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Persevering with bandwagoning, not hedging: why European security cooperation still conforms to realism

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, European security cooperation has been revived. The EU has launched several defence initiatives and some member states, such as France have launched their own collaborative initiatives. The renewed activism in European security cooperation followed several years of inactivity and warrants theoretical investigation. Hedging is a concept that has been employed to make sense of renewed activism in European security cooperation. By pursuing hedging, Europeans are preparing for a future in which the US might be unwilling or unable to get involved, and to assist with, European security affairs. Advancing a neorealist analysis, this article argues that European states' efforts to increase cooperation remain consistent with the broader trajectory of European security cooperation since the end of the Cold War. European states remain dependent on the US for their security and are still far from autonomously projecting their influence internationally. This article illustrates the argument with reference to the recent withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan and the French promise to wind down its commitment in the Sahel. The implications of this argument are discussed in detail.

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Introduction

European states have been very active in their undertaking of new defence initiatives in recent years, both collectively via the EU and individually. Are European states preparing for a future in which the US could be unable or unwilling to support them? Seeking to address this line of inquiry, this article evaluates whether initiatives towards greater European security cooperation are linked to a fundamental shift in favour of hedging or whether they constitute a means to increase Europe's influence in international politics. To this end, this article gets to the root of the debate between those that hold that European security cooperation is aimed at becoming independent of the US (Posen 2006), those that believe that European security cooperation occurs out of choice (Smith 2017) and those that believe that the EU is fashioning world politics in its own image (Whitman 2011).

Putting forward a neorealist explanation of European security cooperation, my findings indicate that European states' responses are consistent with the broader trajectory of

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European security cooperation since the end of the Cold War. This article argues that the behaviour of European states can be best understood as bandwagoning rather than hedging: European states continue to remain dependent on the US and side with them. They have not prepared for a future in which the US might not be willing to assist with European security affairs. The article also illustrates the following point. Despite the fact that there has been a proliferation of security and defence initiatives at the EU level and individually, European states have strived to keep the US more, rather than less, involved in European security.

Neorealism remains a relevant analytical framework to study European security cooperation. Analysis of European security cooperation in recent years have been confined to the consequences of Brexit for European security cooperation (Martill and Sus 2018), individual states' foreign policies after Brexit (Cladi and Locatelli 2021; Baciuc 2020; Giegerich and Mölling 2018), and EU defence initiatives since the launch of the 2016 global security strategy (Besch 2017). Some contributors have resorted to scenario analysis (Sus and Hadeed 2020). Yet, without theoretical guidance, it remains difficult to assess European security cooperation. Through theoretical analysis, the question is not "what is going to happen?" but "why do states behave one way instead of another?" Admittedly, addressing the latter question will still not predict the future. The failure to predict the future should not be the death knell of a theory. As Singer (1990, 74) argued, "despite the folklore to the contrary, prediction is neither the major purpose nor the acid test of a theory." Nevertheless, neorealism is the body of work that has committed most explicitly to providing an answer, albeit a parsimonious one, to a question about states' behaviour in international politics.

The article proceeds as follows. It begins with the explanation of bandwagoning in European security cooperation. It then proceeds with an explanation of the distribution of power at a global level and regional level. Next, it illustrates the argument by looking at key European and individual defence initiatives. Subsequently, the article focuses on the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and on the promised scaling down of French operations in the Sahel. The concluding section wraps up the argument and discusses its implications.

Bandwagoning and European security cooperation

Neorealism provides an answer to the puzzle concerning whether renewed activism in European security cooperation represents evidence of hedging. Europe is bandwagoning rather than hedging. This explanation continues to fit the neorealist agenda for two reasons. Firstly, bandwagoning is a possible way for European states to react to US power (Cladi and Locatelli 2012); they opt for keeping the US involved in European security affairs. Secondly, despite the proliferation of European defence initiatives in recent years, the outcome is still not one in favour of increased influence of the Europeans internationally without the US.

Neorealism pays attention to the context in which states operate. As Kenneth Waltz (2000) put it "structures shape and shove; they do not determine the actions of states." When it comes to European security cooperation, neorealist scholars have provided numerous, and often incompatible, answers. What explains the rise in European security cooperation? Why is European security cooperation not as deep as one would expect?

What are the aims of European security cooperation? On the one hand, there are neorealist scholars (Posen 2006) who point out that Europe will balance against US power. On the other hand, there are neorealist scholars (Paul 2018) who argue that European states soft balance against US power. In so doing, they frustrate American actions and seek to weaken the endurance of US hegemony.

Due to the lack of empirical evidence in favour of European balancing against the US, this option can be excluded from the analysis. European states have ultimately strived to keep the Americans involved in NATO since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, soft balancing has largely remained ambiguous (He and Feng 2008). When applying the original concept of soft balancing (Paul 2018), it is understood that states should soft balance against a perceived threat. The US' preferences have often been at odds with the preferences of the Europeans, most notably during the Iraq war of 2003 (Gordon 2003). However, the US has not been a constant threat to European states. Had this been the case, we would have expected European security cooperation to aim for much more independence and autonomy from the US. If the Europeans have not balanced or soft balanced against the US, how would realist scholars account for the Europeans' striving to become more autonomous whilst keeping the US involved in European security affairs?

On the one hand, the rise in European security cooperation results from changes in the regional and international systems. Seth Jones (2007) for instance, understood the rise of European security cooperation in the aftermath of the Cold War as an attempt to decrease reliance on the US. European states cooperate with one another in security matters because they wish to preserve peace in Europe and project power abroad. Following this logic, one should expect European security cooperation to keep increasing as the economic growth and military expansion of other countries such as China, India, Russia, coupled with an apparently declining interest of the US in European security, warrants deeper collaboration among European countries (Martill and Brinkle 2020).

This explanation has the merit of appreciating the importance of variables located at the systemic level; hence, European security cooperation rises as changes take place at the regional and international levels. Nevertheless, this explanation assumes that European states would continue to expand their security cooperation whilst decreasing reliance on the US. We should expect European autonomy to be more consequential than it currently is, as Europeans decrease their reliance on the US. However, this does not take place as European security cooperation occurs whilst striving to keep the US involved in European security affairs.

Classical realism has provided an alternative explanation for the rise of European security cooperation (Zakaria 1999; Selden 2010). Based on this explanation, states develop the tools for international influence when they have consolidated control over domestic affairs and built the state institutions needed to project power. Looking at internal reasons behind the development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in the absence of external threats to Europe is a possible way to understand the following aspects. Firstly, it allows us to understand why the EU has ventured into the security realm. Secondly, it helps to make sense of the reasons why the EU has continuously sought to make progress in the security department. Selden (2010) argues that the development of ESDP can be seen as a process linking how federal systems evolve as they consolidate power across their member states, with a view to then projecting power

abroad. The classical realist agenda is admittedly more dynamic in its opening to the interplay between internal and external variables. However, bandwagoning in response to US power still offers a more persuasive way to understand European security cooperation. Firstly, with Brexit having taken place, the EU is now one possible avenue, not necessarily the main avenue, for European states to increase security cooperation. Some member states of the EU have sought in fact, to increase their influence by opting for alternative frameworks. Secondly, we should expect the EU, through the common security and defence policy, to seek much greater influence over international events than it normally has. Ultimately, in every major foreign policy crisis since the end of the Cold War, the EU has often promised more than it was actually able to deliver without the US.

Summing up, what is missing from the analysis is an explanation of what the renewed activism in European security cooperation in recent years has led to. The behaviours that European states have undertaken, I argue, are consistent with the perseverance of bandwagoning. Attempts to foster deeper defence cooperation among European countries have followed familiar trajectories, making the US more, rather than less, important for European security. This neorealist explanation has the merit of doing the following: it asserts the importance of the distribution of power in the international system, explaining why European states' responses have continued to follow familiar trajectories since the end of the Cold War. However, this explanation also provides due importance to the US: as the US commitment to European security apparently wanes, European states continue to strive to keep the US involved in European security.

The endurance of global unipolarity

Since the end of the Cold War, the international system has been unipolar. The US' military power has remained largely unchecked since then. More specifically, a unipolar system, is characterised by three key features. Firstly, it has one superpower, which is disproportionately stronger militarily than its peers are. As William Wohlforth put it, unipolarity is a system in which "one state's capabilities are too great to be counter-balanced" (1999, 9). Secondly, unipolarity is anarchical. As no overarching power sits above the unipole, the latter has incomplete control over political actors (Wang 2020). Thirdly, a unipolar system is also characterised by the preponderant power's attempt to foster an international order, which is primarily shaped by the unipolar state's view of how the world works and how the world should work.

If we accept that examining the polarity of the international system is a useful starting point, why should we focus on unipolarity? If a truly multipolar system was about to emerge, then we would expect greater opportunities for great power conflict. Multipolar systems exist where there are three or more great powers and each of them could bid for hegemony. Kenneth Waltz explained that "interdependence of parties, diffusion of dangers, confusion of responses" characterise great power politics in a multipolar world (1989, 48). Interdependence between different poles, i.e. interolarity (see the Introduction article in this Special Issue), comes when actors rely on each other. But they can also entrap each other: it can become very difficult for states to assess their potential threats and to ascertain who can be expected to deal with problems when they arise.

One strand has it that the balance of economic power is shifting in favour of the so-called “BRICs” (Brazil, Russia, India, China) (Hopewell 2017) (see also Baciú and Kotzé in this Special Issue). Some scholars see that the power shift currently underway could result in a return to great power competition in key regions of the globe (Macdonald and Parent 2011). Other scholars predict that a return to multipolarity will be significant for the European strategic environment and British defence policy in particular (Blagden 2015). Promotion of multipolarity has been a central goal of emerging great powers such as Russia and China. In his speech at the 2007 Munich security conference, Putin said that unipolarity was “without moral foundations for modern civilisation” (President of Russia 2007). In the US, whilst Clinton and Bush pursued US foreign policies centred on American preponderance, it is only under Obama that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton mentioned an evolution towards a multipolar world and a multi-partner world (Clinton 2009). Some scholars have concluded that the global balance of power did not change overnight but the balance of influence – the normative equilibrium – did (Paikin 2021).

It can therefore be said that other great powers are present and rising in the international system. Moreover, in recent years, US narrative has tended to focus on intensifying great power competition and specifically the challenges that great powers such as Russia and China present (Ambrosio et al. 2020). Yet, this article argues that, the US remains dominant in important respects. At a global level, the balance of power still tilts in favour of US preponderance. As of 2019, the US still drove growth in military spending, reaching a total of \$732 billion and accounting for 38% of global military spending. The increase of 5.1% registered by the next biggest defence spender in the world, China, was notable but that brought it \$261 billion, far less than half that of the US (SIPRI 2020). The US also maintains the edge in terms of economic power: with a GDP of approx. \$21 trillion in 2019, it scored higher than the Chinese GDP of approx. \$14 trillion. The GNI per capita divide is even more striking as the US average scored approx. \$65,000 compared to the Chinese approx. \$10,000 (World Bank 2021). The US also maintains the upper hand in technology: whilst China is clearly proving excellent in terms of putting artificial intelligence to commercial use, the US is still crucial and leading in terms of developing the technology that makes artificial intelligence work (O’Meara 2019). Therefore, the US continues to have a comparatively bigger share of the distribution of power than other great powers. In analysing European security cooperation, this is an important starting point because the key manifestations of US preponderance, such as US military presence in Europe and NATO’s role as a key European security institution, remain intact.

The European strategic environment: balanced multi-polarity

Over the past few years, external challenges such as the rise of a resurgent Russia as well as internal challenges such as Brexit have contributed to putting the European strategic environment back in the spotlight. Looking at the broader picture, however, one can note the importance of structural factors contributing to stability in Europe. With approximate power parity among the UK, France and Germany (Blagden 2015), the system in Europe continues to be characterised by balanced multipolarity (Hyde-Price 2007). In a system characterised by balanced multipolarity, no power can make a bid for hegemony because a balancing coalition would emerge.

There have not been major changes in the distribution of capabilities among European powers. In 2019, the UK, France and Germany were still the “Big Three” with an expenditure of \$54.8bn, \$52.3bn and \$48.5bn each.¹ A little behind those we find Italy with \$27.1bn and Spain with \$12.1bn (The Military Balance 2020). What is, then, the impact of Brexit upon European security cooperation? Krotz and Schild (2018) argued that Brexit’s impact can be understood in terms of potentially altering the actor constellations and preference configurations around the Brussels negotiating table. Neither of the European great powers have signalled that they could bid for hegemony in Europe. Germany, for instance, has increased its economic standing in recent years and it has signalled its willingness to assume more leadership in security and defence at times (see Ewers-Peters and Baciu in this Special Issue), but it has not significantly invested in CSDP nor in its own army. As a report by the military commissioner of the German parliament reported, budget cuts and poor management have meant that German soldiers lack the resources to effectively take part on a NATO mission (Deutsche Welle 2018).

The circumstances described are what characterise European security cooperation: the survival of European states is not at stake. Remarkably little has changed in terms of Europe being affected by systemic dynamics. However, despite the uncooperative relationship between the UK and its European partners, which has developed since Brexit, this is unlikely to insulate European states entirely from the security implications of balanced multipolarity at a regional level and of unipolarity at a global level. Under balanced multipolarity, there is a risk that countries may privilege state responses. This does not mean that unbalanced multipolarity will come back because European states are going to strive to keep the US involved in European security.

Despite the emergence or resurgence of powers such as China or Russia on the one side, and changes in the exogenous and endogenous variables in Europe on the other side, the international system remains largely unipolar and the distribution of power in Europe persists. What requires an explanation then is why there has been a proliferation of security and defence initiatives in recent years. “Hedging” has emerged in recent years as a possible way to explain the renewed European security activism. There are several interpretations of hedging in the literature. Goh (2005) sees hedging as a strategy that states employ when they cannot decide on a more straightforward strategy such as balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality. Tessman (2012), for instance, states that hedging is a system-induced behaviour that is prevalent in systems that are unipolar and in the process of power de-concentration. Castillo and Downes (2020) add to this by asserting that secondary states typically hedge when they doubt the ability or willingness of established great powers to check a rising great power. Hedging is also defined as a behaviour states engage with when they prepare for the eventuality that a more powerful state might lose interest in ensuring their protection (Fiott 2018; Ringsmose and Webber 2020; Ross-Smith 2020). Ringsmose and Webber (2020, 301) have argued that hedging encompasses policy options “considered by allies when doubts arise as to the motives and reliability of a powerful protector.” Fear of abandonment is a recurrent theme in US-European relations. Combining the insights from these contributions, this article understands hedging as a behaviour that Europeans undertake in order to prepare for a future in which the US might be unwilling or unable to get involved, and to assist with, European security affairs.

The continuing US involvement in European security

The US presence in Europe has traditionally provided a measure of reassurance against external threats but also against potential threats to the intra-European balance of power (Joffe 1984). During the Cold War, the US commitment to the defence of Western Europe was strong from the start, as the US force strength totalled 300,000 soldiers from 1953. There were some reductions in the 1960s to roughly 250,000 but the US contingent went up to 280,000 soldiers in the 1980s (Zimmerman 2009). After the end of the Cold War, collective defence was no longer the priority as NATO moved to out of area operations (Ringsmose and Webber 2020). Nevertheless, collective defence reasserted itself as a core task of NATO with the resurgence of Russia as a great power, manifestations of which included most notably the cyber-attacks in Estonia in 2007, the war in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Throughout the post-Cold War period, fear about the US leaving Europe has been constant and it has been rising in recent years. With the pivot to Asia that President Obama proclaimed in 2011, the Europeans could no longer rule out significant reductions in the US engagement in Europe (Wolf and Gareis 2016). Nevertheless, US disengagement from Europe was not the aim of the US pivot to Asia. Kurt Campbell (2016) argued that the purpose of the Pivot was to show China that the US was ready to commit to being influential in Asia.

During the tenure of President Trump, European anxieties were exacerbated further by a sense that the US would be stepping back from the world (Wike 2018). Trump inaugurated his time in office by stressing the “America first” message. Trump notoriously commented, “For many decades, we’ve enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry, subsidised the armies of other countries, while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military” (ABC 2017). Trump’s comments and tweets have aroused suspicion across the board and among European allies in particular. Nevertheless, as Webber and Sperling (2019, 512–513) contend, “Presidential comment is consequential in its own right but excessive attention to it gives rise to misplaced and unrealised sentiments of danger.” Moreover, to put this further into perspective, John Schuessler and Joshua Shifrinson (2019) remind us, for instance, that US ideas about leaving Europe date all the way back to the 1950s and it also used threats of abandonment in the 1960s to put down the Franco-German revolt.

In practice, US plans to leave Europe have been more theoretical and rhetorical than practical. At a maximum, the Trump administration unveiled a plan in July 2020 to reposition 11,900 military personnel from Germany – from 36,000 to 24,000 – in a manner that will strengthen NATO. Of those 11,900, nearly 5,600 members will be repositioned within NATO countries and approximately 6,400 will return to the United States (US Department of Defense 2020). Trump made it clear this was driven by his own long-standing grievances. “We don’t want to be the suckers anymore,” Trump said in a White House briefing (quoted in Quinn 2020). In the grand scheme of things, it would be the removal of 6,000 troops out of more than 60,000 troops in Europe (Moravcsik 2020). Furthermore, the plan would be scrutinised by the new Pentagon team, headed by new secretary of defense Lloyd Austin, as part of the new administration (Sprenger 2021).

The plan still appeared to generate anxiety among European politicians. Local politicians such as Markus Soeder, president of the federal state of Bavaria, for instance, said

that the decision would weaken NATO and the US itself (Feroz 2020). In April 2021, the US then decided to step up its military presence in Germany by 500 soldiers; Germany welcomed this move. As defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer commented, “it is of course wonderful news that the U.S. has not only distanced itself from plans to withdraw American troops from Germany, but that, on the contrary, these troops will be strengthened by 500 additional forces” (Gehrke 2021).

US commitment to European security is not waning; Defender Europe 20, halted by COVID-19, was going to be the largest deployment of US based land forces to Europe in more than 25 years, with more than 20,000 soldiers deployed directly from the US to Europe (NATO 2020). Defender-Europe 20 took place in a modified version but still carried the message that NATO is committed to European security. In March 2021, Defender Europe 21, the second exercise in the series, began, and it focused on the Black Sea and the Balkans. There is an intention to keep the Defender Europe exercises going with plans for Defender Europe 22 (Judson 2021). Recent rising tensions in Ukraine, following Russia’s stationing of troops near its border with Ukraine, further prompted the US to hold security talks with its Russian counterparts in Geneva in January 2022 (BBC News 2022).

EU defence initiatives

PESCO, EDF and CARD

With the publication of the Global Strategy in June 2016, the EU generated the expectation that it would achieve “strategic autonomy” (EEAS 2017; Duke 2019). The strategy says that EU member states should ensure their own security, by having a “sustainable, innovative and competitive European defence industry which is essential for Europe’s strategic autonomy and for a credible CSDP” (EEAS 2017). The European Commission reiterated that the emphasis was on capabilities, noting that “moving towards Europe’s strategic autonomy requires spending more on our defences, as well as spending better and spending together” (European Commission 2017).

In March 2017, the European Commission published a White Paper envisioning the creation of a Europe-wide defence union by the year 2025 (European Commission 2017). Subsequently, at the European Council on 6 March 2017 (European Council 2017a), the EU promised to work on two developments which could substantiate the call for strategic autonomy made in June 2016. The EU promised to launch the European Defence Fund (EDF); new financial arrangements for the deployment of the battlegroups; and to operationalise, for the first time, the process of permanent structured cooperation (PESCO).

As part of PESCO, a group of member states can take a decision by qualified majority voting (QMV), “to undertake closer defence cooperation by aiming to achieve certain levels of defence spending; aligning their equipment and force interoperability; filling capability gaps; and undertaking joint procurement. Member states do not have a veto over permanent structured cooperation, but unwilling member states would not be required to take part” (European Council 2017b).

Despite the fact that the EU made substantial progress in the field of security and defence, the development of PESCO deserves qualification in a number of respects.

Firstly, even with PESCO, the progressive framing of a common Union Defence policy should still be approved by unanimity in line with Article 42(2) of the Lisbon Treaty (Treaty of Lisbon 2007). Furthermore, member states retain a degree of autonomy in making decisions over whether or not to participate in PESCO. Secondly, for PESCO to ultimately be meaningful, it must be strategically communicated to EU citizens, with its impact upon European citizens' security and European countries' external security clearly articulated. Ongoing political commitment by participating member states is also necessary (Efstathiou 2019). PESCO does not limit national sovereignty as member states remain in charge of deciding the extent to which they wish to take part and their level of defence expenditure. Even states who tend to be more favourably disposed towards the idea of deeper EU defence integration, find it hard to realise meaningful initiatives. In Germany, for instance, there is multi-party support for a European army. However, this has never led to important initiatives, aided by the fact that there remain significant constitutional impediments on the use of force in Germany (Peters 2018). Furthermore, as Simon Duke (2019, 130) has pointed out, "if the goal of PESCO is to align defence capabilities so as to attain common strategic objectives, it has thus far largely failed." Therefore, the expectation that PESCO would provide the necessary capabilities to underpin the EUGS and prepare the EU for a future without its partners (the US and NATO), has not been met. In a similar vein, Sweeney and Winn (2020, 234) have argued that whilst PESCO is potentially significant, it "falls short of offering convincing evidence of a strategic turn in EU commitment to autonomous defence capability."

In June 2017, the European Commission also presented a proposal for the setting up of the European Defence Fund (EDF). The latter is intended to foster the competitiveness and innovativeness of the European defence technological and industrial base. The EDF is aimed at member states' militaries and defence industries and will co-finance military research projects that involve entities from at least three member states. According to Simon Duke (2019, 125) "the impetus behind the EDF ... is the lack of cooperation between the member states on defence development and acquisition, with up to 80% of procurement and 90% of research and technology administered on a national basis." Closing the recognised capability gaps would require spending levels that would be unsustainable from a purely national-level perspective. The EDF provides matched funding to member state expenditure on cooperative multistate initiatives. To this end, the Commission requested €13 billion for the EDF over the multiannual financial framework 2021–2027 (Zandee 2021).

The EDF would not be established with additional contributions by member states but will be provided out of the EU budget, showing that the European Commission has a growing role in security and defence (Mills 2019; Sweeney and Winn 2020). Whilst this is a notable step, it should be stressed that security and defence is still the heading with the least amount of allocated funding (approx. 15 billion euros out of a total 1.8 trillion euros and against 1.203 billion euros dedicated to cohesion, resilience and values) (European Commission 2020). Furthermore, whilst there was a notable increase in research and development spending in 2019, totalling 19% compared to 2018, EU member states still spend almost seven times less than the US on defence research and development (European Defence Agency 2021).

A further initiative in recent years has been the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD). The objective of CARD is to foster capability development by addressing shortfalls, deepening defence cooperation and ensuring optimal use, including coherence, of defence spending (EEAS 2017). Based on a cyclical two-year process, it is a notable development in that it provides a comprehensive picture of the European defence landscape to member states for the first time, including capability, research and industrial aspects. The European Defence Agency (EDA) is a key actor here as it collects information made available by member states and coordinates with the European External Action service and the EU military staff. Bilateral dialogues are held with individual member states to validate the information, in consistency with NATO's defence planning process. Recommendations for defence are finally presented to ministers of defence in the CARD report. The first full CARD cycle was launched in autumn 2019 (Van Reybroeck 2019).

The development of CARD deserves qualification as its findings are used to enhance EU-NATO cooperation as well as advance the next phase of PESCO for 2021–2025 (European Defence Agency 2020). Furthermore, the CARD currently does not allow for third party involvement so the UK's involvement in it is not an option for now (Mills 2019). Thus, despite considerable advancements in EU security cooperation, it remains to be seen how the EU can realise its ambition to have strategic autonomy without the UK, which was one of the most powerful EU member state in terms of hard power. EU defence autonomy may be central to the European agenda. However, it is more the realisation of long-trend soul-searching European efforts than a real effort to look to a future in which the US is less central to their strategic calculations (Pothier 2020).

France and the EI2

In September 2017, President Macron suggested a European Intervention Initiative (EI2) as part of his vision of a “sovereign, united and democratic Europe” (Zandee and Kruijver 2019a, 3). The EI2 is an initiative of multinational defence collaboration. According to Zandee and Kruijver (2019a), the EI2 is the “odd one out” because its aim is not to establish a new military formation. The EI2 is about enhancing the ability of the participating European states “to respond to future threat and crises so that, whenever necessary, European security interests can be better and faster protected within the chosen framework” (Zandee and Kruijver 2019b, 2). Flexible and non-binding, the EI2 aims at assisting various institutional frameworks such as the EU, NATO, the UN and coalitions of the willing, but is outside any of the institutional frameworks aforementioned. On 25 June 2018, nine European states signed the letter of intent (Letter of Intent 2018). France also sent the invitation to countries such as Denmark, which has an opt-out on European defence and cooperation, and the UK, which was in the process of leaving the EU (Koenig 2018). Meanwhile, the number of participants has grown to thirteen (Zandee and Kruijver 2019b).

Why did Macron unveil the launch of another defence initiative and why did he do that outside the EU and NATO frameworks? On the one hand, this initiative appears to be in line with France's pragmatism since the end of the Cold War: furthering French goals through the most effective institutional mechanism available (Talmor and Selden 2017). Nevertheless, it was odd that this initiative came from France, which remains the

standard-bearer of the Europeanist position, holding that European integration and the development of a European independent military capability best serves the interests of European states.² Zandee and Kruijver (2019b) have explained that France had realised that it did not share the same understanding of the security environment as its European partners. Secondly, Macron voiced the French frustration with PESCO that it had become too inclusive and not ambitious enough to foster deeper European security cooperation. In so doing, he distanced the French position on PESCO from the German one, which showed a preference for a more inclusive PESCO with lower entry criteria to make sure there would not be new dividing lines within the EU (Koenig 2018). Thirdly, the French ministry of the armed forces had carried out an exercise which identified a more limited group of able and willing European partners that could take part in the EI2 (Billon-Galland and Quencez 2018).

The EI2, however, caused some tension in terms of European security cooperation. Firstly, whilst the letter of intent specified that the EI2 would not constitute a new rapid reaction force and it would not create new structures. It would be resource neutral, so an underlying and potential issue of duplication still existed (Letter of Intent 2018). The only new structure associated with EI2 would be a light EI2 permanent secretariat in Paris. Secondly, it deepened divisions within the EU: inviting Denmark and the UK was seen as a way to keep EI2 separate from PESCO. Moreover, countries such as Lithuania or Poland were not invited but would have liked to participate. Whilst Koenig (2018) reminds us that a concession was made in the letter of intent in that the EI2 would be open to “other European states willing to share its strategic objectives and to demonstrate commitment as well as an adequate level of operational capabilities,” EI2 proved to be a divisive initiative. Despite the rhetoric, it may seem unrealistic to further enlarge EI2. Zandee and Kruijver (2019b, 4) have stressed, in fact, that “it seems contrary to the selection criterion (‘the able and willing’) and to the idea of efficiency to enlarge the group of participating states much further.” The impact of EI2 upon existing CSDP structure and force is also one to consider. In this connection, French investment in the EI2 signals that CSDP is destined to become nothing more than a humanitarian crisis management instrument (Sweeney and Winn 2020).

In sum, while several EU member states feel excluded from the European core, the temptation to opt for strengthening bilateral relationships with the US is hard to avoid. Poland, for instance, offered to spend \$2bn on building a permanent US base (BBC News 2019).

Withdrawal from Afghanistan: “in together, out together”

US and coalition forces conducted military operations in Afghanistan from October 2001 until the withdrawal of all forces, which ultimately completed on 30 August 2021. By the end of 2014, the US had concluded Operation Enduring Freedom and NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had also concluded (Carati 2015). Whilst the US and its allies’ troop numbers were substantially reduced after 2014, a number of US soldiers remained involved with Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, which was, in turn, part of NATO-led operation resolute support. European troops backed US and NATO-led missions in Afghanistan from start to finish.

European countries, including the UK, were opposed to the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan but ultimately went along with the “in together, out together” approach which the US and coalition forces had always taken in Afghanistan (Mills 2021, 5; Kaldor 2021). What the “out together” entailed only became evident as the withdrawal was carried out in August 2021. The decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was taken without any meaningful consultation with European allies (Fleming and Foy 2021). Whilst the lack of consultation could be seen as a sign that the US would disengage from European security, the US remains deeply committed to it as showed above. The engagement of the US and its allies in Afghanistan was different to the engagement of the US with its European partners. Whilst the latter have struggled to realise strategic autonomy, they are still important centres of economic power that the US remains committed to.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan illustrates other important aspects, which validate the neorealist analysis of this article. Firstly, Europeans did not take the chance to manifest their autonomy and did not show a capacity to act geopolitically. As the final decision to leave Afghanistan was taken by the Trump administration back in February 2020 as part of a US/Taliban peace deal (Mills 2021), there was no significant European response to it. Secondly, they had options to remain in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal but did not pursue them. For instance, the Europeans could have stayed in Afghanistan as part of a NATO contingent under the auspices of the UN (Kaldor 2021); they could have also undertaken a civilian-led demilitarisation of Afghanistan with a focus on peace-building (European Union Institute for Security Studies 2011). Furthermore, UK Defence secretary Ben Wallace explained that London had sought to forge a coalition of “like-minded” countries to maintain presence in Afghanistan but nearly all of the NATO member states did not show any interest (Warrell et al. 2021). Put differently, there was a lack of political will among the Europeans to stay longer than the US in Afghanistan (Franke 2021). The withdrawal from Afghanistan thus showed that the Europeans were still dependent on Washington’s foreign and security policy (Breton 2021).

The withdrawal from Afghanistan has sparked significant reactions from the EU as the coming of age of European security and defence. High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, for instance, commented “Europe only responds in a crisis. Afghanistan could wake it up. The moment has come to give it a military force capable of fighting if necessary” (Euractiv 2021). Whilst such statement is resounding, its reach may be exaggerated. There is now a record of cases where the EU reacts to foreign policy crises with big promises of greater autonomy. These often involve the creation of a more far-reaching military force. Back in 2011, for instance, the Libyan crisis was also an important wakeup call for CSDP (Koenig 2012). Subsequently, the European Council called for “the urgent necessity to strengthen European cooperation in the area of military capability development for sustaining and enhancing CSDP in order to improve operational effectiveness and in the context of increasingly constrained defence budgets” (European Council 2011a). Only a few years later, in 2015, as Europe got to terms with the Ukraine crisis in its own backyard, with the subsequent Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called for the creation of a European army (BBC News 2015).

Therefore, there continues to be a gap between the external capabilities that the EU has and the expectations, which are placed on it (Hill 1993). Without the willingness to remain involved in Afghanistan autonomously from the US, Europe did not have many options but to ultimately go with the US decision on Afghanistan. The withdrawal from Afghanistan experience shows yet again Europe's dependence on the US and this state of affairs is unlikely to change in the short to medium term. At the same time, Europe will continue to engage in calls for greater autonomy, which could periodically come up again, especially in times of crises.

French efforts in the Sahel region: in alone, out together?

In 2012, Mali became the theatre of a political crisis. A Tuareg insurrection in the north of the country led to a military coup in the capital. Subsequently, a coalition of Al-Qaeda affiliated jihadists sought to establish control in the northern regions of the country (Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen 2020). France had already alerted in its White Paper published in 2008, that Sahelian states were unable to tackle challenges such as rebellion, trafficking, illegal migration and terrorism (Défense et Sécurité Nationale 2008). France deployed troops to the Sahel region back in 2013; the objective was to stop armed northern separatists from advancing towards Bamako, Mali's capital. French troops then stayed on to fight against jihadists (The Economist 2021a). Whilst the involvement in the Sahel region is nowhere near the magnitude of the involvement of the US and its allies in Afghanistan, there are some similarities. Firstly, like the US and its allies, France has also had to deal with insurgent groups. In the French case, such group was the Jama' at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). This would, in turn, prolong the involvement in the conflict and cast a question mark over the opportunity to improve the security situation. Secondly, and related, France also has to show a way out of the conflict, especially as public support for the intervention wanes.

The support that France received for Operation Serval, running in Mali between 2013 and 2014, included the UK sending supply surveillance aircraft. Furthermore, Belgium, Denmark, Germany and Spain sent transport planes. However, no European country joined France in combat, as France remained the only state with permanent military presence in the region. Following the success of Operation Serval, helping to regain the northern half of Mali from Islamist groups, France launched counter-insurgency Operation Barkhane in 2014 (Taylor 2017). France has also been providing air support to the G5 Sahel force since 2017. This is a multinational military grouping with units from Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania (Gheciu 2020). The Sahel region became a strategic priority for the EU (European Council 2011b) as several CSDP missions have been deployed to reform the security forces of Mali and Niger. These included a civilian capacity-building mission in Niger in 2012 (EUCAP Sahel Niger), the military mission EUTM in 2013 and the civilian capacity-building mission in Mali in 2014. The EU used Mali as a notable opportunity to strengthen its role as a security actor.

France has decided to wind down its largest overseas military mission in the Sahel. The situation is worse than it was back in 2013. For some commentators (Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen 2021) the jihadist insurgents are currently closer the capital of Bamako than they were in 2013. President Macron firstly made an announcement ahead of the G7 and NATO summit in June 2021, that Operation Barkhane would end in the first quarter of

2022 (Mallet and Munshi 2021). This would not mean that France would leave the Sahel region altogether; rather, that the operation would move from being a primarily French operation to being a multilateral one. A possible avenue for this would be the strengthening of Task Force Takuba, which was deployed in 2020 and which has a mandate for three years. The Task Force Takuba received support from the NATO support and procurement organisation in June 2021 (NATO 2021). Nevertheless, Task Force Takuba is not mandated by an international organization and it has 600 special forces, 300 of whom are French, the rest being from Belgium, Estonia, Czech Republic, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden. Germany, Norway and the UK back the mission politically but they have not committed any forces (Schmauder et al. 2020). Whilst Task Force Takuba is a step in the right direction in terms of having a European option to remain involved in the Sahel region, the objective of having an enhanced multinational special forces contingent of 2,000, which President Macron called for back in February 2021, is still far from being realised. On top of that, military and financial support from most of France's EU allies is also lacking (Mallet 2021).

Moreover, France and the EU need further help from the US, not just in terms of military and financial assistance but also political (Lebovich 2021). This can be beneficial in terms of creating the conditions for stabilisation and political reform. During the Trump administration, whilst there was uncertainty over US interest in the Sahel, US logistical assistance to French troops continued steadily (Lebovich 2021). The Biden administration seemed to strike a different note. At the G5 Sahel summit, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken remarked "As ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates seek to expand their reach across Africa, the United States will continue to work closely with our African partners. We will build on existing efforts in West Africa and share lessons in the global fight against violent extremism" (quoted in Coakley 2021). However, there are also elements of continuity from the Trump to the Biden administration in respect of the US engagement with the Sahel region. No further assurance was provided, in fact, as to the potential increase of US assistance beyond the ongoing support that the US military provides to the anti-jihadist operation Barkhane (The Economist 2021b).

Conclusion

This article investigated whether the renewed activism in European security cooperation in recent years led to Europe hedging against the US withdrawing from European security affairs. It argued that European states continue to bandwagon and that this behaviour reflects a trend, which has been in place since the end of the Cold War. Advancing a neorealist analysis, this article started from the premise that the distribution of power at a global level and at a regional level have remained unaltered. Whilst the rise of potential peer competitors should be taken into account, the international system remains unipolar and centred around US dominance. At a regional level, no major change has taken place as Europe continues to be under a condition of balanced multipolarity.

Since 2016 and the publication of the EU global strategy, notable steps have been taken by the EU and by individual member states such as France to deepen defence collaboration among European countries. These steps, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding the US commitment to assisting its European allies, generated the expectation that

European states would be engaged with hedging, thereby preparing for a future in which the US would be unable or unwilling to further assist them.

However, the findings of this article point to a perseverance of bandwagoning by European states. The article showcased this argument by discussing EU defence initiatives. Whilst notable initiatives such as PESCO, the EDF and CARD clearly benefited from a post-Brexit impetus towards greater European integration, they have so far fallen short of equipping European states with a credible military set-up to possibly be more autonomous from the US. As John R. Deni in this Special Issue argued, EU security operations and missions are still reliant on US capabilities and it might take some time until they will be self-responsible operable. EU defence initiatives remain divisive among member states and are ultimately less ambitious than they seem; at best, they are there to support NATO. France's own independent initiative, the EI2, further contributed to potentially deepening divisions within the EU.

Perseverance with bandwagoning offers European states the chance to continue relying on their more powerful US ally. The latter remains committed to European security as showed by this article. Nevertheless, perseverance with bandwagoning is a behaviour that comes with certain costs and consequences. The article illustrated these with reference to the US exit from Afghanistan and French efforts in the Sahel region. In the former case, European states lost yet another opportunity to show that they could be autonomous from Washington. Despite disagreeing with, and complaining about, President Joe Biden's decision to execute the withdrawal from Afghanistan, they could ultimately not advance their own alternative plan as they decide not to significantly deviate from US preferences. In the latter case, France has so far not managed to rally enough support among its fellow European allies to securely downsize its military commitment to the Sahel region, hoping that a European coalition will take on the burden. Meanwhile, that has also left France exposed to having to continuously rely on, and ask for, US logistical support.

Persevering with bandwagoning leaves Europe reliant on the US. Absent a change in the distribution of power, this state of affairs could continue to work, keeping the Europeans and the Americans close together. However, it comes with the cost for Europeans to have to put up with a distinctive lack of far-reaching autonomy from Washington's decisions. This becomes evident when it could be in the Europeans' interest to show more autonomy from their US ally. Subsequently, whilst it is likely that Europeans will persevere with bandwagoning, we could expect to see more and more pressure being put on the Europeans to strive for more autonomy from the US.

Notes

1. For a discussion on the hard power and strategic objectives of the "big three" and Italy, see the article "European Strategies in Post-Pandemic Peer Competition: Implications for America" by John R. Deni in this Special Issue.
2. For an in-depth discussion of France's role in promoting strategic autonomy, see the article "Differentiated Integration and Role Conceptions in Security Orders: A Comparative Study of France, Germany, Ireland and Romania" by Ewers-Peters and Baciu in this Special Issue.

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