European Momentum: Analysing Representations of European Strategic Autonomy in Dutch Politics

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"If we wish to keep the United States involved, we as Europe must show that we are able to take our own responsibility in the field of defence" – *Hans van Mierlo, 1997.*

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Content

Abstract

With the adoption of the European Union Global Strategy in 2016 the EU renewed its quest for attaining strategic autonomy. However, the EU document did not specify what would constitute European strategic autonomy (ESA), so, as is the case with the EU's external policies, the national perspectives of Member States are its obvious basis. Historically, the Netherlands has been an obstructionist when it came to European security and defence integration due to its Atlanticist position, begging the question: *how is European strategic autonomy represented in Dutch politics?* To understand the Dutch perspective and positioning regarding ESA, this thesis drew from the field of Critical Geopolitics, conducting an interpretive-explanatory research employing discourse analysis by analysing statements made by party representatives in the *Tweede Kamer* during the period of 2016-2021. Three distinct schools of thought underpinning the representations of ESA in the Dutch debate. The Sovereigntists are Eurosceptics who present ESA as an attempt to establish a European army and a threat to national sovereignty. The Europeanists actively champion ESA and envision it as an emancipatory project to make the EU able to act independently of the US because it is an increasingly unreliable ally. The Atlanticists present ESA as an opportunity to take responsibility within NATO and improve burden-sharing with the US. This thesis found that the Dutch debate regarding European security policy has substantially Europeanised. While the Atlanticists are still cautious, they no longer take an active obstructionist position, instead adopting Europeanist talking-points from the 90s. Considering this Europeanist momentum, there is potential for the Netherlands to become an active and serious promotor of ambitious European security commitments.

Key words: European Union, European Strategic Autonomy, the Netherlands, Dutch, NATO, CSDP, Atlanticist, Europeanist, Eurosceptic, Identity, Representation, Discourse, Critical Geopolitics.

Abbreviations

CDA	–	*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*
CSDP	–	Common Security and Defence Policy
EDC	–	European Defence Community
EDF	–	European Defence Fund
EP	–	European Parliament
EPC	–	European Political Cooperation
ESA	–	European strategic autonomy
EUGS	–	European Union Global Strategy
GL	–	*GroenLinks*
MP(s)	–	Member(s) of Parliament
MS(s)	–	Member State(s)
NATO	–	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PESCO	–	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PvdA	–	*Partij van de Arbeid*
PVV	–	*Partij Voor de Vrijheid*
SP	–	*Socialistische Partij*
TK	–	*Tweede Kamer*
VVD	–	*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2016 the EU Global Strategy, accompanied by the Implementation Plan on Security and Defence, was adopted by the Council, and with it the concept of European strategic autonomy (ESA) became the leitmotiv of the EU's security policy (Kempin and Kunz 2017, p. 6). US president Trump's policies, behaviour and statements exacerbated pre-existing concerns in the capitals of many member states (MSs) about the US's long-term strategic commitments to Europe, "fuelling a debate about whether, how, and to what extent Europeans could and should take greater responsibility for their own security" (Järvenpää, Major and Sakkov 2019, p. 4). It even prompted Angela Merkel, at the time Chancellor of Germany, a staunch Atlanticist state with strong ties to the US, to declare that "the times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over. […] We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands" (Henley 2017; Järvenpää, Major and Sakkov 2019, p. 4; Stahl et al 2004, p. 430). President Biden's election therefore left many in Europe euphoric. Having lived through the abrasiveness of the Trump presidency, European leaders had hoped for a reprieve and return to normalcy. European Council President Charles Michel even copied Biden's motto, proclaiming "America is back" (Reuters, 2021). Dutch members of parliament (MPs) spoke similarly celebrating that "a new wind is blowing in the White House, Biden wants to invest in the Alliance [NATO]" (Tweede Kamer 2021c, p. 6).

Fast forward to the middle of August 2021, and the honeymoon phase seemed to be over, as officials across Europe reacted with a sense of "disbelief and betrayal" to the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, following the American, and thus NATO, withdrawal (Karnitschnig 2021). Not only did they feel blindsided, but European leaders were also forced to publicly acknowledge the capacity gap between the US and European countries. Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, Sigrid Kaag, admitted to the Dutch parliament (the *Tweede*

Kamer/TK) that the Europeans were "fully dependent on the Americans" for the evacuation of their citizens, adding her German counterpart shared that assessment (Leidsch Dagblad, 2021). High Representative Borrell commented on the capabilities gap in an interview, stating that "we have to analyse how the EU can further deploy capabilities and positively influence international relations to defend its interests. Our EU strategic autonomy remains at the top of our agenda", adding that he hoped Afghanistan would be a wake-up call for MSs (Euractiv 2021). Most recently, the Biden administration has joined the chorus calling for the EU to "get real on strategic autonomy" in order to prevent that "the gap between what the U.S. military can do – and what Europe's collective militaries can't do – will only grow wider" (Herszenhorn, 2021).

However, the waxing and waning of the transatlantic relations are only a part of an equation that results in a "deteriorating security situation" for the European Union (Drent, Wilms and Zandee 2017, p. 1). These developments have not gone unnoticed in the Netherlands, another Atlanticist state like Germany, but has it responded to the changing global security situation in a similar fashion as Germany? Being a founder of both NATO and the European project – but also due to its economic size and ambitious foreign policy – the Netherlands can assert considerable influence in the EU, but its Atlanticist reflex has often led it to use that influence to obstruct European security and defence integration, rather than promote it (Koops and Vériter 2021; Hoffenaar 2015; Rood 2021; Stahl et al 2004). For this reason, the Netherlands actively tried to avoid getting involved in "ideological debates over European security" (Koops and Vériter 2021). Yet, according to some analysts, the Netherlands has started to shed its obstructionist ways in favour of becoming a more ambitious promotor of a serious European security commitments (Drent, Wilms and Zandee 2017; Koops and Vériter 2021). Indeed, in 2021 the Netherlands has published a non-paper with Spain and issued a joint statement with France (historically its opposite regarding European security). Both of these

focussed on the need for Europe to become strategically autonomous (Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2021a; 2021b).

Are these developments indicative of a more fundamental and sustainable Dutch policy shift in relation to European security? To ascertain this, the sources of Dutch security policy, and by extension its stance on European security policy, need to be considered. According to Everts (1991) domestic ideological debate in the *TK* as representative body ultimately decides the outlines and priorities of Dutch foreign and security policy. To better understand the Dutch position at an EU-level, we must therefore analyse the domestic ideological landscape and how ESA is incorporated in it. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to answer the question: *how is European strategic autonomy represented in Dutch politics?*

In the effort to answer this question this thesis has drawn from the field of Critical Geopolitics to employ a discourse analysis via the public discourse on European security utilised by political actors in the *TK*. To this end, documents relating to European security originating from the period of 2016-2021, such as minutes from committee debates and plenary debates, as well as party programmes have been processed and analysed. In this process, three distinct schools of thought have been identified, Sovereigntists/Eurosceptics, Europeanists and Atlanticists, each presenting ESA in a distinct way to promote their policy preferences. These will be explained in detail below.

Research into the role MSs play in the formulation of EU-level policy is not new, nor is analysing the domestic cleavages that shape the positioning of MSs in said process (see for example David, Gower and Haukkala 2013). However, it has not been done specifically in relation to the concept of European strategic autonomy. The concept of ESA has been extensively debated in the literature, but no study into the national perspectives of MSs on ESA has been conducted, especially not one focussing on the Netherlands. Similarly, much is written on the Atlanticist reflex, but nothing as of recent that also takes into consideration the impact

the concept of ESA may have on domestic politics and positioning. There are indications that changes in the Dutch policy consensus are materialising, so this merits a deeper investigation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Netherlands is a founder of the European project and NATO, and has, for the most part, been an advocate for European cooperation, but when it comes to European security and defence, the Netherlands has been described as an "obstructionist", "staller", or at best a "reluctant participator" (Vollaard, Harst and Voerman 2015; Koops and Vériter 2021; Rrustemi and Jovetic 2019; Stenden 2011). However, there was once a period when the Netherlands was enthusiastic about an integrated European security policy, and, according to some analysists, it may become so again (Harryvan and Harst 2013; Vollaard, Harst and Voerman 2015; Drent, Wilms and Zandee 2017; Koops and Vériter 2021). In this chapter the domestic factors that contributed to the continuity and change of the Dutch security policy will be expounded. Following this, the concept of ESA will be discussed to contextualise the contemporary Dutch debate.

The Dutch Security Identity

To analyse the representations of European strategic autonomy in Dutch politics we must establish what identity, or identities, might underpin these representations; how do the Dutch view themselves and their role in the world and in the EU? To begin uncovering this, we will draw from small state literature. This will serve a dual purpose. First, it serves as a legitimation of the relevance of the Netherlands in matters of European security, and thus a legitimation of this thesis. Second, it provides a frame of reference for the subsequent examination of the domestic sources of Dutch security policy. Following this, the continuity and change of the Dutch security identity after the Cold War will be discussed.

The Netherlands as a big small state

The big-small states dichotomy is often invoked, especially in the context of the European Union, but defining what exactly makes a state big or small has remained a daunting tasks for scholars to this day (Koops and Vériter 2021; Hoffenaar 2015, p. 179; Grøn and Wivel 2011; Rood 2010; Panke 2008; Broman 2005). On the one hand, a state's size might determine the size of its toolbox (Grøn and Wivel 2011; Rood 2010; Panke 2008; Broman 2005), on the other hand we must question how the bigness or smallness of a state could be measured (Koops and Vériter 2021, Hoffenaar 2015). Apart from objective measurements – such as population, landmass or GDP – size is also dependent on context (in relation to what does it exist) and subjective variables such as perception by other states and diplomatic or moral influence (Koops and Vériter 2021; Hoffenaar 2015; Rood 2021). Hoffenaar (2015, pp. 179-180) argues that international influence is too subjective to be a reliable measurement. However, even objective measurements become subjective depending on the context; the Netherlands is a big power within the BeNeLux, but a small one when it concerns global security (Koops and Vériter 2021).

When the Netherlands is observed in the context of the European Union, it is often described as "the cut-off point between smaller and bigger powers" (Koops and Vériter 2021). This leads other scholars to label the Netherlands as a "medium state" or "middle power" (Drent 2013, p. 148; Grimaud 2018, p. 17; Rood 2010, p. 119). They argue that the Netherlands may be small when it comes to landmass, but when it comes to population it is on the bigger end of the smaller states. Additionally, its large economy and active international trade allows the Netherlands to "punch above its weight" (Rood 2010, pp. 120-121; Grimaud 2018; Drent 2013; Koops and Vériter 2021). Rood (2010, pp. 120-121) also posits that its ambitious foreign policy combined with its position as a founder of both the EU and NATO endows the Netherlands with influence, because it has allowed the Netherlands to build strong institutional links with

MSs, the institutions itself, and gain experience and knowledge over the course of years of involvement. This involved and ambitious foreign policy also resulted in the Netherlands being an active security actor, participating in multiple EU, NATO and UN missions to this day.[1] Therefore, it is assumed in this thesis that the Netherlands is indeed an active "middle power".

This status provides the Netherlands with various options of asserting influence over European security policy. On the one hand, the Netherlands is an attractive partner for smaller states, allowing for multilateral coalition-building (Koops and Vériter 2021; Rood 2010, p. 128). On the other hand, it also has "enough clout" for good bilateral relations with Germany, France, and the UK – although no longer an EU MS it is still an important security ally (Koops and Vériter 2021; Rood 2010b, p. 128). This allows the Netherlands to position itself as an "honest broker or mediator" in the EU, making it a partner with considerable influence (Rood 2010, p. 128). Additionally, David, Gower and Haukkala (2013, p. 265) posit that national perspectives are the obvious basis of common EU policy, and that multiple MSs or groupings of MSs need to be considered. Their case involved the EU's Russia policy, but surely the same can be said about European security policy and European strategic autonomy. Therefore, we may conclude that a study into the Dutch perspective on ESA is relevant for furthering our understanding of European security policy.

Domestic sources of Dutch security policy

What then is the Dutch perspective on European security and what are its sources? First, we must contend with the question: does a singular Dutch perspective exist? Everts (1991) would caution against assuming so because the existence of a singular "national interest" that would

[1] Currently participating in missions in Lithuania (eFP); Somalia (VPD); Bahrain (CMF); Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH); Gaza (EU BAM and USSC); Lebanon, Israel, and Syria (UNTSO and UNDOF); Kosovo (EULEX); UAE (FSE Mirage); Malo (EUTM, EUCAP Sahel and Minusma), and Uganda (GPOI), and until recently also Afghanistan (ISAF and RSM).

underpin such a perspective is "highly controversial" (p. 9). Similarly, David, Gower and Haukkala (2013) posit that "member states are not unitary actors and internal cleavages matter" (p. 260), so it stands to reason that there is no singular Dutch perspective. This thesis is therefore not concerned with such state-centric assumptions. Indeed, Hyde-Price (2012, pp. 24-26) posits that any analysis of European security policy must include an analysis of domestic level variables.

What then constitutes these domestic level variables? Pohl (2013, p. 353) argues that EU governments are driven by internal factors such as domestic expectations and preferred foreign policy roles. Similarly, Koenig-Archibugi (2004) identifies that domestic "identities, values and cultural attitudes of domestic social groups affect the behaviour of their governments" (p. 145). These identities, expectations and preferred roles coalesce into what some call traditions (Hellema 2015, p. 17; Everts 1991, pp. 5-6). Everts (1991, pp. 7-8) questions whether traditions are a proper analytical tool because they rely too much on the assumption of continuity, while he posits foreign and security policy is sooner characterised by discontinuity . However, Hellema (2009, p. 10) and Hoffenaar (2015, p. 180) posit that continuity and change in security policy accompany, rather than negate, one another. Moreover, Hellema (2015, pp. 17-18) defines these traditions as competing schools of thought – or ideologies – rather than static policy preferences. When this definition is considered, we may conclude that Everts' (1991, p. 11) position actually does not fundamentally differ. He argues that ultimately domestic political debate, in parliament as a reflection of society, determines the outlines, priorities and details of security policy.

Given the central role of the *Tweede Kamer* in formulating security policy, the role of MPs in this debate must be touched upon briefly. In the Dutch political party system, MPs represent parties which in turn represent segments of society. How much agency do these individual MPs have regarding policy? According to Thomassen and Andeweg (2004, p. 65),

not much, because of what they call "a party-collectivist" approach to representation when it comes to policy, meaning MPs are inclined to represent party interests and positions rather than individual positions. So, ultimately, parties are the carriers of ideologies that underpin the Dutch security identity. How then has the (political) debate shaped the Dutch position in European security matters?

Continuity and change of the Dutch security identity

During the Cold War, the dominant security identity in the Netherlands was the so-called 'Atlanticist reflex' (Rood 2010b; Hellema 2009; Harst 2003; Tonra 2001; Harryvan and Harst 2000; Pijpers 1997). Characteristic of this school of thought is the conviction that Dutch – and later European – security interests are best protected by close alignment with the US and UK rather than its French or German neighbours (Rood 2010b, p. 122; Tonra 2001, p. 62; Pijpers 1997, p. 165). To this end, the Dutch favoured defence cooperation to take place within a NATO-framework, and endeavoured to avoid anything they regarded a potential threat to the transatlantic alliance (Hellema 2009, 401-402; Tonra 2001, p. 62; Rood 2010b, p. 122; Tonra 2001, p. 62; Pijpers 1997, p. 165). This Atlanticist identity is regarded as one of the primary causes for the Dutch obstructionism in the face of European defence integration initiatives such as the EDC (Harst 2003, p. 306; Harryvan and Harst 2000, pp. 169-180), the Fouchet plans (Hellema 2009, p. 202; Pijpers 1997, p. 165) and the EPC – which the Dutch only begrudgingly accepted (Hellema 2009, pp. 290-292).

With the end of the Cold War, the global security paradigm shifted and the Dutch position would experience "a weakening pull of Atlanticism" in favour of a more Europeanist outlook, specifically a closer political and military cooperation with Germany (Pijpers, 1997, p. 171; Stahl et al 2004, p. 423; Hellema 2009, pp. 326-327; Eekelen 1998, pp. 228-229; Bos 1997; Rees 1996). For Europeanist parties such as the *PvdA* (*Partij van de Arbeid*; social

democrats), *D66* (social liberals) and *GL* (*GroenLinks*; greens), the transatlantic relations and NATO were no longer a priority, instead favouring a supranational European security and defence policy independent of the US and NATO (Harryvan and Harst 2013, pp. 156-157; Vollaard, Harst and Voerman 2015, pp. 131-143, pp. 163-164). Initially, the traditional Atlanticist party *CDA* (*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*; Christian democrats) also relaxed its position on the importance of the transatlantic relations (Harryvan and Harst 2013, pp. 156-157), but the important role the US and NATO played in the Yugoslav crisis reaffirmed its Atlanticist position (Boxhoorn 2009, pp. 725-726). The *VVD* (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*; conservative liberals) remained a staunch Atlanticist party throughout this period of Europeanisation (List 1995, pp. 435-436; Boxhoorn 2009, pp. 725-726). The new Europeanist consensus led to a *herijking* (recalibration) of Dutch policy that resulted in greater continental involvement known as the *buurlandenbeleid* (neighbourhood policy) (Hellema 2009, pp. 334-335; Soetendorp en de Wijk 2002, p. 87).

However, this period of Europeanist dominance would not last. The decision to provide political support for the American invasion of Iraq and military support for the NATO invasion of Afghanistan showed that the Atlanticist reflex was still present and ultimately prevailed (Staden 2011, p. 14; Stahl et al 2004, p. 440; Vollaard, Harst and Voerman 2015, p. 58). Additionally, Europeanism had to contend with the rise of Euroscepticism. In the aftermath of the 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, the Dutch adopted an increasingly defensive and sceptic position in their Europe policy (Casier 2013, p. 121; Koops and Vériter 2021). They were once again regarded as a stumbling block, or a "staller", rather than enabler of European security policy (Rrustemi and Jovetic 2019; Koops and Vériter 2021). The no-campaign, consisting of predominantly the *PVV* (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*; radical right-wing populist) and the *SP* (*Socialistische Partij*; socialists), portrayed the EU as "an undemocratic superstate" and advocated the repatriation of national sovereignty from Brussels, cultivating

anti-internationalist sentiments (Pirro and Kessel 2018; Startin and Krouwel 2013; Stenden 2011, p. 26). While the *PVV* rejects the entire notion of EU integration (hard rejectionist) the *SP* worries mostly about the direction of EU integration and the disagrees with the current form of the EU (soft rejectionist), mentioning that the "thundering militarist language" in the treaty was a cause of concern (Tweede Kamer 2021b, p. 5; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2017, p. 13; Pirro and Kessel 2018, pp. 339-340). This combination of Euroscepticism and anti-militarism would play a major role in subsequent debates on EU security (Simón and Mattelaer 2011, p. 6). For example, Eurosceptics of all stripes denounced the CSDP as plans for a European army (Howorth 2020, p. 316). These Sovereigntist pressures led successive Dutch governments to express a desire to "remain outside ideological debates over European security or a 'European army'", so they defaulted to the Atlanticist reflex (Koops and Vériter 2021; Stenden 2011, p. 51).

Yet, with the adoption of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in response to "a disengaged White House and a deteriorating security situation around Europe and an assertive Russia", and the consequent introduction of the concept of European strategic autonomy, this ideological debate has become inevitable (Drent, Wilms and Zandee 2017, p. 1). In addition, Drent, Wilms and Zandee (2017) posit that the Netherlands could potentially shed its role of stumbling block and transition into a more ambitious MS that promotes more serious European security commitments. To ascertain what role the Netherlands might be willing to take on, the domestic ideological debate between Atlanticists, Europeanists and Eurosceptics/Sovereigntists – due to the sovereignty focussed narrative, these Eurosceptics are often called Sovereigntists in the Dutch debate over European security– requires deeper analysis (Korteweg, Houtkamp and Sie Dhian Ho 2020).

European Strategic Autonomy

In order to properly contextualise the debate in Dutch politics on European strategic autonomy and the future of European security policy it is imperative to develop a deeper understanding of this concept of ESA. While placing ESA at the heart of the European security and defence ambitions, the EUGS document does not clearly conceptualise it. The closest it comes to defining ESA is that it is "important for Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders", placing an emphasis on the role of a "sustainable, innovative and competitive European defence industry […] for Europe's strategic autonomy and for a credible CSDP" (EUGS 2016, p. 45). We must therefore rely on the literature for clarification.

According to Sabatina et al. (2020, p. 9, emphasis added) achieving European strategic autonomy means that "in order to protect its own interests Europe should be able to *act* alone". Smith (2018, p. 613) goes a bit further than the mere capacity for action, claiming "it is about the EU's (potential) *freedom to choose* among various courses of action" as opposed to being presented with a *fait accompli,* as had most recently been the case with the withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, Lippert, Ondarza and Perthes (2019) as well as Grevi (2019) warn against interpreting autonomy as autarky, arguing that actors may opt to pursue their interests through partnerships or alliances. Therefore, Grevi (2019) posits that strategic autonomy is about "setting objectives, making decisions and mobilising resources in ways that *do not primarily depend* on the decisions and assets of others" (emphasis added). Therefore, we arrive at a general definition of strategic autonomy as: "the ability to set one's own priorities and make one's own decisions in matter of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone" (Lippert, et al. 2019, p. 5; also see Järvenpää, Major and Sakkov 2019, p.4).

However, will the EU be able to set its *own* priorities and make its *own* decisions? Sweeney and Winn (2020), Cottey (2020), Grevi (2019) and Zandee (2017) do not believe this to be the case. They posit that the EU is an a-strategic actor rather than a strategic one, meaning

that it is not capable of making real strategic choices and set strategic priorities (Cottey 2020, p. 283; Zandee 2017, pp. 11-12),because the EU is only able to a produce lowest-common denominator consensus. In other words: "the EU is the prisoner to its member states own strategic interests" (Sweeney and Winn 2020, p. 228; Cottey 2020; Zandee 2017). To become truly strategic, the EU would need to be able to independently formulate interests that transcend the individual interests of MSs (Zandee 2017). Would this mean the EU must not only seek to act autonomously *vis à vis* the world, but also *vis à vis* its own MSs? It is unclear how this would happen without the MSs first agreeing to this. Indeed, Arteaga (2017) argues that such an approach could aggravate MSs who fear to lose control over the collective decision-making process. Ultimately, the EU is bound to remain the "prisoner" to its MSs.

Additionally, Varga (2017, p. 5) argues that the EU cannot credibly claim to be a strategically autonomous actor because it is not "able to undertake demanding expeditionary military operations, at least in Europe's vicinity". However, the EU currently has 16 ongoing missions on three different continents, of which six are military in nature (EEAS 2019), nor does the EU claim to *be* autonomous; its ambition is to *become more* autonomous. Moreover, Artegea (2017) and Kempin and Kunz (2017, p. 10) caution against reducing the concept of ESA to merely encapsulating the ability to undertake military operations, or what they call operational autonomy, arguing that this has been a major contributor to the lacklustre successes in European security integration. Instead they propose a more holistic approach wherein the concept of ESA must be understood as composed of three mutually dimensions: political, operational and industrial (see figure 1). While Artegea (2017), Kempin and Kunz (2017) might present these dimensions as mutually dependent, Fiott (2018) posits that the question which of these dimensions are ultimately considered by MSs depends on which of the three visions for pursuing strategic autonomy they adhere to: autonomy as responsibility, hedging, or

emancipation.

The three dimensions of strategic autonomy		
	Political autonomy	The capacity to take security policy decisions and act upon them.
	Operational autonomy	The capacity, based on the necessary institutional framework and the required capabilities, to independently plan for and conduct civilian and/or military operations.
	Industrial autonomy	The capacity to develop and build the capabilities required to attain operational autonomy.

Figure 1: The three dimensions of strategic autonomy (Kempin and Kunz 2017, p. 10).

The vision of "autonomy as responsibility" ties directly into the fears – mostly felt by Atlanticists MSs – that the US might potentially decouple from Europe if the issues regarding burden-sharing within NATO are not tackled (Fiott 2018, p. 2). To this end, the EU should strive for a limited form of autonomy insofar as operational autonomy is achieved, but the US is not pushed away by striving for complete independence: "under this vision, autonomy is defined as the freedom to conduct missions and operations autonomously rather than the freedom from dependencies on the hegemon" (Fiott 2018, p. 2).

The vision of "autonomy as hedging" also does not necessarily diminish dependencies, instead it serves as "a sort of insurance policy that guards against a deterioration in relations between two actors and/or should the hegemon cease to provide security to the hedging actor" (Fiot 2018, p. 4). To ensure the EU does not lose capabilities in the event of a US decoupling from Europe, the EU should not only strive for operational but also industrial autonomy (Fiott 2018, pp. 5-6; Raik and Järvenpää 2017). However, Howorth (2019, p. 2) considers hedging to be merely "a waystation on the road to emancipation".

The vision of "autonomy as emancipation" is the most radical of the three visions and it regards autonomy as a project aimed at reducing Europe's dependency on the US that should

ultimately result in the emancipation of the EU as a truly independent global security actor (Fiott 2018, p. 6). Those who adhere to this vision believe that only an EU that is fully capable of ensuring its own territorial defence and has developed the full spectrum of capabilities may be considered a strategically autonomous actor able to take on a leadership role (Howorth 2017, p. 534; Fiott 2018, p. 6).

Taking all this into consideration, we can make some assumptions about how the concept of ESA will be represented in the Dutch debate. We can theorise that the Atlanticists in the Netherlands will probably deploy a narrative centred on the vision of autonomy as responsibility, since they are concerned with keeping the US as involved in European security affairs as possible. The Europeanists will, given their ambitions, likely represent ESA as an emancipatory project, whereas the Sovereigntists will in all likelihood reject the concept of ESA altogether on the same grounds they opposed the CSDP: they will view it as yet another plan for a European army. This makes sense given their fervent defence of national sovereignty – security and defence are after all the core competences of the nation-state (Menon 2014, p. 66).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Following the advice of David, Gower and Haukkala (2013; Pohl 2013; Hyde-Price 2012; Koenig-Archibugi 2004), this thesis endeavours to reconstruct the domestic debate over European strategic autonomy in the Netherlands, thereby uncovering cleavages that underpin the Dutch positioning in the wider European security debate and furthering our understanding of European strategic autonomy, and by extension European security policy. Therefore, the following question is formulated: how is European strategic autonomy represented in Dutch politics? To answer this question, this thesis shall draw from the field of critical geopolitics, a specific school of discourse analysis within International Relations that shall be explained below. After this explanation, the analytical framework shall be elaborated upon, followed by a justification for the time period and source selection.

Critical geopolitics is a reconceptualization of classical geopolitics that centres discourse in its analysis because it is "inseparable from the formation and use of power" – i.e. geopolitics – since "strategies of power always require the use of space and, thus, the use of discourses to create particular spatial images" (Sharp 1993, p. 492; discourse (Müller 2008, p. 324-325, Ó Thuathail and Agnew 1992, p. 192). Moreover, Ó Tuathail (2002, p. 607, emphasis added) posits that discourse is "drawn upon and used by officials and leaders to constitute and *represent* world affairs". Müller (2008, pp. 323-325) adds that these discourses are drawn on intentionally and deployed strategically to pursue political ends (also see Dalby and ÓTuathail 1998, pp. 12-13). With the help of this interpretive-explanatory form of research one may reconstruct how domestic political actors endeavour to influence the positioning of states through the deliberate and strategic utilisation of discourses (Müller 2010, par. 16-17; 2008, p. 232). Reconstructing how domestic political actors in the Netherlands use geopolitical

imaginations and identities to represent world affairs (ESA and European security) in an effort to shape Dutch security policy is the aim of this thesis.

As with all forms of research, interpretive-explanatory critical geopolitics also has its limitations. The primary of these is the intersubjectivity of language, meaning that every word and phrase can be interpreted differently by different individuals depending on their identity, previously held beliefs and background knowledge (Bryman 2012, pp. 529-520). It is precisely this intersubjectivity we are interested in, because it is through the friction caused by the meeting of perspectives and the clashing of ideas that the narratives that underpin policy are constructed (Everts 1991, p. 11; Hellema 2015, pp. 17-18; Steenbergen et al. 2003, p. 21; Curato et al. 2017, p. 30). That is why an interpretive-explanatory approach was chosen. However, the subjectivity of language also expands to the researcher, to me. To limit the impact of my subjectivity on the interpretation process – which is exacerbated by the fact that all source material must be translated from Dutch to English – the analysis is grounded in the literature which provides a frame of reference for the interpretation of the texts.

In the literature, three ideologies relevant to the Dutch debate over European security were identified: Sovereigntism, Europeanism and Atlanticism. Sovereigntism is the Eurosceptic ideology that has thus far rejected European security cooperation on the grounds of it being a threat to national sovereignty. They feared it would lead to the creation of a European army at the expense of national armies and control, and there is no reason to suspect this has changed (Howorth 2020). Based on this information, it is assumed that a similar narrative shall be deployed by Sovereigntists in the debate over ESA. Because of the Europeanists' previous ambitions to create a supranational European security policy independent of the US (Harryvan and Harst 2013; Vollaard, Harst and Voerman 2015), it is assumed that they will deploy a narrative based on the "vision of autonomy as emancipation" as explained by Fiott (2018). Atlanticists have historically been driven by the desire to keep the US and NATO as the

cornerstone of Dutch and European security. Fears of a potential US decoupling from Europe will probably mean they shall try and limit the concept of ESA to "autonomy as responsibility" as Fiott (2018) predicted this would be the preferred vision for Atlanticists. Special attention is given to who these ideological groups present as the "us" and who they present as the threats (them) in their narratives.

To understand their positioning and narratives, statements made by Dutch politicians in the *Tweede Kamer* as well as party election programmes during the period between 2016 and 2021 (the present as of writing this thesis) are analysed. This time frame is chosen because 2016 marks the beginning of the current quest for European strategic autonomy through the adoption of the EUGS (Howorth, 2018). The statements made in parliament shall be drawn from the minutes of committee debates in preparation of or following the Foreign Affairs Council meetings (meetings specifically related to security and defence, also called colloquially the *Defensieraad* (Defence council) in Dutch). These committee meetings are constituted by members of the *Vaste Commissie Buitenlandse Zaken* (Permanent Foreign Affairs Committee; BZ), *Vaste Commissie Defensie* (Permanent Defence Committee) and *Vaste Commissie Europese Zaken* (Permanent European Affairs Committee; EUZA). Additionally, the *Staat van de Unie* (State of the Union) debates shall also be analysed, because here the security and defence matters are discussed in a broader European context in the *Tweede Kamer*. The inclusion of party election programmes is based on the fact that political parties are the carriers of ideology and that these programmes present the parties' ideal positions and could be seen as a starting position in the debate. Additionally, since MPs serve a "party-collective" representative function in policy debate, rather than represent their own idiosyncratic convictions, they shall be treated as representatives of their respective parties instead of individual representatives (Thomassen and Andeweg 2004, p. 65). Based on the time period, this research includes party programmes from three elections (TK'17, TK'21 and EP'19). All

these sources will be translated from Dutch to English while sticking as close to the initial meaning of the texts to maintain the nuances.

Given the limited resources available for this thesis, including all 19 parties currently present in parliament would be too ambitious, nor are all of these parties necessarily relevant. Therefore a selection had to be made. The parties most relevant to this thesis have already been mentioned in the literature as they have all had a significant impact on the Dutch debate over European security in the run-up to this time period: *PVV* and *SP* represent the Sovereigntists. *D66*, *PvdA* and *GL* represent the Europeanists. The *VVD* and *CDA* represent the Atlanticists. This selection also provides a cross-section of the entire Dutch political spectrum of party families (right wing hard Eurosceptic populism, socialism/left wing soft Eurosceptic populism, social liberalism, social democracy, the greens, conservative liberalism and Christian democracy, respectively), thus ensuring content validity.

Chapter 4: Representations of European Strategic Autonomy

Three main discourses in Dutch politics exist when it comes to European security integration and each presents ESA differently. Sovereigntist discourse is Eurosceptic in its nature; Sovereigntists therefore reject the notion of ESA, albeit for different reasons. Europeanists on the other hand are champions of ESA, because they believe in the emancipation of the EU from the US's security umbrella. Atlanticists, once hegemonic, reject the idea that the EU should become autonomous from the US, instead they see in ESA the opportunity to improve NATO burden-sharing through European cooperation. In this chapter these three discourses and the language they deploy shall be expounded. However, before that analysis can commence, it needs to be noted throughout the source material 'Europe' and 'EU' are used interchangeably in all three discourses. While these are of course two separate concepts, the source material is leading. Therefore, 'Europe' and 'EU' shall also be used interchangeable in the coming chapters.

The Sovereigntists

The Sovereigntist discourse is a Eurosceptic discourse and as such it is represented by two Eurosceptic parties. The *PVV* is a hard Eurosceptic party, meaning it is "wholeheartedly against all aspects of European integration", including in the field of security and defence (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2017, p. 13). The *SP* on the other hand is a soft Eurosceptic party, meaning it does not reject the principle of European cooperation, but it does reject specific forms of integration, in this case the "militarisation of the union" due to security integration (ibid; Tweede Kamer 2021a, p. 13). Sovereigntist discourse hinges on the conceptualisation of ESA as a stepping stone in the process of creating an EU army. This serves as the vocal point for traditional

Eurosceptic critiques such as threats to national sovereignty, the EU's antidemocratic posturing and anti-elitism. These four topics are the main themes elaborated in this section.

Primarily, Sovereigntists endeavour to associate ESA with the idea of an EU army by consistently referencing said European army whenever European security and defence cooperation and ESA is discussed. For example, De Roon (PVV) claimed an EU army is the end goal of European security integration, stating that "Juncker and Verhofstadt have been steering us towards the creation of a European army for a long time" (Tweede Kamer 2016a, p. 6). Similarly, Karabulut (SP) asked the Defence minister: "is this the harbinger of further steps towards the creation of a European army and the militarisation of the union?" (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 3). While Sovereigntists never specify what they would consider an EU army to be, they vehemently reject anything they consider as a step towards it (PVV 2017, 2019, 2021; SP 2017, 2019, 2021; Tweede Kamer 2016a; 2016b; 2017b; 2017c; 2020; 2021a; 2021b). By interpreting ESA in such a fashion, they create a clear identifiable target. Defence, and especially an army is, after all, traditionally seen as "high politics" – the core competence of the nation-state (Menon 2014, p. 66).

Sovereigntists therefore consider an EU army to be a threat to national sovereignty. On the more extreme end of the discourse, some Sovereigntists from the PVV see European strategic autonomy as a "coup" (Tweede Kamer 2021a, p. 8) staged by an "imperialist" EU (2017c, p. 4). However, the narrative is not often pushed to these extremes. The SP posits that "national democracies need to retain exclusive control over their own defence, with the army being under national democratic control" (SP 2019, p. 40). This view is frequently repeated, such as by De Roon (PVV) who stated that "the Netherlands must remain sovereign in matters of defence" (Tweede Kamer 2016a, p. 6), as did Karabulut (SP) (2019b, p. 6). Van Dijk (SP) emphasised Dutch parliament's right to decide over the deployment of Dutch soldiers and implored the Defence minister to keep defending that right in the EU (Tweede Kamer 2021b,

p. 13). Likewise, Popken (PVV), wished to remind the minister and parliament that "we should serve the Dutch interests" first and foremost (2017c, p. 4). De Roon (PVV) characterised the EU as a "glutton" whose appetite for "more and more Europe, this time in the field of security of defence undermines our democracy and sovereignty" (Tweede Kamer 2016c, pp. 6-7). Here the EU's security ambitions are not only described as a threat to national sovereignty, but democracy specifically, which is another major theme in Sovereigntist discourse.

The perceived anti-democratic nature of ESA is often brought up alongside sovereignty, but it is a distinct theme. What makes ESA particularly anti-democratic, according to Sovereigntists, is the fact that it is yet another example of an EU that does not take no for an answer. They argue that the Dutch have repeatedly made clear their opposition to the creation of an independent European armed forces, yet the EU-elites continue pushing for it. De Roon (PVV) called this obtrusive behaviour "an insult to the Dutch electorate" (Tweede Kamer 2016c, pp. 6). The language deployed is meant to portray the EU as an incessant and insatiable. One example of this is the reference to gluttony made by de Roon (PVV), but similar language can be found throughout the discourse. Maeijer (PVV) for example presents the EU as "power-hungry" (Tweede Kamer 2018a, p. 12), and Karabulut (SP) complained that despite repeated Dutch rejections of a European army "the process continues to move in that direction" (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 28). Likewise, Leijten (SP) likened the discussion to a "broken record", because the EU keeps coming up with new reasons to push for integration despite Dutch refusals (2020, p. 25).

The root of this incessant, anti-democratic behaviour, according to Sovereigntists, can be found in the existence of a detached and self-interested elite. This is the fourth theme of Sovereigntists discourse. Maeijer (PVV) spoke of a "European elite who only one interest, their own self-interest, skilfully obscured by the EU's propaganda machine" (Tweede Kamer 2018a, p. 13). As a result, the "megalomaniac idealism of a European utopia reigns supreme over

common sense" (p. 12). The SP expands this rhetoric from the public sphere to the special interests of big business, in this case the European defence industry. For example, they claim that the EDF was created "with support of the European arms industry" in order to "fill the coffers of the already very profitable European defence industry" (SP 2019, p. 40). Karabulut (SP) therefore questioned the ethics of the EDF and even made accusations that the initiative was riddled with corruption (Tweede Kamer 2019, p. 4). Similarly, Van Dijk (SP) wished to know why the EU was "directly subsidising weapons research" (Tweede Kamer 2017b, p. 13). Later he also spoke of a "powerful lobby" that had been extremely successful: "a few years ago we were discussing a few extra millions. Now we have a European Defence Fund worth 13 billion euros" (Tweede Kamer 2021b, p.4; 2021a, p. 13). The coffers of the military industrial complex are filled at the expense of the taxpayer, because every penny spent on the "militarisation of the union" is one less to spend on education or healthcare in the Netherlands (2021a, p. 13).

The Europeanists

Whereas Sovereigntists reject the concept of ESA and anything resembling further defence integration, Europeanists actively champion it, although there is some diversity in rigour between the various Europeanists parties – *PvdA*, *GL* and *D66*. They envision a European Union that can "stand on its own", especially given the increasingly unreliable nature of the United States, and by extension NATO (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 6). Europeanists see in the EU "the hope for our future" (Tweede Kamer 2020a, p. 15),and a safe haven in an increasingly insecure world. Therefore they pursue a narrative centred mostly around what Fiott would describe as 'autonomy as emancipation [from the US]', as discussed earlier in this thesis. Three main themes in Europeanist discourse are therefore the external threats faced by the EU, the increasing unreliability of US in facing those threats and the need for Europe to develop its own

security architecture in order to be emancipated from the US security umbrella. Additionally, there is also the still unresolved issue of how this emancipation would impact the relationship between the EU and NATO, which is where inter-party differences emerge.

To emphasise the need for more European cooperation in the field of security and defence, Europeanists draw attention to the various "external threats" faced by the EU and deploy language to instil a sense of unease and insecurity (Tweede Kamer 2017a, p. 13). For instance, Belhaj (D66) referred to "unrest at the edges of the European Union" (Tweede Kamer 2016a, p. 10) and Günal-Gezer (PvdA) stressed that "the changing international security situation" has "consequences for our security, values, prosperity and way of life" (2017b, p. 4). Kerstens (PvdA) used more ominous words when he mentions that Russia and China are "stirring", "amassing more military power" and "brewing trouble" for Europe (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 4). The words used by Kerstens, like stirring and brewing, create an ominous sense of a slumbering beast that is slowly waking. This imagery becomes more complete when In 't Veld referred to China as a "dragon reaching its full size" and that Russia was "flexing its muscles" (Tweede Kamer 2019a, p. 16). Additionally, Verhoeven (D66) identified that the "growing Russian aggression" as a "political landslide", which imbues the audience with a sense of being overwhelmed (Tweede Kamer 2018a, p. 23). Taking all these threats into consideration, Van der Lee (GL) concluded that "the existential necessity of the union has never been clearer" (Tweede Kamer 2021a, p. 15).

However, perhaps more importantly – because this is where one of the stark differences with Atlanticist discourse comes up – is the reference made by Jetten (D66) in relation to the US: "the US and Russia are toying with our security" (Tweede Kamer 2019a, p. 15). This exposes the second theme in Europeanists discourse, one that is antagonistic towards the traditionally dominant Atlanticist discourse: not only is Europe faced with an increasing number of external threats, the US is increasingly unreliable and actively contributing to

European insecurity by destabilising the global system, turning the US into a potential threat to European, and in turn, Dutch security. This claim is repeated in one form or another by the various Europeanist parties. For example, Belhaj (D66) stated that Trump's presidency was "a wake-up call for Europe" (Tweede Kamer 2017c, p. 5). Similarly, Kerstens (PvdA) expressed concern over the fact that the US was "flirting with the idea to leave NATO" and that it "does not seem to care about its allies" (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 4; PvdA 2019, p. 18). In 't Veld (D66) took it even further when she claimed that the US "is demolishing the foundations of our security" (Tweede Kamer 2019a, p. 16). Van Ojik (GL) posited that the US had effectively "withdrawn itself as leader of the free world" and that this necessitated "an unprecedented policy shift" away from traditional reluctance in favour of more and deeper EU cooperation (Tweede Kamer 2020a, p. 22). Finally, when Atlanticists cheered following "the return of the US" following Biden's election, Europeanists warned that "after four years of autocracy in the US, we must not ignore the Trump warning signs. We cannot afford to snooze" (Tweede Kamer 2021a, p. 6). Taking all this into account, Van der Lee (GL) concluded that the "EU needs to become a powerful actor" (Tweede Kamer 2021a, p. 15).

Following the observation that the EU can no longer rely on the US, the next major theme in Europeanists discourse is introduced: the need for Europe to be emancipated from the US and become independent. Jetten (D66), for example openly questioned the Dutch reliance on NATO: "the Netherlands needs to recognise that no matter how much it desires NATO to remain the cornerstone, things may go quite differently. Then what? This is why it is so important for Europe to be able to fully provide for its own security, *outside* of the NATO perspective" (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 30; emphasis added). The language deployed, such as "independently position itself" (Tweede Kamer 2019a, p. 14) or "the need to protect European sovereignty" (Tweede Kamer 2018a, p. 24), is meant to invoke a feeling that the EU is 'coming of age' and should become self-reliant. Kerstens (PvdA) stressed that "Europe needs to stand

on its own feet" (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 6). Likewise, Jetten (D66) professed that "Europe must learn to take care of its own problems" (Tweede Kamer 2021a, p. 6), whereas Belhaj (D66) asserted that "Europe needs to develop all necessary tools to defend itself", claiming that only "with a full-fledged defence force can the EU measure up to global powers such as the US or China" (Tweede Kamer 2017d, p. 6, 9).

Regarding this full-fledged defence force, *D66* and *GL* are most outspoken, arguing in favour of the creation of a European army under the auspices and control of the European Parliament (D66 2017, p. 149; 2021, p. 199; GroenLinks 2017, p. 7). The PvdA is not in favour of handing "the power to take decisions" to the EP (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 6), but is otherwise unbothered "whether we call it an EU army or European cooperation" (Tweede Kamer 2016a, p. 8). They welcome increased defence integration so that eventually "the EU will take over NATO's [security and defence] tasks", which they view as the best way to "contribute to European autonomy and the realisation of European ambitions" (PvdA 2021, p. 95). However, "so long as the EU is not capable of fulfilling its security role and take responsibility", the PvdA (2021, p. 95, emphasis added) argues "it makes sense to strengthen the European pillar *within* NATO". This seems to indicate that the *PvdA* sees NATO as an incubator for the EU to mature into its own security actor, which ultimately does not differ much from *GL* and *D66's* aspirations for an EU army. Regardless of these nuances, all Europeanists agree with the sentiment that "NATO may not inhibit European military integration in any way" (GroenLinks 2017, p. 7) and all envision a greater role for the EU in the field of security and defence outside the NATO context.

The Atlanticists

Traditionally speaking, Atlanticists – represented by the *VVD* and *CDA* – have always been dismissive of any initiative that would lead to further European integration in the field of

security and defence out of fear that this would lead to less US involvement in the continent. Today, this fear of a US withdrawal from Europe still guides Atlanticists, but their discourse has reformed to accommodate a more Europeanised (geo)political landscape. These reformed Atlanticists now argue that the US may only remain involved when Europe takes more responsibility for its own defence, within a NATO context. This narrative appears to follow the principles of "autonomy as responsibility" as described in Fiott's typology, wherein strategic autonomy is reconceptualised as a form of improved NATO burden-sharing. By doing so, Atlanticists seek to position their approach as the realistic approach to attaining ESA, as opposed to the idealism of Europeanists and Sovereigntist isolationism. While there exist varying degrees in which these are applied by actors, Atlanticists discourse ultimately consist of four themes: NATO primacy, responsibility, complementarity, realism.

First and foremost, Atlanticists emphasise that NATO must remain the "primary guarantor" of European security and the "cornerstone" of Dutch security and defence policy (VVD 2017; 2019; 2020; CDA 2017; 2019; 2020; Tweede Kamer 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2017b; 2017c; 2017d; 2019b; 2021b). To reinforce this message, they mention NATO (primacy) whenever European defence is discussed. By doing so, they intend to create an association between the two so that European defence can never been seen as separate from NATO. Every initiative taken and all language deployed serves to reinforce this principle. Therefore, Atlanticists are "triggered" by the Europeanists' conception of strategic autonomy, because they interpret it to mean a European *Alleingang* "without Canada or the United States" which they fear "puts unnecessary pressure on the NATO alliance" (Tweede Kamer, 2019b, p. 16, 28). Bosman (VVD) added: "it [the EUGS] literally says 'European autonomy'. BAM! It does not say 'more autonomous' or 'partially' but 'European autonomy'. I take issue with that because it apparently means we will go on without NATO" (p. 16). Bruins Slot (CDA) supported him by warning that European autonomy could indeed threaten to replace NATO primacy (p. 33).

Later Boswijk (CDA) stated: “Biden wants to invest in the Alliance, so let us not start an entire debate within Europe about strategic autonomy” (Tweede Kamer 2021c, p. 6). By presenting the concept of ESA as absolute, Atlanticists try to discredit it. This is done to force conceptual concessions so that ESA will only entail “European defence cooperation that will strengthen the trans-Atlantic alliance” (CDA 2019, p. 26).

This introduces the second theme in Atlanticist discourse: responsibility. Where Europeanists see in the US an increasingly unreliable partner from which Europe needs to be emancipated, Atlanticists recast Europe as the unreliable partner, thereby framing the concept of ESA not as a project to achieve full autonomy from NATO, but as a project to shoulder more responsibility *within* the NATO context: “70% of NATO’s expenditures are paid by the US. This means that de facto there is no trans-Atlantic solidarity. Europe needs to do more” (Tweede Kamer 2017b, p. 10). Similarly, the VVD asserted that through NATO the US has been “subsidising European security” (VVD 2020, p. 46). The language deployed by Atlanticists is meant to foster a sense of responsibility and duty. Knops (CDA) mentions American “pleas for European NATO allies to contribute more” Tweede Kamer 2017b, p. 10). Van Wijngaarden (VVD) urged fellow parliamentarians that Europe needed to “contribute its fair share” (Tweede Kamer 2021b, p. 6) and Bruins Slot (CDA) spoke of a “growing sense of urgency to do more” (2019b, p. 9). By intensifying European defence cooperation, Atlanticists posit, Europe will be able to acquire “more defence per euro” (Tweede Kamer 2021b, p. 8) and by doing so, the European NATO average may gradually grow to reach the NATO norm of 2% (VVD 2017, p. 27; CDA 2017, p. 37) and thus “strengthen the trans-Atlantic alliance” (CDA 2019, p. 26).

However, Atlanticists place limits on this cooperation, presenting the third theme of their discourse: complementarity. To ensure that ESA does not entail striving for autonomy from the US, and thus pose a threat to American involvement in Europe and ultimately NATO, Atlanticists stress that European cooperation may not lead to “overlap” with NATO, instead the

EU and NATO should "supplement each other" (Tweede Kamer 2016a, pp. 3-4). Atlanticists prefer the EU to develop capacity in areas that fall outside of NATO's scope. Boswijk (CDA) said he foresees a "clear role for the EU to complement NATO with its set of political and civilian instruments" (Tweede Kamer 2021b, p. 8). This fits his earlier warnings against the EU "duplicating" NATO (Tweede Kamer 2017b, p. 11). When the EU does develop defence capacity, this should be done "primarily within NATO context" (Tweede Kamer 2019a, p. 5). Atlanticists therefore rejoiced when NATO allies Canada, Norway and the US were admitted into the PESCO project (Tweede Kamer 2021b, p. 3, 8).; NATO, after all, "remains the core of everything we do" (VVD 2021, p. 46; Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 3). Of course, by doing this they put restraints on the scope of the concept of ESA, but that is the purpose of this exercise so that it remains limited to NATO burden-sharing and fits their fourth narrative: realism.

Atlanticists endeavour to present their conception of ESA as the only truly realistic one. They recognise the need for European cooperation, thereby rejecting the isolationism of the Sovereigntists while simultaneously dismissing the "abstract visions" of the Europeanists (Tweede Kamer 2016a, p. 3). This position is probably best illustrated by Van Den Bosch (VVD) who describes his position as 'centrist': "I feel rather comfortable to sit between *GroenLinks* [Europeanist] and the *PVV* [Sovereigntist]. You do not need to be in favour of a federal Europe, you can see NATO as *the* security organisation of Western Europe, and still want to improve European cooperation" (Tweede Kamer 2017d, p. 18). Above all, Atlanticists claim they want European cooperation to be based on "concrete ideas" (Tweede Kamer 2017d, p. 4), "realistic in scope" (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 2) and have "practical use and employability" (Tweede Kamer 2021b, p. 20). They are frustrated that defence investments are "bogged down in abstract notions" (Tweede Kamer 2017b, p. 11) and demand that Europeanists "for once be clear about how an EU army would even work" (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 30).

Concluding remarks

Thus, when analysis the Dutch political debate over European Strategic Autonomy, three distinct discourses may be observed, all representing ESA in differing ways. The Sovereigntists, whether they be hard or soft Eurosceptics, are vehemently opposed to anything resembling ESA, which they consider just a steppingstone to the formation of an EU army. They stress that European defence projects merely serve European elites, but more fundamentally they fear that ESA will undermine the sovereignty of the Netherlands. The defence of national sovereignty, they argue, is the sole responsibility of the nation-state and not the purportedly undemocratic EU. By doing so they construct a geopolitical identity based on the spatial organisation of the nation-state (us) versus the European Union (them).

Sovereigntists are therefore the opposite of to the Europeanists, who actively champion European security and defence integration. Europeanists proclaim that only an EU that is able to act as an autonomous security actor will be able to measure up to other global powers and adequately protect European countries against the Russian, Chinese *and* American threats. Thus propagating an identity based on the spatial organisation of Europe (us) versus Russia, China and the US (them). Hence, in their view the Netherlands should support endeavours to develop more capabilities for the EU. An important condition is therefore that these capabilities should be developed outside of the NATO context because they criticise the Dutch (and European) reliance on the US and NATO security guarantees, which Europeanists consider increasingly undependable.

It is this stance on the US in particular that "triggers" Atlanticists, whose unshaking faith in the transatlantic alliance has for decades been the foundation of Dutch foreign and security policy. They caution that the autonomy Europeanists strive for is merely an abstract vision, but one that could irreparably threaten US involvement in European security, a doomsday scenario. Atlanticists do not deny that the EU needs to cooperate more in the field

of security, but they argue this cooperation should be motivated by a desire to improve burden-sharing and strengthen NATO in a complementary fashion, not undermine it by striving to become truly autonomous from it. This geopolitical identity hinges on the spatial organisation of a transatlantic community (meaning Europe *and* the US, Canada and UK) versus Russian and Chinese threats.

Does this mean that these three groups exist purely in opposition to one another and that their positions are completely incompatible? No, but it is paramount to first analyse the differences – which inadvertently magnifies the disagreements – in order to appreciate the similarities, of which there exist more than initially meets the eye.

Chapter 5: The Europeanisation of Dutch Security Debate

In the previous chapter the three prevalent discourses in the Dutch debate – Sovereigntism, Europeanism and Atlanticism – were expounded. To do this their differences were magnified, but when we dig deeper their similarities may be explored. Therein lies the true value of this thesis because it allows us to shine a light on the direction wherein the Dutch debate over European strategic autonomy may develop and what implications this may have for the future of Dutch and European security policy. Therefore, this chapter will function as a mediation between three seemingly antagonistic discourses.

The Sovereigntists and the Atlanticists both rely on a narrative centred on responsibility. The Sovereigntists explicitly propagate the responsibility towards the Dutch citizens. After all, the nation's sovereignty must be protected. Atlanticists, on the other hand, stress the need to take seriously the responsibility of being part of an alliance, NATO, brings with it. They claim that this is best achieved through European cooperation. Perhaps the same argument can be made for taking seriously the responsibility towards Dutch nationals. What if the best way to protect national sovereignty is through European cooperation? Ultimately, a nation of only 17 million people can only do so much on its own. The *PVV* might be sympathetic to the case for strengthening NATO (for example: Tweede Kamer 2017b, p. 4; 2017d, p. 31), but this would require them to ease down Eurosceptic rhetoric which seems highly unlikely since that is their *raison d'être*. Interestingly, the electorate of Sovereigntists parties seems to agree with such an analysis. A plurality of the *PVV* electorate and a majority of the *SP* electorate actually support closer European cooperation following Brexit and the Trump presidency (Korteweg, Houtkamp and Sie Dhian Ho 2020, pp. 2-3). Thus, there seems to be movement on this front.

The Europeanists and Atlanticists are also far more amenable to one another than their differences might suggest. The Atlanticists may reject the lengths to which Europeanists want to push the concept of European strategic autonomy, but they do acknowledge the threats faced by the union and the need for some form of increased autonomy. The Atlanticists keep the door open to discussing the development of operational capacity outside of the NATO context when the US "has no interest to get involved" (Tweede Kamer 2019b, p. 3) and it "immediately concerns European interests" (2021b, p. 8). Europeanists for their part do not reject a role for NATO or the US entirely; they merely desire the EU to develop the capacity to act autonomously from the US when needed. The *PvdA* stated that European cooperation with NATO remained "self-evident" and Belhaj (D66) affirmed that "a strong European defence branch will strengthen NATO" (Tweede Kamer 2017b, p. 9). This reasoning is in line with Howorth's (2018, p. 534) assertion that a fully emancipated and capable EU as a military actor would actually be a boon to the trans-Atlantic alliance. This stance might possibly alleviate Atlanticists fears that European strategic autonomy will push away the US and render the trans-Atlantic alliance void, but it remains to be seen whether they will be persuaded to risk such a gamble.

However, while the Atlanticists still fear pushing the US away with talk of European strategic autonomy, the Europeanist narrative seems to be gaining ground. A recent representative survey found that 79% respondents believed the US would reduce its protection of Europe in the next 5 years (Korteweg, Houtkamp and Sie Dhian Ho 2020, p. 5). 29% of respondents even considered the US to be a threat to Europe, a sentiment felt most strongly by the electorate of Europeanist parties (2020, p. 5-6). More interestingly is the high number of neutrals among the electorate of the Atlanticist *VVD* and *CDA*. While a plurality (around 40%) in both parties still consider the US to be no threat, an almost equally large group is uncertain and around a fifth does consider the US a threat to Europe (p. 5). Perhaps the US is actually

perceived as pushing away Europe, instead of the other way around. The electorate of both Europeanist and Atlanticist parties are overwhelmingly (around 80% in all parties) in favour of increased cooperation with the Franco-German axis instead of the traditional Dutch security partners, the US and the UK (p. 3). Another representative survey found 72% of respondents believed the EU should be militarily independent from the US (Zandee, Houtkamp and Sie Dhian Ho 2020, p. 3). This changing electoral landscape could sway the Atlanticists – who have already Europeanised substantially when compared to the traditionally obstructionist Atlanticism – further towards the Europeanist position.

This synthesis is already beginning to take shape. In March 2021, the Spanish and Dutch governments published a joint non-paper on strategic autonomy wherein the two governments also state that the EU and its MSs should take the necessary steps to gradually enhance the EU's strategic role and improve its "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary" (Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2021a, pp. 6-7). At the same time it is stressed that action should be taken "together with partners wherever possible" (Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2021a, p. 6) because the EU needs to take into account "prior obligations undertaken by member states, notably those corresponding to the signatories of the North Atlantic Treaty" (p. 7). We can also find the Europeanist Belhaj's argument translated into the document in near perfect synthesis with the Atlanticist emphasis on NATO responsibility: "it must be understood that a Europe that shoulders its responsibility in the area of defence is a Europe whose actions will strengthen NATO and its objectives" (Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2021a, p. 7). Similarly, in a French and Dutch joint statement issued in September 2021, both countries recognised the need for Europe to "take more responsibility for its own security and defence" and that they will closely cooperate to realise this ambition, while at the same time both emphasising the importance of NATO as the cornerstone of their collective security (Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2021b). This joint statement by the Dutch and French – who historically have been

at odds concerning European defence cooperation – is certainly a significant historical moment and indicates just the direction in which Dutch security policy may develop.

This study into the representations of ESA in Dutch politics has certainly shown the extent to which the Dutch security and defence debate has Europeanised. Europeanists certainly have been most successful in normalising their message in the past years. Even the staunch Atlanticist recognise that they need to stop stepping on the brakes of European security and defence integration, and instead they accept the fact that "the Netherlands can only be successful on the global stage within a strong Europe" (VVD and CDA 2021, p. 5). The question is no longer "if" more European cooperation is needed, but "how" this cooperation should be shaped and how far it may go. For now, the consensus on ESA that parties would be able to reach points in the direction of autonomy as hedging, rather merely seeing autonomy as responsibility or swinging the other direction towards full emancipation from the US. However, as Howorth (2019, p. 2) made clear, hedging is "a waystation on the road to emancipation", so the future of ESA remains full of potential. The concept of European strategic autonomy has breathed new life into a debate that had been paralysed by yes-or-no dichotomies. Now, the Europeanists appear to have gained the momentum, but we should not expect the Atlanticists to go gentle into that good night.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis was written with the aim of answering the following question: *how is European Strategic Autonomy represented in Dutch politics?* In the pursuit of answering this question three distinct discourses were reconstructed, each representing ESA in a different way. The Sovereigntists, of both the hard (PVV) and soft (SP) Eurosceptic stripes, represent ESA as a project to create an EU army, and therefore reject the concept as a threat to national sovereignty. They are of the opinion that security and defence are responsibilities that only the nation-state should be tasked with, and that ESA therefore undermines this prerogative. Their discursive polar opposites are the Europeanists who actively champion ESA because they assert that the interests of the European nation-states, the Netherlands specifically, can only be protected by pooling sovereignty and ensuring that the EU has the capacity to act as an independent security actor. To them ESA means emancipation from the US, who they consider to be an increasingly unreliable ally. This stance in particular is a direct assault on the very core of traditional Dutch security and defence policy: Atlanticism.

Historically, Atlanticism has been the hegemonic security identity for the Dutch, but in the latter half of the 90s, experts (such as Pijpers 1997; Bos 1997; Rees 1996) began speculating it had started to wane in favour of a more Europeanist outlook. The Atlanticists, though, turned out to be more resilient than expected. The waning of Atlanticism was, among others, slowed due to the rise of Euroscepticism following the 2005 referendum on the constitutional treaty. Integration fatigue kicked in and enthusiasm to engage in new European projects, such as defence integration, dissolved, meaning that Europeanist ambitions were put on the backburner for the foreseeable future. Since the most successful Sovereigntist party, the *PVV*, does not reject the trans-Atlantic alliance, the Netherlands relapsed into its Atlanticist

reflex and Atlanticism remained the dominant factor in the Dutch security identity~~,~~ but its hegemonic position had been lost.

Traditionally, Atlanticists took an obstructionist position when it concerned matters of European security. They argued that NATO was already tasked with the protection of the sovereignty of European nations and that a parallel EU security architecture could risk alienating the US, and without the US, NATO would lose its purpose to the Dutch. This fear of the US withdrawing from the European continent still guides Atlanticists, but they have lessened their opposition. Atlanticists still reject the notion that the EU should become autonomous or independent from the US, thereby technically also rejecting the notion of ESA, but they see in the project a chance for the EU to improve NATO burden-sharing, thus keeping the US involved. They have also weakened their stance that European security cooperation should take place within the NATO context, allowing European cooperation outside of the NATO context under very specific conditions. We may therefore conclude that, over two decades after initially predicted by experts, the pull of Atlanticism has definitely weakened: Atlanticism has become increasingly Europeanised. This synthesis between Atlanticism and Europeanism is further illustrated by the emergence of a new policy consensus. A hedging based policy seems to be unfolding, taking into consideration elements of both traditional Atlanticism – in the form of emphasising the importance of NATO – as well as Europeanism – in recognising the need for ambitious European cooperation.

This Europeanisation of the Dutch security identity does not necessarily have to stop there. When we take into consideration public opinion, which has grown increasingly sceptical of the American security guarantees and instead desires more European cooperation (Korteweg, Houtkamp and Sie Dhian Ho 2020), we must conclude the Europeanists have the momentum on their side. For now, Atlanticists may still try to limit ESA to a form of burden-sharing within NATO, but increasing Europeanist pressure could very well shift the policy consensus even

further in their favour. A deeper investigation of internal party debates – especially traditionally Atlanticist parties – in relation to European security policy and ESA could provide valuable insights into this process. Additionally, a study focussed on Dutch discourse as projected outwards, possibly combined with similar studies on the national perspectives on ESA of other MSs, could inform us on the direction of European security policy developments. Such a study would be inspired by David, Gower and Haukkala (2013, p. 265), who proposed a similar longitudinal approach to national perspectives in relation to the EU's foreign policy regarding Russia. European strategic autonomy can of course not been seen as separate of the EU's foreign policy.

Ultimately, in line with expectations, three distinct representations of the concept of ESA exist in Dutch politics, based on three identities. Sovereigntists present ESA as a threat to national sovereignty, Europeanists represent ESA as a means to emancipate the EU from the US/NATO security umbrella and Atlanticists represent ESA as a means to take more responsibility and improve NATO burden-sharing. Europeanists appear most successful in normalising their narrative, as the Dutch security identity seems to have become increasingly Europeanised in the recent years, affirming Drent, Wilms and Zandee's (2017) prediction that the Netherlands would become an ambitious promotor of European security policy. After all, when the outspoken Europeanist foreign minister Hans van Mierlo talked about European security cooperation in 1997, he framed it as an exercise in sharing responsibility with the US to keep them involved, now the Atlanticists have adopted that language and Europeanists have moved on to emancipating Europe from the US (Tweede Kamer 1997, p. 33). Therefore, there appears to be potential for the Netherlands to shirk its traditional obstructionists role in relation to European security and defence integration and instead assume the role of an active supporter of European security ambitions – a role worthy of a founding member.

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