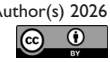
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The European Union's strategic adaptation to new threats: From normative to pragmatic strategic culture

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Abstract

This article examines how the European Union's strategic culture has evolved across three key strategy documents: the European Security Strategy, the European Union Global Strategy, and the Strategic Compass, and whether these shifts are reflected in post-2016 institutional practices. Using qualitative content analysis, it compares change across four dimensions: identity, threat perception, strategic response, and autonomy. The findings show a shift from a predominantly normative and civilian orientation towards a hybrid strategic culture combining normative commitments with pragmatic and geopolitical elements. Recent strategies increasingly emphasise explicit threat identification, hybrid warfare, and military preparedness. However, this does not amount to a transition towards a fully autonomous military actor. Instead, growing operational ambition coexists with continued reliance on North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Euro-Atlantic frameworks. Empirical illustrations demonstrate that adaptation is most advanced in hybrid and resilience domains, while high-intensity security remains North Atlantic Treaty Organization-centred. The article argues that European Union strategic culture is best understood as hybrid, rather than as a linear shift from normative to realist.

Keywords

European Union, strategic culture, hybrid threats, strategic autonomy, resilience, North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) finds itself at a critical juncture in its security and defence policy, confronted with an increasingly complex and volatile international environment. Over the past decade, a convergence of external shocks and internal developments, including Brexit, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and growing uncertainty in the transatlantic relationship, has prompted a reassessment of the EU's role as a security actor. This evolving context is reflected in the Union's expanding use of the language of geopolitics, resilience, hybrid threats, and strategic autonomy. In her 2019 mission letter to High Representative Josep Borrell, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2019) declared that "this Commission will be a geopolitical Commission," signalling an ambition to reposition the EU from a predominantly economic, civilian, and normative actor towards a more assertive geopolitical and strategic one. At the same time, the proliferation of hybrid threats, including cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and the strategic use of emerging technologies, has intensified pressures on the EU to reassess how it conceptualises threats and organises its strategic response.

Such developments raise broader questions about how the EU understands and enacts security, which are commonly examined through the concept of strategic culture. For the purposes of this article, strategic culture is defined as a shared and institutionalised set of assumptions about threats, legitimate responses, autonomy, and the EU's role as a security actor, deliberately bounded to the four analytical dimensions that structure the empirical analysis. In the EU context, this culture has traditionally been associated with a strong commitment to multilateralism, civilian crisis management, and the projection of normative power (Manners, 2002; Meyer, 2005).

A substantial body of scholarship has examined EU strategic culture, yet three closely related debates remain unresolved. The first concerns whether the EU possesses a coherent strategic culture. Meyer (2006) argues that a distinctive European strategic culture is emerging, shaped by shared values and institutional constraints and characterised by a civilian and multilateralist orientation. By contrast, other scholars emphasise its fragmented and negotiated character, suggesting that EU strategic culture reflects the interaction of diverse member state preferences and institutional dynamics rather than a unified set of assumptions (Aggestam and Hyde-Price, 2019; Chappell, 2009; Cornish and Edwards, 2001). From this perspective, strategic culture is continuously constructed through institutional processes and shared experiences.

The second debate concerns how EU strategic culture translates into the Union's role as a security actor. Early contributions conceptualise this culture as underpinning a normative or civilian form of power, privileging diplomacy, multilateralism, and rule-based instruments (Manners, 2002; Meyer, 2005). Subsequent scholarship challenges this interpretation, arguing that the EU's strategic culture increasingly incorporates elements associated with geopolitical competition and power politics (Biscop, 2013; Hyde-Price, 2006). More recent contributions argue that normative commitments coexist with, and are complemented by, emerging geopolitical logics (Howorth, 2014; Riddervold and Newsome, 2018), highlighting tensions between established norms and evolving practices.

The third debate addresses whether recent geopolitical disruptions are transforming EU strategic culture. A growing body of literature argues that external shocks, most notably Russia's aggression against Ukraine, intensifying great power competition, and the proliferation of hybrid threats, have acted as catalysts for a recalibration of the EU's strategic orientation (Biscop, 2013; Fiott, 2020). These developments challenge the normative underpinnings of EU strategic culture by increasing the salience of hard power and demanding more agile and coordinated responses. In this context, scholars point to a closer alignment between strategic necessity and institutional adaptation (Howorth, 2014; Riddervold and Newsome, 2018), particularly through developments within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (hereafter Strategic Compass; Council of the European Union, 2022), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and the European Peace Facility (EPF). As Kalniete and Pildegovičs (2021) demonstrate, these frameworks enhance the EU's capacity to respond to hybrid threats, suggesting that changes in strategic culture are increasingly reflected in policy instruments and practices.

These debates have largely developed in parallel. Studies of EU strategic culture often remain conceptual and do not systematically trace how its core assumptions are articulated across strategic documents; analyses of EU actorness tend to reproduce the normative–geopolitical binary without examining how these logics are embedded within strategic culture; and assessments of recent adaptation rarely apply a consistent analytical framework across the EU's major strategy texts. What remains missing is a systematic, longitudinal analysis of how these assumptions are codified across successive strategy documents. As a result, we lack a systematic account of how EU strategic culture is articulated, stabilised, and transformed over time. This article addresses that compound gap by applying a consistent analytical framework across three key EU strategy documents.

This article addresses the following research question: how has the concept of EU's strategic culture evolved across key strategic documents between 2003 and 2022, and what patterns of change can be identified across its core dimensions?

Existing scholarship has extensively examined the EU as a normative or civilian power, as well as ongoing changes in its security and defence policy, yet less attention has been paid to how these developments reflect a broader reconfiguration of the EU's strategic culture. The article advances the argument that EU strategic culture is undergoing a gradual reconfiguration, moving beyond a predominantly normative and civilian orientation towards a more differentiated framework in which geopolitical threat perception and operational capacity-building are increasingly integrated alongside, rather than replacing, foundational normative commitments.

It further contends that this transformation is driven by external security pressures, most notably geopolitical contestation and technological change, which have prompted a recalibration of the EU's strategic orientation. While earlier conceptions of EU strategic culture emphasised normative and civilian dimensions, recent developments indicate a growing emphasis on security, resilience, and capability. EU institutions play a central role in this process, particularly under conditions of urgency, by coordinating and consolidating strategic adaptation across policy domains.

To explain these dynamics, the article draws on institutional constructivism, which highlights the role of institutions in shaping, stabilising, and reproducing strategic ideas over time (Checkel, 2005; Schmidt, 2010). Through processes of institutionalisation, specific concepts, such as resilience, hybridity, or strategic autonomy, become embedded as organising principles that guide subsequent policy development and action. Accordingly, once institutionalised, these concepts are expected to reappear as structuring elements in subsequent policy instruments and practices.

Methodologically, the article employs qualitative content analysis (QCA) of three key EU strategy documents: the European Security Strategy (hereafter ESS; Council of the European Union, 2003), the European Union Global Strategy (hereafter EUGS; European External Action Service, 2016), and the Strategic Compass. These documents are selected as authoritative statements of EU strategic intent and as temporally spaced reference points. A consistent coding framework across four analytical dimensions, implemented using MAXQDA, enables systematic comparison. To complement the document analysis, three empirical illustrations are examined: the EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM), the EU Hybrid Toolbox, and the EU-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure. These are included as illustrative examples to explore if and how concepts articulated in strategy documents appear as organising principles in operational practice.

The article makes three contributions. Conceptually, it specifies EU strategic culture as a bounded and operationalisable set of assumptions. Methodologically, it introduces a consistent comparative framework for analysing strategic discourse across time. Empirically, it shows how changes in EU strategic discourse are linked to institutional developments and policy practices, providing a systematic account of the Union's evolving role as a security actor.

Strategic culture and analytical framework

Rather than treating strategic culture as a fixed or purely ideational attribute, this article uses it as a dynamic configuration that evolves through institutional processes and becomes observable through its articulation in official texts and policy practices. This definition follows constructivist approaches that emphasise the role of shared understandings in shaping security behaviour, while adapting them to the specific context of the EU as a supranational actor.

Classical accounts conceptualise strategic culture as rooted in historically embedded beliefs, identities, and norms that shape how actors understand security and the use of force (Johnston, 1995; Snyder, 1977). Subsequent scholarship has extended this perspective by emphasising processes of socialisation and institutional interaction (Howorth, 2014; Meyer, 2005). While these approaches highlight the ideational foundations of security behaviour, they pay less attention to how such ideas are stabilised, reproduced, and translated into policy over time.

This article builds on institutional constructivism by conceptualising strategic culture as a process of institutional codification, whereby strategic ideas become embedded in official documents, regulatory frameworks, and policy practices. Through codification,

specific concepts, such as resilience, hybridity, or strategic autonomy, are stabilised as reference points that structure subsequent interpretation and action. This perspective allows strategic culture to be analysed not only as a set of shared beliefs, but also as an evolving configuration that is continuously reproduced through institutional outputs. By tracing change across successive strategy texts, the analysis shows how crisis-induced shifts become consolidated into more durable reference points.

National strategic cultures are typically associated with historically rooted attitudes towards the use of force. In the EU context, strategic culture does not emerge from a single historical tradition, but is constituted through processes of institutional interaction, negotiation, and consensus-building (Meyer, 2005). As a result, it is less centred on military doctrine than on the coordination of diverse policy instruments and the construction of shared strategic priorities. This helps explain why the EU strategic culture has historically been characterised as a predominantly civilian and normative.

At the same time, EU strategic culture remains responsive to external shocks and evolves through periods of crisis-induced adaptation. External disruptions, such as geopolitical instability or conflict, can trigger processes of institutional adjustment and convergence around new strategic priorities (Gjesvik and Riddervold, 2023; Helwig, 2023; Howorth, 2004; Juncos, 2017). This results in a dynamic configuration in which national, NATO, and supranational dimensions interact, shaping the EU's security role over time (Chappell and Petrov, 2014; Toje, 2008). This perspective helps explain both the persistence of the EU's civilian and normative orientation and its gradual incorporation of new security instruments and practices (Duchêne, 1972; Howorth, 2014).

To analyse this transformation systematically, the article operationalises strategic culture across four analytical dimensions derived from the strategic culture literature: identity, threat perception, strategic response, and autonomy. These dimensions are derived from core elements commonly associated with strategic culture in the literature (Johnston, 1995; Snyder, 1977) and capture the core components through which strategic assumptions become observable in policy documents, namely how actors understand themselves, define risks, select appropriate instruments, and position themselves in relation to others.

Identity captures how the EU understands itself as a security actor, shaping what actions are considered appropriate or legitimate; in this sense, it provides the normative framework within which threats and responses are interpreted (Manners, 2002; Rieker, 2007). Threat perception reflects how risks are defined and prioritised; it is central to strategic culture, as the classification of threats structures strategic choices (Gray, 1999; Johnston, 1995).

Strategic response refers to the range of instruments considered legitimate within a given strategic culture, including diplomatic, economic, regulatory, and military tools; in the EU context, this dimension is essential for assessing the balance between civilian and hard-power instruments (Biava et al., 2011; Johnston, 1995). Autonomy captures the extent to which the EU seeks independent capacity for action versus reliance on allies and existing security arrangements. While not a classical element of strategic culture, it is particularly salient in the EU context, where questions of dependence and cooperation are central to security policy.

Taken together, these dimensions operationalise strategic culture as a set of interrelated and evolving assumptions rather than a static attribute. They are analytically ordered: identity shapes how threats are perceived; threat perception structures the range of responses considered appropriate; and these, in turn, condition the scope of autonomous action. This framework provides a structured basis for tracing how strategic culture is articulated and transformed across EU strategic documents over time.

Methodology and data

Methodologically, the study employs QCA to examine EU strategy documents and related policy texts. The core corpus consists of the ESS, EUGS, and the Strategic Compass, treated as authoritative statements of EU strategic intent. These documents serve as temporally distinct reference points, enabling structured comparison of how strategic culture is articulated over time. QCA is employed because the study aims to systematically trace patterns and shifts in articulated strategic assumptions across a bounded corpus, rather than reconstruct discursive power relations or actor contestation. Compared to discourse analysis, QCA offers a more structured, transparent, and replicable approach (Mayring, 2014: 10–13; Schreier, 2012: 1), making it particularly suitable for comparative analysis across documents produced at different time points.

QCA enables the systematic classification of textual data into analytically meaningful categories, allowing large volumes of text to be reduced into structured patterns while preserving contextual interpretation (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1279–1282). In this study, a directed approach is employed, whereby initial coding categories are derived from the four analytical dimensions, consistent with theory-driven coding procedures (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1281–1283) and concept-driven category development (Schreier, 2012: 84–87). Coding proceeds iteratively: texts are first read in full to achieve immersion, followed by line-by-line coding, during which segments are assigned to predefined categories or, where necessary, to new inductively generated codes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1279–1280). These codes are subsequently compared, refined, and organised into a coherent coding scheme, with category definitions adjusted as analysis progresses to ensure internal consistency and conceptual clarity (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1285–1286; Schreier, 2012: 95). This combination of deductive structuring and inductive refinement enhances the transparency and trustworthiness of the analysis by explicitly linking textual evidence to analytical categories.

The coding framework is deductively derived from the four analytical dimensions, with the thematic statement as the unit of analysis. Documents were coded line-by-line in MAXQDA 2024, combining deductive categories with limited inductive refinement. Multiple coding was allowed where relevant, enabling overlap between dimensions. Qualitative interpretation of coded segments provided contextual depth. This procedure follows the logic of systematic, rule-guided category application and iterative revision central to QCA (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012: 104–106).

To complement the document analysis, the study incorporates three empirical illustrations as theoretically motivated probes: the EUPM, the EU Hybrid Toolbox and Rapid Response Teams, and the EU–NATO Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure. These are used to assess whether concepts articulated in strategy documents are reflected in operational practices. Applying the same analytical dimensions across these illustrations enables comparison between articulated priorities and institutional practices, providing an indication of alignment as well as potential gaps between discourse and implementation.

The empirical analysis centres on three key EU strategy documents, which are systematically examined using QCA. These texts are treated as authoritative and comparable expressions of EU strategic intent over time. Additional materials, including Council decisions, mission mandates, and official documents from the European External Action Service, the Council, the European Commission, and NATO, are used to contextualise and illustrate the findings. While these documents are not subjected to systematic coding, they serve to assess whether the concepts articulated in the strategy texts are reflected in institutional practices.

In the empirical analysis of the research, four analytical dimensions of EU strategic culture were operationalised: identity conception (IDEN), threat conceptualisation (THR), response instruments (RESP), and strategic autonomy (AUTON). These dimensions were translated into four overarching code families in MAXQDA. The main categories were derived deductively from the theoretical framework, while the lower-level subcodes were refined inductively through iterative close reading of the selected EU strategic documents. This combination of deductive and inductive coding allowed to preserve theoretical consistency while remaining sensitive to shifts in the language, emphasis, and meaning of EU strategic discourse over time.

Identity was coded through references to the EU's self-representation as a soft or normative actor, a hard security actor, and an increasingly self-sufficient strategic actor. This coding structure enabled a systematic comparison of how EU strategic discourse evolved across time, not only by identifying the presence of particular themes, but also by tracing changes in their salience, framing, and relationship to one another. Under *threat* conceptualisation, the analysis distinguished between military, non-military, and hybrid threats. Military threats included references to external aggression, revisionist powers, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), while non-military threats captured economic coercion, societal vulnerabilities, migration, climate-related risks, energy insecurity, and other non-conventional forms of insecurity. Hybrid threats were coded separately where documents referred to cyber operations, information manipulation, or threats to critical infrastructure. *Response instruments* were coded according to the type of policy tools proposed, legitimised, or prioritised in the documents. The coding distinguished between military instruments, such as deterrence, defence financing, rapid deployment capacity (RDC), prevention, and military mobility, and non-military instruments, including cooperation, soft-power tools, institutional strengthening, and proactive external engagement. Finally, the *strategic*

autonomy dimension captured how the documents framed the EU's capacity for independent action, differentiating between expressions of high autonomy and references to limited autonomy, especially where EU action was presented as dependent on NATO, the United States, or broader multilateral frameworks.

Evolution of the EU's strategic culture (2003–2022): A comparative content analysis

This section examines the evolution of the EU's strategic culture through a comparative analysis of three key strategy documents: the ESS, EUGS, and the Strategic Compass. Rather than reading them as isolated policy texts, the analysis approaches them as key moments in a broader evolution of EU strategic culture: each document defines the Union's role in the world, identifies the sources of insecurity it considers most salient, legitimises particular instruments of action, and frames the limits and possibilities of European autonomy.

The analysis is organised around four interrelated dimensions. It begins with identity, as the EU's self-understanding, whether as a normative, civilian, geopolitical, or security actor, conditions how threats are interpreted and responses are legitimised. It then turns to threat perception, tracing the shift from diffuse and largely non-state risks in 2003 to more explicit, adversary-oriented and hybrid threat framings by 2022. The third dimension examines strategic response, focusing on how the balance between civilian, normative, institutional, and military instruments evolves across the three documents. Finally, the analysis considers strategic autonomy, understood as the extent to which the EU presents itself as capable of independent action.

The figures included in the section should therefore be read not as standalone quantitative measurements of strategic culture, but as indicators of changing discursive salience. They help visualise which themes became more prominent, which remained stable, and which declined across the three documents. The qualitative interpretation then examines how these shifts were framed, justified, and connected to broader transformations in the EU's security environment.

Identity

The evolution of EU strategic culture is most visible, first, in the changing way the Union represents itself as an international security actor. The ESS constructed the EU as a normative, post-modern actor: grounded in "democracy, human rights, good governance and respect for the rule of law" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 1), embedded in "effective multilateralism" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 9), and reliant on prosperity as a stabilising lever. It declared that "spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 10).

Hard power was acknowledged but restricted to Petersberg tasks and subordinated to a wider civilian identity. The EUGS reaffirmed values and rules (European External

Action Service, 2016: 14), but coupled them with resilience and the recognition that "in this fragile world, soft power is not enough" (European External Action Service, 2016: 44). It introduced the language of strategic autonomy and deterrence, reframed economic scale as a strategic resource—"third largest economy in the world, first trading partner and investor for many" (European External Action Service, 2016: 18)—and explicitly recast the EU as a "security provider" (European External Action Service, 2016: 18).

Identity thus shifted from a purely normative conception towards a more pragmatic actor attuned to power politics. The Strategic Compass consolidated this dual identity. It affirmed that "our strength rests on our values" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 4), yet credibility now rested on concrete military deliverables such as the RDC and defence-industrial strengthening. While NATO was reaffirmed as "the foundation of collective defence" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 14), the EU presented itself as an operational actor with autonomous capabilities and a realist orientation shaped by Russia's war against Ukraine. In 2003, the Union projected itself as a unique post-modern power; by 2016, identity reflected tension between normative aspirations and geopolitical necessity; and by 2022, it had become explicitly dual: still a guardian of rules and values, but also a hard-power actor prepared for adversary-specific competition.

Taken together, these shifts indicate that EU identity has not moved from a normative to a purely geopolitical conception, but has instead become increasingly dual. Normative commitments continue to define the purpose of EU action, while growing emphasis on security provision and operational capacity reflects adaptation to a more contested strategic environment. Identity therefore evolves not through replacement, but through layering, resulting in a hybrid self-understanding that combines normative and strategic elements.

Threat perception

Between 2003 and 2022, the EU's conception of threats underwent profound change. The ESS reflected post-Cold War optimism: although it admitted that "war has not disappeared from our continent" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 1), it judged that "large-scale aggression against any Member State is now improbable" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 4). Instead, it emphasised poverty, bad governance, climate change, and energy dependence (Council of the European Union, 2003: 6–8). Terrorism, WMD proliferation, and state failure were acknowledged as "new threats" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 3), but attributed to non-state actors and fragile states, with no sovereign adversary identified.

The EUGS, drafted after Russia's intervention in Ukraine, marked a turning point. It warned of "the return of power politics" (European External Action Service, 2016: 13), acknowledged aggressive state behaviour and territorial disputes (European External Action Service, 2016: 14), and introduced hybrid threats such as disinformation and cyberattacks (European External Action Service, 2016: 15–16). Economic interdependence was reframed as vulnerability (European External Action Service, 2016: 15). Russia was indirectly linked to aggression in Ukraine but not defined as an existential adversary, while China and Iran appeared only in functional contexts.

The Strategic Compass institutionalised a decisive shift towards a more geopolitically oriented threat perception culture. It identified external aggression as "a long-term and

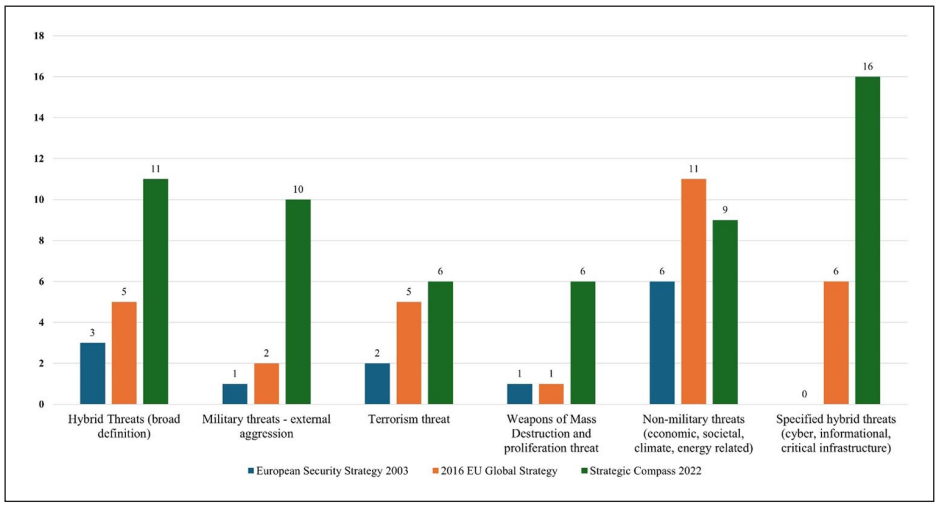


Figure 1. Military versus non-military threat mentions in EU strategic documents (2003–2022).
Source. Authors' own analysis using MAXQDA, based on mentions in the ESS, EUGS, and Strategic Compass.

direct threat for European security" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 18) and demonstrated this cultural transformation through a marked increase in explicit adversary naming in threat-related contexts, particularly referencing Russia, but also China, Iran, Belarus and North Korea. This move away from abstract threat formulations signals the EU's embrace of a strategic culture that privileges concrete geopolitical threat identification over normative framings. Hybrid threats became central, including cyberattacks, disinformation, weaponised migration, and infrastructure sabotage (Council of the European Union, 2022: 10–12). This urgent framing was tied to concrete commitments such as the 5000-strong EU RDC (Council of the European Union, 2022: 25), expanded PESCO projects (Council of the European Union, 2022: 37), and enhanced military mobility (Council of the European Union, 2022: 46).

Figure 1 illustrates this trajectory. External military aggression threats experienced dramatic growth, evolving from minimal presence in early strategies to become a major security concern by 2022. Similarly, hybrid threats showed substantial expansion across both broad definitional categories and, most remarkably, in specified hybrid threat types, which emerged as the single most prominent threat category in recent discourse. Non-military threats maintained relatively stable prominence throughout the period, while traditional concerns like terrorism and WMD remained consistently present but secondary. In short, EU discourse evolved from diverse but abstract threat formulations (2003), through balanced recognition of both traditional and emerging threats (2016), to explicit adversary-focused framing with unprecedented emphasis on military and hybrid warfare dimensions (2022).

This evolution reflects a shift from diffuse and largely non-state threat perceptions towards a more explicit and geopolitically grounded understanding of security risks.

Rather than abandoning earlier concerns, the EU incorporates them into a broader framework in which hybrid and state-based threats are increasingly central.

Strategic response

The EU's strategic response mirrors this trajectory. The ESS presented the EU as a civilian and preventive actor, emphasising governance promotion, development aid, and multilateral institution-building (Council of the European Union, 2003: 6–8). Military means were explicitly downplayed: "none of the new threats can be tackled by purely military means" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 12). Hard power was largely delegated to NATO and the United Nations (UN), while the EU positioned itself as a builder of partnerships: "we should focus particularly on developing strategic partnerships with Russia, Japan, China, Canada and India" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 13).

The EUGS blended continuity with new ambition. While resilience-building and economic engagement remained central, it insisted that "soft power is not enough" (European External Action Service, 2016: 44). It introduced "strategic autonomy" as a guiding concept and called for defence cooperation "as the norm" (European External Action Service, 2016: 20). At the same time, its doctrine of "principled pragmatism" acknowledged that institutions and norms could no longer guarantee security (European External Action Service, 2016: 16). Hybrid threats were institutionalised, and renewed state aggression was recognised as part of "the return of power politics" (European External Action Service, 2016: 13).

The Strategic Compass operationalised this shift. With Russia's war on Ukraine defined as "a long-term and direct threat" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 17–18), the document foregrounded hard-power responses: the RDC (Council of the European Union, 2022: 13), expanded PESCO (Council of the European Union, 2022: 37), accelerated ammunition production (Council of the European Union, 2022: 46), and routine readiness exercises (Council of the European Union, 2022: 5, 19). Economic and industrial instruments were reframed as security tools, and the overall salience of military measures rose markedly.

This trajectory is visualised in Figure 2, which maps EU threat response strength across categories from 2003 to 2022. The figure highlights the progressive strengthening of military instruments relative to non-military ones. The ESS gave clear priority to non-military responses, particularly cooperation with other actors, trade, norms, and institution-building, while military responses remained marginal. The EUGS recalibrated the balance: it reinforced diplomacy and multilateralism but simultaneously expanded deterrence, defence financing, and military capacity-building, reflecting lessons from Russia's actions in Ukraine and the emergence of hybrid threats. The Strategic Compass, by contrast, codified a decisive shift towards hard-power preparedness, as shown by the steep increase in references to military capability, defence financing, and preventive capacity, introducing concrete measures such as the EU RDC, while non-military responses, though still present, declined in relative prominence.

Taken together, the analysis of strategic response across these texts illustrates how the EU's strategic culture has moved from a predominantly non-military conception of security action to a hybrid posture that combines normative, cooperative instruments with

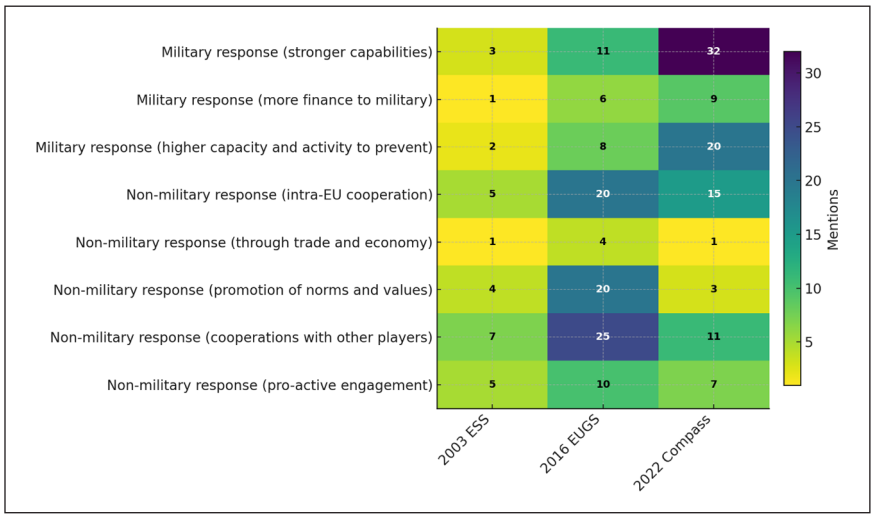


Figure 2. EU threat response strength by category (2003–2022).
Source. Authors' own analysis using MAXQDA, based on mentions in the ESS, EUGS, and Strategic Compass.

concrete military capabilities and commitments. By comparing the relative weight assigned to military and non-military responses at different points in time, one can observe how the Union's strategic discourse has shifted towards more realist and action-oriented positions. Yet strategic culture transformation requires not only rhetorical change but also corresponding shifts in institutional practice and operational behaviour alignment that remains only partially achieved, suggesting an ongoing rather than completed cultural transformation.

While the EU's strategic response has expanded significantly across these documents, this evolution is better understood as a diversification of its policy repertoire rather than a shift towards conventional military actorness. Instruments such as the EPF, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), and the RDC illustrate growing operational capacity, yet remain embedded in a broader framework in which military means constitute only one component of a wider strategic approach (Biscop, 2013; Riddervold and Rosén, 2016). In this sense, EU strategic response reflects a hybrid configuration, combining regulatory, economic, diplomatic, and increasingly military instruments in pursuit of collective security objectives (Biava et al., 2011).

Autonomy

Reflection on autonomy evolved from absence, to ambition, to cautious operationalisation. The ESS made no claims to independent action, describing NATO and the transatlantic partnership as "irreplaceable" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 9, 15) and portraying the EU primarily as a civilian and multilateral actor. The EUGS marked a rhetorical shift by introducing "strategic autonomy" as a concept. For the first time, it

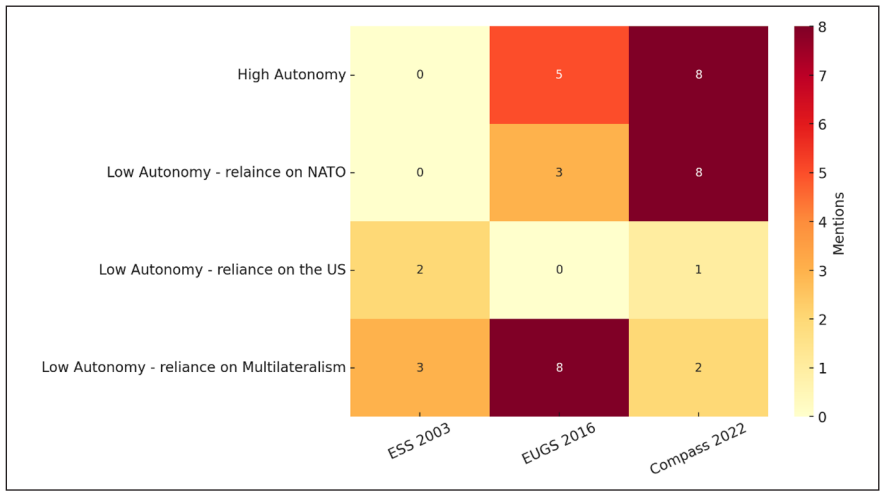


Figure 3. EU security autonomy levels (2003–2022).
Source. Authors' own analysis using MAXQDA, based on mentions in the ESS, EUGS, and Strategic Compass.

called on the Union to "take greater responsibility for our security . . . to act autonomously if and when necessary" (European External Action Service, 2016: 19). Yet this ambition was tempered by institutional anchoring: the EUGS explicitly admitted that "NATO remains the primary framework for most Member States" (European External Action Service, 2016: 20), and the document simultaneously displayed a rhetorical duality by combining clear high-autonomy references with reinforced reliance on NATO and, even more strongly, on multilateralism.

The Strategic Compass advanced further by operationalising autonomy in practice—"with partners whenever possible and alone when necessary" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 23). High autonomy received the strongest emphasis, supported by concrete measures such as the RDC, coordinated defence investment, and enhanced military mobility. Yet reliance on NATO was simultaneously reaffirmed at the highest level, while references to the United States and multilateralism remained present but secondary. This dual profile reflects how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine elevated both the urgency of EU capabilities and the indispensability of NATO as "the foundation of collective defence" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 14).

The EU's RDC illustrates both progress and limits. Designed as a 5000-strong modular force with airlift and cyber enablers, it reached operational status by 2025 and has conducted live exercises in Spain, Germany, and Hungary (European External Action Service, 2024, 2025a). Yet it has not been deployed, since unanimous approval by Member States remains a precondition. This highlights the functional ceiling of EU autonomy: although the RDC embodies a growing ambition to act independently in military terms, the Union's capacity to act independently in hard-security scenarios remains constrained by limited political will, fragmented funding, shortages of high-end military

capabilities, and continued reliance on NATO and the United States for key defence functions (Biscop, 2019; Maślanka, 2024; Toje, 2010). The RDC thus symbolises both a cultural shift towards operational autonomy and the enduring structural reliance that prevents rhetoric from fully matching practice. Figure 3 visualises this trajectory.

The ESS emphasised NATO, the United States, and multilateral cooperation as the main anchors of EU security. The EUGS introduced the language of autonomy but simultaneously coupled it with continued reliance on NATO and multilateral frameworks. The Strategic Compass, by contrast, demonstrates for the first time a parallel emphasis on both higher autonomy and NATO dependence, signalling the EU's emergence as a more credible yet still cautious autonomous actor. Importantly, the EU's pursuit of greater self-sufficiency in the military sphere was framed not as an alternative to NATO, but as a necessary condition for enhancing the Alliance's overall effectiveness, an ambition exemplified by initiatives such as the RDC, coordinated defence investment, and enhanced military mobility.

These developments reveal a hybrid profile. The EU now couples unprecedented commitments to independent capacity with structural reliance on NATO. More importantly, they illustrate how culture frames not only what the EU can do but also what it considers legitimate. From a complementary partner (2003), to an aspirant for greater responsibility (2016), to a more credible yet cautious autonomous actor (2022), the Union's autonomy discourse reflects a gradual but contested cultural redefinition of its role in the Euro-Atlantic order.

Taken together, these developments indicate that EU autonomy has evolved from absence, to ambition, to partial operationalisation. However, this does not amount to full strategic independence. Instead, autonomy is constructed in relational terms, combining increased capacity for independent action with continued reliance on NATO and transatlantic frameworks. This results in a hybrid configuration in which autonomy is expanded but structurally bounded.

Cross-dimensional synthesis

The analysis demonstrates that EU strategic culture has evolved not only within each dimension—identity, threat perception, strategic response, and autonomy—but also through their interaction. Transformation becomes visible when these dimensions converge in mutually reinforcing ways, while misalignments reveal structural limits. In the ESS, all four dimensions cohered around a post-modern profile. Identity was grounded in values, prosperity, and soft power; threat perception centred on terrorism, WMD proliferation, and state failure (Council of the European Union, 2003: 4–6); responses emphasised governance and multilateralism: "none of the new threats can be tackled by purely military means" (Council of the European Union, 2003: 12), and autonomy remained low, with NATO and the United States described as "irreplaceable" partners (Council of the European Union, 2003: 9).

The EUGS introduced partial realignment across these dimensions. Identity shifted towards a more pragmatic understanding of the EU as a "security provider" (European External Action Service, 2016: 18), while threat perception expanded to include hybrid coercion, climate change, and renewed interstate aggression (European External Action

Service, 2016: 18–20). Strategic response reflected this shift through the claim that "soft power is not enough" (European External Action Service, 2016: 44) and through greater emphasis on defence cooperation and resilience. Autonomy was articulated more explicitly through the concept of "strategic autonomy" (European External Action Service, 2016: 20), yet NATO was still affirmed as "the primary framework" (European External Action Service, 2016: 20), revealing a misalignment between ambition and capability.

The Strategic Compass shows the strongest convergence across dimensions. Identity is articulated as that of a more credible and operational security actor; threat perception explicitly identifies Russia's aggressive and revisionist actions as "a long-term and direct threat for European Security" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 17–18) and increasingly names other state actors; strategic response is operationalised through concrete measures such as the RDC, PESCO, and defence-industrial initiatives, and autonomy is defined as acting "with partners whenever possible and alone when necessary" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 23). Together, these shifts indicate a more integrated strategic culture in which assumptions about the EU's role, threats, and responses are more closely aligned.

The most decisive transformation arises from the alignment between threat perception and strategic response. By 2022, the explicit identification of adversaries such as Russia and China is coupled with concrete capability development, marking a clear departure from 2003, when large-scale aggression was considered improbable and military instruments were marginal. When threat recognition converges with operational commitments, strategic culture shifts more decisively. Identity and autonomy, however, remain only partially aligned. While the EU increasingly presents itself as a geopolitical and capable actor, its autonomy continues to be bounded by reliance on NATO. The formula "with partners whenever possible and alone when necessary" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 23) encapsulates this duality, reflecting both increased ambition and enduring structural constraint.

This tension produces a hybrid configuration. Normative commitments continue to define the purpose of EU action, while military and economic instruments increasingly shape its means. As a result, EU strategic culture has evolved from a predominantly civilian and normative model towards a more geopolitical orientation. Yet this transformation remains uneven: it advances where identity, threat perception, and strategic response reinforce one another, but remains constrained where autonomy lags behind. The outcome is a more capable yet structurally bounded strategic culture, shaped by Euro-Atlantic interdependence and the enduring division of labour between EU instruments and NATO-centred collective defence.

From strategic documents to practice: Illustrative observations

Building on the article's institutional constructivist framework, this section examines how the strategic assumptions identified in EU strategic documents manifest in institutional practice. We posit that once concepts such as resilience, hybridity, and strategic autonomy are codified as guiding principles, they exert a structuring effect on subsequent policy development. The aim of this section is not to test for a simple

causal consistency between discourse and action, but to assess how these articulated assumptions are reproduced, adapted, or constrained in concrete operational settings. Through three illustrative probes—the EUPM, the EU Hybrid Toolbox, and the EU-NATO Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure—we explore the extent to which these discursive shifts have been translated into routine policy instruments and activities. This exercise provides an empirical bridge, highlighting where the Union's evolving strategic self-understanding is selectively institutionalised, and where it encounters structural or functional limits.

These are illustrative probes rather than full case studies because the purpose is analytical comparison, not exhaustive process tracing. Each case captures a distinct site of EU action: a civilian CSDP mission, a hybrid-threat instrument, and a NATO-linked resilience mechanism while remaining comparable through the same four-dimensional framework. The section therefore serves as an empirical bridge between the document analysis and the broader argument about strategic culture, showing whether the shift identified in strategy texts is merely rhetorical or also visible in practice.

EUPM

The EUPM, launched in May 2023 by Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/855, represents the Union's first civilian mission explicitly mandated to address hybrid threats. In identity terms, it reflects a shift towards an EU that increasingly constructs itself as a hybrid-security provider, acting through civilian instruments in its neighbourhood. In threat terms, it operationalises the growing salience of cyber threats, foreign information manipulation, and crisis-management vulnerabilities identified in the Strategic Compass (Council of the European Union, 2022: 10–12), translating these into concrete areas of intervention. Its mandate explicitly focuses on strengthening "the resilience of the security sector in the Republic of Moldova in the areas of crisis management and hybrid threats, including cyber security and countering foreign information manipulation and interference" (Council of the European Union, 2023: 3).

Empirically, the mission has supported the establishment of Moldova's Strategic Communication and Counter-Disinformation Centre, contributed to the creation of a Cybersecurity Agency, and assisted in developing a National Crisis Management Centre (European External Action Service, 2025b). As noted by Head of Mission Cosmin Dinescu, this includes "advice on the consolidation of national crisis management capabilities . . . supporting the creation of the Cybersecurity Agency [and] the establishment of the Center for Strategic Communications and Countering Disinformation" (Van der Togt, 2025). The extension of its mandate to 2027 and the €19.8 million budget increase (EU Neighbours East, 2025) indicate a move beyond short-term signalling towards more sustained institutionalisation. At the same time, in autonomy terms, the mission highlights the bounded nature of EU action: while the Union expands its role in resilience-building and hybrid threat response, it remains confined to a civilian framework and does not extend into hard military functions, reinforcing its complementary position within the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

The EU Hybrid Toolbox

The EU Hybrid Toolbox, endorsed in June 2022, represents a key step in institutionalising the EU's recognition of hybrid threats through the creation of a coordinated, cross-sectoral response framework. In identity terms, it reflects an EU that increasingly constructs itself as a hybrid-security actor capable of combining regulatory, preventive, and coercive instruments. In threat terms, it operationalises the call in the Strategic Compass to mainstream hybrid threats (Council of the European Union, 2022: 11) and builds on the shift introduced in the EUGS towards "principled pragmatism" (European External Action Service, 2016: 16), acknowledging that complex threats require integrated responses beyond purely normative tools.

Empirically, the Toolbox translates these priorities into a structured set of instruments, integrating preventive, restrictive, and recovery measures, including the Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox, the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) framework, and targeted sanctions. In 2024, this framework was further operationalised through the adoption of Hybrid Rapid Response Teams (HRRTs), designed to provide "targeted, short-term assistance to Member States, CSDP missions, and partners under hybrid pressure" (Council of the European Union, 2024: 2). The Toolbox has already been partially activated, supporting sanctions against Russian entities involved in hybrid campaigns and enabling the first HRRT deployment to Moldova ahead of the 2025 elections. At the same time, its broader use still faces a functional ceiling, as activation depends on political consensus and coordination among member states. As Brender (2025: 4) notes, its value lies "primarily in its potential."

In autonomy terms, the Toolbox illustrates both the expansion and the limits of EU action. While it broadens the Union's strategic response repertoire in hybrid domains, its implementation remains contingent on member-state consent, intelligence-sharing, and institutional coordination. It therefore reinforces a pattern in which the EU operationalises its evolving strategic culture through diversified instruments, while remaining constrained by its intergovernmental structure and embedded within broader Euro-Atlantic security arrangements.

EU–NATO Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure

The EU–NATO Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure, established in January 2023, reflects the growing recognition that "ensuring the resilience of infrastructure that is critical to EU Member States and NATO Allies is an important element of the strategic partnership and cooperation between the two organisations" (European Commission and NATO, 2023: 2). In identity terms, it consolidates the EU's role as an economic-security actor operating through regulatory, financial, and coordination instruments in partnership with NATO. In threat terms, it responds directly to vulnerabilities exposed by Russia's war against Ukraine, particularly the susceptibility of energy systems, transport networks, and communication infrastructure to "malicious hybrid and cyber activities" (European Commission and NATO, 2023: 4), thereby operationalising the emphasis in the Strategic Compass on resilience and infrastructure protection (Council of the European Union, 2022: 10–12).

Empirically, the Task Force translates these priorities into coordinated assessment and policy development. Its final report, published in June 2023, mapped vulnerabilities across energy, transport, digital, and space infrastructure and recommended measures such as stress-testing undersea cables. These efforts have informed subsequent initiatives, including the EU's 2025 Cable Security Action Plan and NATO's Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure, indicating a move towards more structured and institutionalised resilience-building (Bendiek and Kerttunen, 2025). At the same time, from the perspective of autonomy, the initiative highlights the bounded nature of EU action: the Task Force institutionalises complementarity with NATO rather than transferring hard-security responsibilities to the EU. This interpretation is supported by Kytömaa and Niskanen's observation that "NATO remained primarily focused on collective defence and deterrence," whereas the EU possessed "more powerful tools" for measures below the Article 5 threshold, including sanctions and legally binding resilience measures (Kytömaa and Niskanen, 2024: 94).

The Task Force therefore exemplifies how the EU operationalises its evolving strategic culture in domains aligned with its comparative advantages, particularly resilience and economic security, while remaining embedded in a division of labour with NATO. It illustrates a pattern of increasing operational engagement alongside continued reliance on transatlantic structures, reinforcing the hybrid character of EU strategic culture rather than a shift towards full strategic autonomy.

Synthesis of illustrative findings

Taken together, the three illustrations show that the shifts identified in the strategic documents are not merely rhetorical, but are selectively institutionalised across different domains of EU action. The growing emphasis on hybrid threats, resilience, and coordinated responses—most clearly articulated in the Strategic Compass (Council of the European Union, 2022)—is reflected in practice through instruments such as EUPM, the Hybrid Toolbox, and the EU–NATO Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure. In line with the document analysis, changes in threat perception and strategic response are most consistently translated into areas aligned with the EU's established capabilities, particularly in hybrid security, cyber defence, and infrastructure resilience.

At the same time, the comparison with the document analysis reveals important limits to this transformation. While strategic documents increasingly articulate stronger ambitions for autonomy, practice follows a more differentiated logic. EU action expands where it can rely on regulatory, civilian, and coordination instruments, but remains embedded in a division of labour with NATO in domains requiring high-end military capabilities. This pattern is what we call a functional ceiling—it does not indicate a gap between rhetoric and action, but rather reflects the structural conditions under which EU strategic culture evolves.

These findings support the interpretation of EU strategic culture as hybrid. The notion of a hybrid strategic culture captures the coexistence of distinct, and at times tension-filled, elements within the EU's approach to security. Rather than representing a linear shift from a normative to a geopolitical or realist orientation, hybridity reflects the layering of new strategic assumptions onto pre-existing ones. Across the four analytical

dimensions, this is visible in a dual identity that combines normative commitments with an emerging role as a security provider; in threat perceptions that simultaneously encompass non-state, hybrid, and state-based challenges; and in a strategic response repertoire that integrates regulatory, civilian, and increasingly military instruments.

Most importantly, hybridity is expressed in the domain of autonomy, where growing ambitions for independent action remain embedded in a division of labour with NATO. The evolution traced across the strategy documents—from a predominantly normative orientation to a more security-oriented and operational posture—is thus mirrored in practice, but in a domain-specific and bounded manner. EU strategic culture does not evolve towards a conventional military model; rather, it consolidates a distinct configuration in which expanding operational capacity coexists with enduring institutional and geopolitical constraints.

Conclusion

This article has traced the evolution of EU strategic culture across the ESS, EUGS, and the Strategic Compass, and examined how these shifts are reflected in selected post-2016 institutional practices. The analysis identifies a clear transformation: from a predominantly normative and civilian configuration in the early 2000s, through the introduction of "principled pragmatism" after 2016, to a more security-oriented and operationally engaged strategic culture after 2022. Across the four dimensions of identity, threat perception, strategic response, and autonomy, strategic culture has evolved towards greater recognition of hybrid and state-based threats, a broader and more coordinated policy repertoire, and a more explicit articulation of strategic ambition.

At the same time, this transformation remains differentiated and bounded. While "autonomy" has become more prominent in the EU strategic documents, its practical expression is selective and domain-specific. The change of strategic culture is most consistently institutionalised in areas aligned with existing capacities, particularly hybrid security, cyber defence, infrastructure resilience, regulation, coordination, and economic security. By contrast, domains requiring high-end military capabilities remain embedded in a division of labour with NATO. This pattern does not indicate a gap between rhetoric and practice, but reflects the structural conditions under which EU strategic culture operates.

The findings therefore support a conceptualisation of EU strategic culture as hybrid. Rather than a linear shift from a normative to a realist model, hybridity captures the layering of new strategic assumptions onto existing ones. Normative commitments and multilateral practices persist, but increasingly coexist with geopolitical threat perception, operational coordination, military-capability development, and resilience-oriented responses. Most importantly, hybridity is most visible in the domain of autonomy, where growing ambitions for independent action remain constrained by institutional, capability, and geopolitical factors, including enduring Euro-Atlantic interdependence.

Beyond the EU case, this article contributes to the broader strategic culture literature by showing that strategic culture should not be understood as a coherent or static set of beliefs, but as a dynamic and layered configuration that evolves through institutionalisation and is expressed unevenly across policy domains. It demonstrates that changes in

strategic culture do not necessarily produce uniform behavioural outcomes, but instead generate patterns of selective institutionalisation shaped by organisational capacity and external constraints. In the EU context, this perspective helps move beyond binary debates about normative versus realist actorness by showing instead how supranational strategic culture can develop as a hybrid form shaped by both internal institutional logics and external security architectures.

The article makes three contributions. Conceptually, it shows that change in EU strategic culture is best understood as the consolidation of a hybrid pragmatic–geopolitical configuration rather than as a replacement of normative power by hard-power actorness. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of a structured QCA for systematically tracing change across comparable strategy documents. Empirically, it links discursive developments to selected institutional practices, showing both the consolidation of new priorities and the limits of their implementation.

Overall, EU strategic culture does not evolve towards a conventional military model, nor does it remain purely normative. Instead, it consolidates a distinct hybrid configuration in which expanded operational ambition coexists with enduring structural constraints. Future research should examine how this hybrid strategic culture adapts to further geopolitical shocks and whether its domain-specific patterns of institutionalisation persist across different areas of EU security policy.

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