catalysed ripping off the curtain regarding the purpose of the tool and allowed the EPF to be described more clearly as a security and defence instrument, hence inducing 'a radical paradigm shift' in the narrative regarding the EPF.[73] This alludes to a change in the balance of power between the different strategic narratives and strategic sub-cultures regarding the EU's agency, consolidating a trend towards a more security-emphasising narrative over the civilian-focused peace project narrative.

From an unprecedented initiative to evolving practice

The EPF, whilst ambiguous on its strategic purpose, was unlikely ever feared to become relevant in a scenario such as in Ukraine – as indicated also by the moderate budget allocated to it.[74] Yet, the presence of the instrument enabled the EU chiefs to act swiftly within the existing tools and employ the EPF to co-fund the Ukrainian defence efforts. The decision to break the taboo of EU arms funding required member states' approval (as discussed in the next section). However, that the EPF was so quickly deployed and transformed into the spearhead of the EU's war response also required active agency to put forward the initiative. In this regard, the sudden policy change with the EPF presents an interesting case of agency of change of the EU institutions and foreign policy heads.

This agency was noted in the media as well as by the interviewed officials. Both sources portray a state of shock after the onset of the full-scale war, which opened space for proposals that would have been unimaginable otherwise. According to the deputy secretary-general of the EEAS, Charles Fries, interviewed in a widely-spread Financial Times article, there was a 'paralysis' due to the war, and this was quickly utilised by the EEAS to convince the member states about the necessity of military support.[75] Similarly, an EU official interviewed noted that 'The HR/VP said we cannot send helmets. […] Institutions have been quite ambitions, and the member states have followed'.[76]

The EEAS, with the lead of the HR/VP, actively challenged the traditional narrative and practice on the limits of the EU's security agency. Lethal force assistance ought to be on the table because

[71]Mark Furness and Julian Bergmann, 'A European peace facility could make a pragmatic contribution to peacebuilding around the world'. *Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) Briefing Paper*, 6 (2018); Join Civil Society Statement, 'European Peace Facility: Causing harm or bringing peace?', (2020), available at: https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/import/european-peace-facility-joint-cso-statement.pdf, accessed 16 November 2024.

[72]Matlary, 'When soft power turns hard'.

[73]EEAS, 'CFSP Report – Our Priorities in 2023 Report of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy', (2023), available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/our-priorities, accessed 16 November 2024.

[74]The initial budget of €5,7 billion has been replenished several times due to the scale of need in Ukraine and to maintain the facility's global scope.

[75]Henry Foy, 'Arming Ukraine: how war forced the EU to rewrite defence policy', *Financial Times*, (27 February 2023), available at: https://www.ft.com/content/1b762ff1-2c7f-40a1-aee9-d218c6ef6e37, accessed 10 November 2024.

[76]EU official in June 2023.

the situation constituted a war, argued the HR/VP.[77] Afterwards when addressing the European Parliament, he questioned more broadly the norm of civilian only action also when it comes to the EU's budget use: 'because we claim that the EU is a peace force and cannot provide arms to anyone else', he referred to the normative identity and continued, 'Yes, we can. Yes, we have done – in the next budget, think about it'.[78]

Given its modest initial substantive implications for the volume of military aid the EU member states could bilaterally provide, using EPF to channel the support is to be seen as primarily political and deliberate move to showcase EU-level readiness to act.[79] As such, the EU foreign policy heads strived to maintain the momentum with the EPF beyond Ukraine. The act of providing lethal materiel support to Ukraine did not go unnoticed by the EU's African partners, for example, and catalysed pressures on the EU to equally respond to their needs. Rather than narrating Ukraine as an exception to the rule, EU leaders emphasised the EU's new readiness to better respond to its partners' needs elsewhere as well.[80] Indeed, the HR/VP Borrell made this clear when stating that '[a]nd now we will not have so many constraints if we need to support another army'.[81]

The extent to which the initiative and changed narrative on the EPF is associated with changed practice of military and security support remains ambiguous. However, there is some indication of change in practice. The EPF has been used to finance lethal support more than once also outside the Ukraine context. The first time was in Niger in the summer 2023, then in Somalia and as of August 2024 most recently in Benin.[82] Notably, in these cases provisions of lethal support have also been made in situations lower than the standard threshold of war, which departs from the justification for the use of such measures in the context of Ukraine. Granted, the scale of the support in these cases vastly differs from that of Ukraine. However, given the earlier controversy within the EU regarding the provision of lethal materiel to precisely these types of situations, it is remarkable that the decisions have been made with very little public discussion.

This may signal a new mode of EU military support evolving into a generally accepted pattern of behaviour, i.e. practice. The counterargument would be that the application of the EPF and the EU military support more broadly remains cautious and hampered by divergent member state interests. However, divergent interests impeding effective EU action in Ukraine, for example, do not necessarily mean that EU-level practices are unchanging. The act of provisions of lethal support to partners continues to evolve from an unprecedented step to an accepted EU practice as such, even amid member states' disagreement over where and when it is most needed.

Analysis part II: EPF as a tool for the member states – evolving yet constrained shared strategic culture

We now turn to the perspectives of EU member states and their approaches to the use of the EPF, drawing from the interviews conducted in eight European capitals and delving into the strategic narratives of France, Germany, Poland, and Finland in particular. This snapshot of member state perspectives provides context for the ambiguity of the EU strategic narrative regarding the EPF before 2022. They also demonstrate how the use of the EPF post-onset was facilitated by convergence in system narratives and how this and the use of the EPF in Ukraine contributed to shifting perceptions of the EU's agency and the issue of EU military support among the member states. We

[77] Foy, 'Arming Ukraine'.

[78] Josep Borrell, quoted in Alexandra Brzozowski, 'Ukraine war is 'birth of geopolitical Europe' EU top diplomat says', *EurActiv* (1 March 2022), available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/ukraine-war-is-birth-of-geopolitical-europe-eu-top-diplomat-says/, accessed 16 June 2025.

[79] See Volker Hauck, 'The European Peace Facility and Ukraine: Implications for Africa-Europe relations', *ECDPM Commentary*, (2022), available at: The European Peace Facility and Ukraine: Implications for Africa-Europe relations – ECDPM, accessed 16 June 2025.

[80] See Borrell, 'Speech at the Schuman Security and Defence Forum'.

[81] Borrell quoted in Foy, 'Arming Ukraine'.

[82] European Commission, 'Service for Foreign Policy Instruments'.

first introduce our results concerning each type of narrative and then discuss the broader implications for EU strategic culture dynamics. Interviewees are referred to with code numbers and the affiliations of the referenced interviewees are listed in Supplementary Material, Annex I.

System narrative

We can identify two key changes in the system narratives that seem to respond to the exogenous shock of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. First, there is increasing convergence among the member states, and secondly, there is a shift from emphasising cooperation to recognising competition as the key feature of the European security system.

The cooperation narrative is central in the interviewees' justifications for the pre-2022 security policies, particularly in German, French and Finnish narratives.[83] This included references to multilateralism (German and Finnish interviewees in particular), to interdependence and trade (Germany) and to dialogue (France) as the key norms of managing relations between states in the European security environment. Maintaining good relations and not triggering Russia was highlighted: '*We were also cautious not to send too fierce signal to Russia*', a French official explained.

Polish descriptions of the pre-2022 security system focused on power competition: if the Polish interviewees referred to cooperation, it meant defence alliances.[84] Some French interviewees also portrayed the security system as a competitive one[85], but the Polish and the French interviewees notably disagreed on the sources of and solutions to the increasing competition (see Table 2). The post-invasion system was narrated by almost all interviewees as a competitive one. This competition narrative focused on the threat of Russia.[86]

The perception regarding Eastern Europe changed in particular. While French interviewees emphasised the increasing relevance of Eastern European security for French national security[87], Finnish interviewees mentioned moving from a Russia-centric view on Eastern Europe towards recognising connections between Ukraine's destiny and the Finnish wars with Russia.[88] Warsaw in contrast had always viewed Ukraine's independence and Europeanness as a national security issue.[89]

Reflecting the pre-2022 narratives in retrospect, many interviewees added a meta-layer, noting how the perception of the European security system was based on 'closing eyes', 'being blind' or 'not saying the threat out loud'. While German and French interviewees described the shift as 'waking up' to the reality, Finnish interviewees rather described it as increasing openness and clarity.[90]

Finally, as Table 2 illustrates, neither of the shifts was complete: divergence remains inside the member states and between them. German and French interviewees underlined the domestic contestation of the new system perception: not all citizens share the current state leadership's threat perceptions.[91] Polish interviewees in turn remained frustrated with the incomplete 'awakening' in the Western European states.[92]

EU identity

The narratives on the EU identity showcase similar shifting, and according to the interviews this shift is not only in response to the exogenous shock but also reflects the usefulness of the EPF in supporting Ukraine. The shift does not amount to convergence over the EU's identity, but there is

[83]Interviews 16, 5, 8, 14, 26, 37, 10, 9, 34, 33, 32.
[84]Interviews 12, 13, 27.
[85]Interview 15.
[86]Interviews 12, 30, 14, 26, 19.
[87]Interviews 17, 9.
[88]Interviews 29, 14.
[89]Interviews 13, 27, 15.
[90]Interviews 4, 8, 30, 2.
[91]Interviews 15, 26.
[92]Interview 12.

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Table 2. Member states' strategic narratives on the European security system (exemplary quotes, shortened, the interview number in brackets).

Pre-onset era				Post-onset era			
Germany	France	Poland	Finland	Germany	France	Poland	Finland
Cooperative (multilateral): *'Population or military did not expect a fully-fledged war. It was not a rational issue'* (16); *'We were closing our eyes'* (4); *'Trade was the mantra, shaping interests of regimes'* (5)	Cooperative but unstable: *'We did not see Russia as a threat. We thought we can change a country with dialogue' (8);* *'We are very engaged in Africa'* (15);	Competitive, necessitates cooperation (alliances): *'We wanted to show to our partners that the real threat is not South but East'* (12); *'Poland has more sensitiveness: if Ukraine falls, they think they are the next'* (15)	Cooperative (multilateral) but unstable: *'Eastern neighbourhood seen from the perspective of Russia'* (29); *'The threat was not said out loud'* (30); *'Russia attacking was not seen as a possibility'* (14)	Competitive, necessitates cooperation (multilateralism): *'Never experienced any change so large degree. It's more significant than 9 /11'* (35); *'The German grand strategy, it is still multilateralism, NATO, EU, international order'.* (26)	Competitive: *'Ukraine is under attack, but Europe can also be under attack soon'* (18); *'We talk in the press about the situation in Ukraine, it is a matter, but people will not vote for more support for Ukraine. They vote for education, housing etc., or immigration'* (15)	Competitive, necessitates cooperation (alliances): *'It is going to be a mess. France, Spain are not aware how big is this war. Have to isolate and deter, iron curtain or something'* (12); *'We want to have a stable neighbourhood'* (13)	Competitive, necessitates cooperation (multilateralism & alliances): *'Russia is revisionist'* (14); *'Now all member states are more likely to recognize Russia's policy on its spheres of interest'* (2)

growing agreement about the need to develop the EU as a security actor, and shared acceptance of the EU adopting new security policies. On the other hand, the differing aspirations and visions that member states held for the EU prior to 2022 persist.[93]

Based on the interviews, key differences for the EU's security identity before 2022 included France's push for strategically more autonomous and militarily capable EU with a security focus directed to Africa; Poland's lack of trust and hence low interest towards EU as a security actor; and Germany's post-World War II risk-aversion which resulted in prioritising the multilateral EU as a channel for security policies but also opposing any too openly military roles for the EU, in particular in the Eastern neighbourhood.[94] Finnish interviewees' descriptions of the pre-2022 preferences seem aligned with both the French idea of developing the EU as a security actor and the German preference for civilian engagement.[95]

> *We wanted the EU to have the same threat perception, which was not. […] It was before last year, it was rather unthinkable that EU uses forces or even training missions in Eastern Europe. Even support programmes, the way it was in the South.*
>
> Official in a leading position, MFA of Poland, October 2023

As Table 3 demonstrates, these differences remain to some extent in the national narratives also after 2022. As the most remarkable change, Poland now recognises the added value of the EU as a security actor and is more invested in implementing the joint policies in the EU framework.[96] Furthermore, despite the remaining differences, the interviewees considered the level of change in Berlin's and Paris' EU visions central in enabling the evolving EU-level strategic narrative and practice regarding the EPF.[97] Both had opposed military role for the EU in the Ukraine conflict after 2014 but changed their stance in response to the full-scale war: to transform the EU from a civilian security actor into a military capacity builder. According to the interviews, the two capitals changed their views in a coordinated manner – while maintaining the key elements of their differing positions.[98]

Moreover, the development of the EU matched both the German preference for multilateralism and the French vision for developing EU as a military actor. According to one French interviewee, the exercise of funding lethal materiel for Ukraine encouraged a wider geostrategic discussion among the member states, serving as a 'catalyst' for joint strategic visioning.[99] Warsaw that had found its security priorities marginalised in the EU was positively surprised about the development.[100] The EU's development was similarly aligned with Finland's preferences, but some noted that Finland's concurrent NATO accession was potentially decreasing the EU's relevance for it as a security actor.[101]

Issue plot

The (limited) convergence among the member states strategic narratives culminates in the strategic issue of funding weapon deliveries through the EPF. The analysis of the issue plot around the EPF demonstrates that while the member states attached different objectives and values to the

[93] See also Tyyne Karjalainen and Marco Siddi, 'From role change to policy change: EU member states and change in EU foreign policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine', Journal of European Integration, (2025), pp. 1-21. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2574424

[94] Interviews 15, 12, 35, 36, 17.

[95] Interviews 29, 14, 25.

[96] Interviews 12, 13, 28.

[97] Interviews 5, 8, 12, 29, 30, 26, 36, 25.

[98] Interviews 31, 37, 38.

[99] Interview 17.

[100] Interviews 12, 13, 27.

[101] Interview 30.

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Table 3. Member states' strategic narratives on the EU identity (exemplary quotes, shortened, the interview number in brackets).

Pre-onset era				Post-onset era			
Germany	France	Poland	Finland	Germany	France	Poland	Finland
Multilateral: *'Likeminded partners, established with our values'* (35); *'EPF has an EU label. It is a question of strategic communication: it shows the unity of EU'* (36)	Emerging military actor: '*Needs to be more efficient in defence and security'* (17); *'We want it autonomous. Sometimes we are accused as anti-American'.* (15)	Weak security actor: '*Not a major forum in security. We don't think that it has the capacity'* (12); *'We wanted it to be supplementary to NATO'* (13)	Important security actor: '*We have been able to contribute to our security through the EU'* (29); '*Want to strengthen military dimension*' (2)	Multilateral: '*We need to find consensus. It's a painful process, but we received quite a lot of EU unity'* (35)	Emerging military actor: *'We still have some taboos'* (19); *'Work together on defence as a common goal without NATO'* (11)	Potentially emerging security actor: *'EU managed to transform itself'* (13); *'European partners followed our lead in assisting Ukraine'* (12)	Important security actor: '*With this reality check, a consensus was reached to strengthen credibility as a military partner'* (2)

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Table 4. Member states' narratives on the issue (exemplary quotes, shortened, the interview number in brackets).

Pre-onset era				Post-onset era			
Germany	France	Poland	Finland	Germany	France	Poland	Finland
Legitimate part of EU toolbox: *'This is something we also pushed during Council presidency 2021: the EU needs an instrument'* (35); *'There was a consensus that never ever we will send weapons to any region with a military conflict'* (37)	Connected to national security interests: *'Since 2013 we try to feed this policy, to have something concrete – EPF is such. One step forward for EU defence'* (20)	Not connected to national security interests: *'Poland was not happy with EPF before the war'* (28); *'The planned countries were sub-Saharan countries, not our focus'* (13)	Not connected to national security interests: *'Finland did not have a strong vision before the war started'* (2)	Legitimate channel for security policy shift: *'We pay 20 percent of the fund, and it is meant as a solidarity instrument and as an incentive instrument'* (36)	Joint exercise: *'EPF was key to make our collective aid to Ukraine, but now it needs to be capable of helping other countries as well'* (17) *'Big change of philosophy, could not be lethal aid before the war'* (15)	Connected to national security interests: *'EPF – when it comes to military assistance, it is all about money. The more money, the better it is. So, this is the point'* (12)	Connected to national security interests: *'Legitimises our support to Ukraine, commits other countries to long-term support'* (23)

development and the use of the EPF, the practical use of it in support of Ukraine contributed to convergence. Table 4 illustrates the findings in this regard.

> *You know, it [the EPF] is a step forward for European defence. […] We try to feed this policy to develop it, to have something very concrete, and EPF is such. It makes the EU member states to work together on defence as a common goal without NATO.*
>
> French diplomat, November 2023

According to the interviews, the adoption of the EPF in 2021 was driven by France pushing for the EU's capability development for the needs in the Southern neighbourhood on one hand, and Germany also finding the development of such a funding instrument legitimate means of advancing its security policy goals.[102] Finland and Poland did not find the tool particularly relevant for their national security interests but did not oppose it either.[103] These differing positions provide an explanation for the ambiguous EU-level pre-onset narrative discussed in the earlier section. Despite the ambiguity, the fact that the tool existed before the escalation of the war was perceived essential in enabling the policy shift in February 2022.[104]

The decision to use the EPF to fund lethal support could not be taken for granted. In the first days of the war, Warsaw remained doubtful about the usefulness of the tool but did not oppose using it to support Ukraine.[105] Finland hesitated at first, but Nordic coordination turned it in favour of using the tool and sending weapons to Ukraine.[106] Germany's green light in particular could not be taken for granted: the system narrative shift was only in the beginning, and the policy shift was internally contested.[107] France's position was least surprising to the interviewees that viewed the use of the EPF in line with its vision of developing European military agency.[108] Some interviewees noted the role of EU institutions pushing for the use of the EPF to fund weapon deliveries.[109]

The use of the tool – tranche after another – carried different meanings for each member state. Non-Polish interviewees often mentioned that the EPF money encouraged Warsaw to send weapons to Ukraine: the first reimbursement tranches in particular were processed with high coverage rates, allowing Poland to replace its Soviet defence capabilities with modern equipment.[110] Polish interviewees argued that the weapons would have been delivered anyway, but the reimbursements were helpful in re-filling stocks.[111]

The Finnish initial hesitation quickly shifted to strong support for using the EPF. Especially in the first months of the full-scale war, the EPF provided a framework for sharing the political and security risk of equipping Russia's enemy in war. The financial benefit gained attention over time: while the interviewees said that weapons to Ukraine would have been sent anyway, they noted that the reimbursements also made the aid easier to justify.[112]

> *For Finland, it was very important that the EU made the decision to use the EPF before we started our bilateral support. It was around this EU ministerial meeting that Kaikkonen participated, that we heard that Sweden would give military support, and then this EPF decision was taken – it was significant for Finland's initial support decision.*

[102]Interviews 16, 5, 14, 35, 20.
[103]Interviews 13, 2, 28.
[104]Interviews 19, 10, 32, 39, 40, 3, 7, 1.
[105]Interview 28.
[106]Interview 30.
[107]Interviews 5, 14, 13, 36.
[108]Interview 17, 20.
[109]Interview 33.
[110]Interviews 15, 36, 17.
[111]Interview 13.
[112]Interviews 30, 23.

Finnish diplomat, June 2023

Some German interviewees also mentioned the use of the EPF limiting 'the exposure of individual member states'.[113] While the interviewees agreed that international pressure pushed Germany's policy shift vis-à-vis lethal aid, assessments on the EPF's role in this function varied. There was no financial incentive for Germany, but the EPF was considered by some to have channelled expectations and pressure on Berlin (however, the US pressure was considered to have played a greater role)[114]:

It is funny but the [EPF] ammunition initiative, what it was – a letter from the Estonian minister of defence, very clumsy letter that had a huge effect. But the initiative is also a question of politics, […] it is political initiative, which of course gives political pressure to give more ammunition to Ukraine, so it has an effect on the ground. Germany did it also before, but with this political pressure we had the fifth look at our stocks if we could deliver more.

Official, Federal Foreign Office of Germany, October 2023.

The member states plugged in to the use of the EPF with different roles. While France's contribution in the development of the tool was highlighted, Germany's contribution to the EPF's multiannual budget (approximately one fourth of the total pot) was underlined. Several interviewees highlighted that this allowed others to cover costs of weapon deliveries to Ukraine. Polish and other interviewees agreed that Poland in turn had a vital impact in quickly supplying weapons, while other states were still stuck in decision-making processes.[115] Poland did not use the EPF only for weapon deliveries to Ukraine, but it also started to co-host the EPF-funded EU military assistance mission (EUMAM) to Ukraine with Germany – however, competition between the two hosts was also mentioned.[116]

Finally, national differences on using the EPF in Ukraine grew with time. While Germany was happy about the EPF allowing at least some institutionalisation of European support to Ukraine, it remained critical of the lack of long-term, strategic vision for the assistance.[117] Even more importantly, it became critical to pay such a high price to refill stocks of other member states.[118] Another disagreement emerged between Paris and some other EU states. Paris advocated for using the EPF to primarily empower European defence industries.[119] *'[The EPF] will be better used to European defence industries. So we can help Ukraine and make the strategic defence in Europe stronger at the same time, to make our producers stronger*', a senior official at the French Ministry of Armed Forces said. Interviewees from elsewhere believed it to come at the cost of Ukraine receiving equipment more slowly than if purchased from the international market.[120] Hungary's vetoing, the German dissatisfaction and the disagreement about the source of the weapons led to the paralysis of the EPF in the latter half of 2023.

The EPF in and beyond Ukraine: evolution and limits of convergence over the EU strategic agency

The analysis of the member state narratives demonstrates how an EU tool can serve as an enabler of joint strategic action and evolution of new practices despite prevailing divergences in national strategic cultures. The crisis catalysed a level of convergence in the national system narratives regarding European security and Russia, enabling EU-level action in the form of the EPF funded

[113]Interview 35.
[114]Interviews 35, 36.
[115]Interviews 15, 13, 21, 6.
[116]Interview 29.
[117]Interview 35.
[118]Interview 36.
[119]Interviews 30, 19, 18.
[120]Interviews 2, 35.

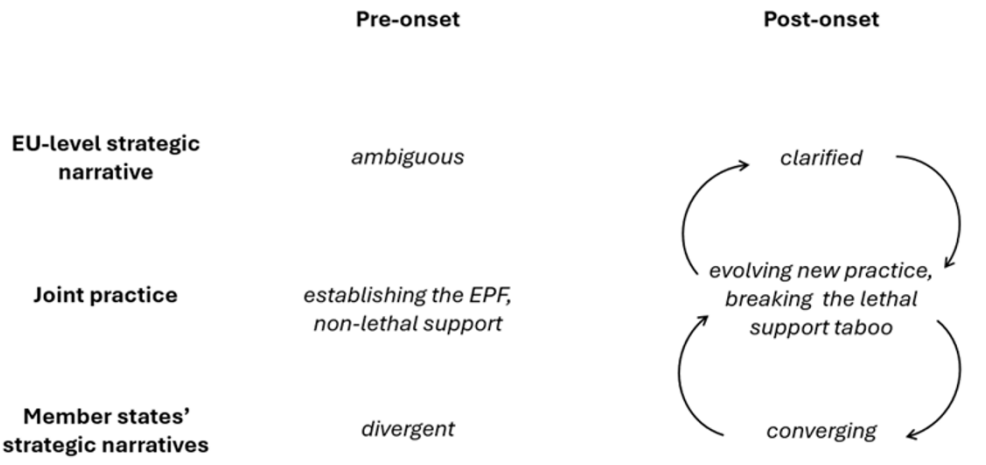

Figure 1. The EU's strategic agency evolves through an interplay of the evolving practice of using the EPF, clarifying EU-level strategic narrative, and converging member states' narratives in response to the exogenous shock of the full-scale war.

lethal support. This EU-level action served different purposes for different member states from the perspective of their strategic cultures. The EPF's usefulness contributed to a shift in national perceptions on the role of the EU as a security actor, which in turn facilitated the EU-level evolution of military support narrative and practice. Figure 1 below illustrates these findings.

The EPF channelled different roles of EU states towards the (eventually) shared objective of supporting Ukraine, including France pushing for the establishing of EU instruments with a military dimension, Germany being the main funder of the EPF, and Poland quickly supplying weapons to Ukraine.[121] The EPF did not only facilitate joint action but also shaped national responses to Russia's war: the joint EPF-decision encouraged Finland among others to provide military support to Ukraine. Simultaneously, member states gave varying functions to the EPF and used it for several purposes. This contributes to Meyer's (2006) argument that evolution of shared EU strategic culture does not need to replace national strategic cultures: in contrast, an EU-level tool may help accommodate divergent national cultures and allow an extent of shared strategic culture without considerable changes in national identities[122].

To an extent the case can be seen as an example of temporarily overlapping rather than converging strategic sub-cultures among the EU states. The re-emergence of member states' divergences – from Hungary's veto to the disagreements on the costs and sources of weapons as well as the balance between regions – indicates prevailing national differences in how and when the EU ought to act. The temporarily overlapping storylines regarding the main threats and objectives for the EU can also be expected to diverge and the competition between sub-cultures to reinforce after the war cools down.

Nevertheless, the near ten aid tranches to Ukraine, the decision-making around those, the principles agreed upon for reimbursements, the operating and exchanges with the Clearing House Cell, and the actual arms deliveries from the member states to Ukraine can be read as a manifestation of evolution of EU strategic culture in action. Equally, the exchanges preceding and around the Council meetings concerning the general objectives, principles, and means regarding the EPF and

[121]Not all member states were fully on board with the use of EPF in Ukraine. Malta, Ireland and Austria did not join the military assistance measures. Instead, they used the EPF's in-built flexibility mechanism, constructively abstaining from the decisions concerning lethal materiel and enabling others to move forward with the military aid. Whilst indicative of the diverse national strategic cultures, the use of the constructive abstention – instead of a veto when unanimous decision-making is applied – can be interpreted as a contribution towards a shared EU objective.

[122]Meyer, *The Quest for a European Strategic Culture*.

the EU's role, as well as the institution building around the EPF, can be expected to pave the way for further evolution of EU strategic culture in the future. Indeed, the clarified narrative and evolving practice around the EPF has already materialised in the provision of lethal materiel to other partners.

Hence, while the quick evolution of joint strategic thinking around the EPF in the early days of Russia's invasion was somewhat temporary and tied to the converging system narrative in response to the exogenous shock, the effects of the joint exercise can be expected to be long(er)-lasting. The concept of strategic culture invites us to differentiate the disagreements that come and go from the broader development of shared overall narrative and practice which have evolved with the use of the EPF. The EU now is a security political actor with internal legitimacy in supplying weapons to a party of a war, reflected also in the official communications.

Finally, from the point of view of the joint objective of supporting Ukraine the peak in shared strategic perspectives was also not insignificant. That the EPF concretely contributed to Ukraine receiving more weapons was widely shared among the interviewees. On the other hand, the limitations of the EPF – its constrained envelope, political blockages and the handling of the support in small tranches – arguably negatively impacted its defence effort and demonstrated short-termism in the EU's strategic vision. Moreover, the EPF-funded materiel originating from several states caused problems in the battlefield[123], reminding of the fundamental non-integration and lack of joint strategic culture between European armies.

Conclusion

The use of the EPF to provide lethal aid to Ukraine marked a significant shift in the EU's security and defence policy. Our analysis points to three concluding remarks on what this can tell us about the EU's strategic agency and culture evolution.

First, the use of the EPF suggests and catalysed evolution in the EU's security agency. EU-level strategic narrative regarding military support to partners developed. The initial ambiguity surrounding the EPF's purpose has given way to a more defined narrative that positions the EU as a security actor capable of providing lethal aid to its partners in a geopolitically competitive world. That the member states – despite prevailing divergences in strategic cultures – have agreed upon financing lethal materiel to other partner states suggests an emergence of a new practice. These findings contribute to understanding of strategic cultural change through the dynamics of institution building, crisis and policy response, a shift in (dominant) strategic narrative, and a broader change in strategic practice.

Second, our analysis sheds light to the mechanisms through which the EU and member states cultures interact and evolve. While not themselves constituting cultural changes, policy changes may open space for renegotiation of strategic narratives at EU- and national levels, which facilitates changes in practices. Our study points to a two-way street between the EU's and the member states' strategic cultures and agencies: EU-level action may act as a scapegoat and help to accommodate diverse national cultures whilst also enabling new types of security and defence initiatives at the member states level (that feed back to the EU).

Third, EU member states divergences in strategic cultures, which may be viewed from the perspective of strategic sub-cultures, remain persistent even in wartime. Our paper suggests a growing recognition among the member states of the need for a more robust EU security and defence policy. However, the persistent divergences among member states underscore the challenges of maintaining a unified plan regarding a strategic issue, not to mention constructing shared strategic culture, within the EU. As an inter-governmental agent, effective and single-voice EU on security and defence remains context-dependent, even when practices and discourse concerning an issue of strategic interest may evolve.

[123]Interview 16.

These findings give rise to future research avenues. Evolution of EU military assistance and its effects on the EU's agency beyond Ukraine deserves attention. As implied in the early criticism around the EPF, more robust military support to partners does not automatically align with the EU's Integrated Approach and its broader objectives of conflict prevention and sustainable peace. In this light, empirical attention ought to be given to the narratives and conditions under which lethal aid support has been given to other partners. More broadly, how the practice of more robust military support to partners is shaping the member states' role attribution (and convergence of this) to the EU and their own national strategic cultures deserves scrutiny.

Finally, our study encourages more research on the interplay between supranational and national strategic cultural change as well as the dynamics of internal and external expectations regarding the EU. In a world characterised by intensified strategic competition and increased uncertainty in the transatlantic relations, external pressures and incentives concerning the EU's role shape policy responses and may shift balance in dominant national and EU strategic narratives and discourses on the EU's security and defence role. How and when these external dynamics interact with the dynamics of convergence and competition of strategic sub-cultures within the Union will be crucial in shaping its agency on the global stage.

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