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## **The enhancement of the European Union's strategic autonomy through PESCO**

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# **The enhancement of the European Union's strategic autonomy through PESCO**

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# Abstract

The European Union has made great strides in integration in many areas. However, military cooperation is lagging behind. Various factors such as the war in Ukraine show that the EU must pull together and not remain dependent on the US and NATO. The introduction of PESCO as an instrument appears to be a step towards strategic autonomy for the European Union's defence entity. The aim of this research is to discuss PESCO and to what extent this instrument can lead to the European Union's strategic autonomy. The following research question was therefore used: *Will PESCO contribute to strategic autonomy for the European Union's defense and if so, why?* Through interviews with various experts in the field of European military cooperation and document research, there is a high degree of coherence between the member states to expand military cooperation. This also has a positive effect on external events such as the war in Ukraine, making PESCO appear to be adaptive. However, the EU's presence has not yet reached that point and NATO is still mainly looked to when it comes to military cooperation. Despite of this PESCO has shown to be promising for the near future.

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# 1.Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

European integration can be seen as a success in certain areas of the European Union. By removing border tariffs and customs, people and goods can travel freely through Europe. With the creation of the unified monetary policy member states can pay with one single currency. When examining the realm of defense and military, the degree of integration among the European member states is notably less extensive. With the adoption of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2017, the European Union is attempting to move towards closer integration of its member states' militarily. The goal of PESCO is clear. It is "an ambitious, binding and inclusive European legal framework for investments in the security and defence of the EU's territory and its citizens" (PESCO, 2023). In addition, it "also provides a crucial political framework for all Member States to improve their respective military assets and defence capabilities through well-coordinated initiatives and concrete projects based on more binding commitments" (PESCO, 2023). However, the road to adopting PESCO has been a long one.

The idea of military integration between European states already existed right after the end of the Second World War. However, NATO, with the United States as its most important ally, took over the responsibility for safeguarding the security of the European continent (Mudge, 2022). The assurance of NATO's protection in deterring Soviet aggression was somewhat taken for granted by the European member states (Ringsmose, 2013). A turning point arrived with the conclusion of the Cold War, ushering in a new era of European integration. The process of integration accelerated with the ratification of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. This pivotal treaty included the provision for "a common foreign and security policy, including the eventual framing of a common defense" (European Union, 2002). In a mere seven years, the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) was formally established (Manners, 2002). However, it was not until 2009 with the Lisbon Treaty that the European Union took some serious steps to further integration. As part of the treaty, the successor of the ESDP, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) laid down the foundation of the prospects that should eventually lead to a common defence for the Union. It took a total of eight years to finally start the notification procedure of this next step of European integration. PESCO was called by former European Commission President Juncker as the "sleeping beauty" of the Lisbon Treaty (Nováky, 2018).

Within a year of the notification initiative, PESCO was no longer an initiative but an adopted cooperation framework. However, the reality is that not the treaty obligations led to the adoption of PESCO. Instead, the adoption of PESCO is, according to Peternelj, Kurecic, and Kozina (2018) the result of multiple contextual causes. In the ongoing steps of integration, each member state continues to have control over its military forces. Notably, PESCO stands out with its legally binding nature, which signifies an increasing commitment to collaborate defence efforts (Biscop, 2020). What is also noticeable different than earlier European military projects is that different EU institutions have a significant involvement in PESCO, which would explain this as a liberal or neofunctional initiative. The European Defence Agency, the European External Action Service, the European Defence Fund, and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability are all collectively contributing to shape the objectives of PESCO. Considering these important parts, PESCO can be considered to be a first step towards a unified European defence entity. This aspirations aligns with the wish of former European Commission President Juncker. He argued for a unified European army that would be “taken entirely seriously” and to defend the democratic values of the EU (Sparrow, 2015). PESCO is a process towards more strategic autonomy for the EU (Franke & Varma, 2019). Since its adoption in 2017, PESCO launched in five different waves more than 60 projects. The aim of PESCO is that every member states can commit to the binding commitments in 2025 (Public Affairs Bruxelles, 2023).

## **1.2 Problem formulation**

The adoption of PESCO in 2017 has been the result of multiple causes. The EU has faced several external crises: the 2015 refugee crisis, the rise of terrorism and war at its borders created the need for more cooperation in the context for security. Most notable is the war in Ukraine. When Russian backed separatist took over the eastern part of the country and annexed Crimea in 2014, it was the first time since the 1990s that the EU had to deal with a war in one of its neighboring country. In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. With the fear of Russian aggression in EU member states in the Baltics and Finland, a strong defence apparatus is needed. This task lies emphatically with NATO. For too long has the EU relied on NATO, in particular its most important member the United States. When Donald Trump was elected in 2016, Europe’s security protection was hanging by a thread. President Trump threatened to leave NATO if European countries would not meet the commitments of investing the two percent of its GDP in their military (Barnes & Cooper, 2019). Even though Trumps successor

Biden seems to commit to NATO membership it's for the EU a clear wakeup call to not take the protection guaranteed by the United States as granted. It was French president Macron that called NATO brain death (The Economist, 2019) and aimed for a "real" European armed forces (Chrisafis, 2018). Former German chancellor Angela Merkel stated that a European army should complement NATO (De La Baume & Herszenhorn, 2018). Despite of these plans, French think-tank IRIS came to the conclusion that the EU is not able to defend itself as both a political and geopolitical actor (Mauro & Fernandez-Cras, 2020). Another big event that led to the adoption of PESCO was Brexit. The United Kingdom has been one of the most critical towards military integration. Instead, the British had a strong 'NATO first' attitude blocking a lot of European defence co-operations plans (Besch, 2016).

### **1.3 Aim of the study**

This study is driven by the aim of critically assessing the impact of PESCO on European military integration since it was adopted in 2017. Given that these significant geopolitical challenges unfolded both during and after the establishment of PESCO, this study seeks to explore whether PESCO has truly emerged as a transformative force and whether it has facilitated a paradigm shift towards a more self-reliant European defense entity and how it corresponds with the EU as a global player. The nature of these challenges necessitates a nuanced examination of PESCO's operational effectiveness, diplomacy and overall its achievements. The following research question will be used: *Will PESCO contribute to strategic autonomy for the European Union's defence and if so, why?*

### **1.4 Societal and scientific relevance**

The war in Ukraine entering its second year saw the revival of the importance of European military corporation. Since PESCO was activated in 2017, defence spending in the EU grew every year. In 2021, the total amount of European defence spending surpassed for the first time 200 billion euros (European Defence Agency, 2022). Since the war, military spending went even higher. In Germany, it was announced that the German military received an investment of 100 billion Euros. In his *Zeitenwende* (times turn) speech, chancellor Olaf Scholz said that the investment was needed to protect the democracy and security in Europe (Connolly, 2022). This is a major change in the pacifist Germany, which has been reluctant in its military since the establishment of the Federal Republic right after the Second World War. The war in Ukraine has ensured that it can be an important catalyst for an increasingly integrated European defense

entity. Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, stated that the "security environment in Europe has changed rapidly since the war is back to our borders" (2022). Security is once again one of the highest priorities for citizens in the EU. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a study showed that Europeans have already been mostly in favor of more integration regarding its armed forces. Since the war this support has only grown (Fernández et al., 2023). Around 70 percent of the population in Europe would like to see the EU to do more in protecting the borders, while 80 percent is in favor of more European interferences in fighting against terrorism (European Parliament, 2017). During the early 2010s the EU's main focus was economic stability. Due to the rise of migration and terrorism, with the period of 2015-2016 having not only the influx of migrants from the Middle East but also one of the deadliest terrorist attack on European soil for more than a decade, pushed the EU to listen more to its population. The EU-Turkey deal is a good example that dealt with stopping migrants coming into Europe. This deal showed that cooperation is important to deal with external crises.

(Dogachan, 2020)

Besides societal relevance, PESCO has also been the attention of scientific research. However, it turns out that it is still an incomplete picture. Throughout the years, research paid little attention to the influence and possible successes of PESCO. Instead, the focus was more about the integration of member states. Researchers such as Baun and Marek (2019) and Billion-Galland and Efstathiou (2019) explain that PESCO is the result of the preferences of the more powerful nations such as Germany and France. When studying an organization like PESCO, one cannot solely look at the preferences of member states because it neglects cooperation among member states by looking only at power as Baun and Marek concluded (2019, p.40). Other scholars such as Calcara (2019) and Pósfai (2018) emphasize the shared values of the EU that led to PESCO. Some researchers have focused on the external dimension of PESCO. Blockmans and Crosson (2021) explains that PESCO is driven by both endogenous and exogenous factors (p. 87) and other argued that the EU in its entirety is of its own kind (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). Authors such as Biscop (2018), De France, Major and Sartori (2019), and Richter and Wehrheim (2019) all have taken external factors in consideration. However, these studies were done in the earlier years of PESCO looking more to the possibilities and ambitions of PESCO. With PESCO projects running for a couple of years and with the war in Ukraine, scientific interest in PESCO has once again grown. The likes of Martill and Gebhard (2023), Cózar-Murillo (2022), and Houdé and Wessel 2022 once again focus on integration, but seem to not focus on PESCO's progression.



### **1.5 Reading guide**

This study is structured into five chapters. The introduction serves as the first chapter. In the second chapter, the theoretical framework is set out which introduces the concept of actorness and sets out the conceptual model. Chapter three will describe the methodology. This chapter explains why this paper is of a qualitative nature and justifies the document analysis and interviews as a method of collecting data. The main part of this study is located in the fourth chapter. This is where the substantive analysis takes place. The fifth chapter will be a reflection on the paper with regards to its scientific and societal relevance leading to recommendations on policy and future study.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Research on the EU has in the past primarily focused on a more internal perspective that focusses on the competencies between member states and EU institutions, as well as among different European institutions. However, the EU has seen through its history a development that placed the EU on the world stage as an actor on its own. Classical international theories have struggled to correctly conceptualize the EU as it primarily focused on rationality and statehood. For many scholars the importance of the external role of the European Community was noted (Sjöstedt, 1977). Because of this, the EU (both its internal and external characteristics) would be conceptualized as an institution *sui generis* (of its own kind) (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). The concept of actorness has its roots in the 1970s when the EU was considered to be a civilian power in terms of its influence on the rest of the world (Manners, 2002; Sjöstedt, 1977). It became an incremental part of explaining the increasing importance of the EU as an actor on the world stage which takes things such as actions and perceptions in consideration (Drieskens, 2017). To support the concept of actorness, it is good to include the concept of effectiveness to implement a certain degree of actorness.

### **2.2 Actorness**

Actorness can be seen as an important concept to describe the role of the EU on the world stage as an independent actor with some level of strategic autonomy. The concept can have different meanings depending on the context. Within the field of international relations, actorness is associated with the power that an actor has. Actorness is a social constructivist approach that conceptualize global politics by looking at the process of state interaction (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). According to Larsen (2002) as states that construct themselves as an international actor considered to be an international actor due to other countries constructing that group as an actor (p. 287). Kratochvíl, Cibulková and Beník (2011) introduced actorness that explicitly made a distinction between internal and external dimensions. Allen and Smith (1990) describe actorness with the influence an actor has to shape both the expectations and perceptions of other actors. According to Hill (1993) actorness does require “a clear identity and a self-contained decision making system” and “practical capabilities to affect policy” (p. 308). Based on the conceptualization of Hill, Toje (2008) explains that the development of actorness is related to three dimensions: presence, procedure, and capability. Presence means the relationship between the actors that are involved with the foreign policy of the EU and the

expectations by third party actors in the EU's role on the global stage. Procedure refers to the factors in the policy process that enables or object action. Capability referes to the capacity the actor has to not only formulate bus also to carry out the policies, referring to foreign and security policies (Toje, 2008). Actorness can also be explained as “the ability to function actively and deliberately in relations to other actors in the international system” (Sjöstedt, 1977, p. 15). Sjöstedt created a criteria for actorness which included the delimitnition from other actors, autonomy/sovereignty, and the possession of a number of state like characteristics (Huigens & Niemann, 2009, p.7). By being less dependent, international actors can act autonomously meaning that they have the ability to make their own decisions and laws and that they possess prerequisites on the international stage by being a legal personality that has agents and the capacity to conduct negotiations with other actors (Hill, 1993). Other scholars have different definitions for the actorness. Peterson and Sjursen (1998) argue that actorness depends on the level of governance due to the rising influence of multi-level governacne. According to Ekengren and Engelbrekt (2006) derives the actorness the EU has through a mandate that is either been delegated from the member states to an agent (The most well known agent of the EU is the Commission) or from certain European principles (such as the creation of the CFSP).

## **2.3 Dimensions of Actorness**

Despite the mentioned definitions of actorness discusses more about what actorness is it does not set out a criteria that can be used as a conceptual framework that can help us answer the research question. There are a couple of scholars that have clear frameworks regarding actorness. Jupille and Caporosa (1998) set out four criteria for actorness, namely recognition, authority, cohesion, and autonomy. However, these criteria describes actorness more in general. The work of Bretherton and Vogler (2006) primarily focusses with their criteria of actorness on the EU. Because of that, the criteria of Bretherton and Volger will be used. The three dimensions of Bretherton and Vogler's description of actorness are opportunity, presence, and capability (2006).

### **2.3.1 Opportunity**

Opportunity is being defined as follows: “the external environment of ideas and events, the context which frames and shapes EU action or inaction” (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006, p. 24). This means that events outside of the EU have a rol in how the EU takes action. With the end of the Cold War, new democracies emerged in Eastern Europe. This allowed these countries to

become part of the European community. However, the EU was also not equipped well to deal with new challenges that emerged. The Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s was a good example of this. The failure in this region in Europe eventually led to the creation of the ESDP and its successor the CSDP. Countries that were involved in the war now see the importance in the EU. Croatia and Slovenia, once part of Yugoslavia are part of the EU, while other former Yugoslavian countries are future candidates showing that the EU became an important player in this region (Bretherton & Vogler, 2013). It is therefore rather difficult to influence opportunity as it cannot dictate the rules of the game, or international playing field (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006)

### **2.3.2 Presence**

The second dimension, presence, refers to the EU's ability to impact non-members simply by the virtue of its status as an global organisation (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). The degree of presence is shaped by the perception of the EU's role on the international stage. Presence is based on the idea of normative power as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. This can either be the result of direct presence which is the result of the external consequences of policies or indirect presence where the perception is based on the reputation of the EU's power (Niemann & Bretherton, 2013). The attractiveness of the EU, whether a country seeks membership or participate in (trade) deals, relies on the perception that the EU embodies security and prosperity. As mentioned earlier, the EU is not able to defend itself (Mauro & Fernandez-Cras, 2020). Based on this perception the expectation of PESCO should be low. Bretherton & Vogler argued that considerable evidence is needed to change the perception of the EU referring to the CSDP (2013, p.377).

### **2.3.3 Capability**

Capability, unlike the other two dimensions, refers to the internal aspect of the external action of the EU. It determines whether the EU together with the member states can engage in collective action (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). This entails a shared willingness, the same priorities and consistent policy instruments for developing and implementing the policies (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). Capacity is the most influential dimension as the EU plays a pivotal role in determining how to deal with challenges related to opportunity and presence (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). Bretherton and Vogler (2013) set out two criteria for capability: "1) the ability to formulate priorities and develop policies; 2) the availability of and capacity

to utilize policy instruments” (p. 381). There are three dimensions of Coherence, namely vertical, horizontal, and institutional coherence. These three, especially the first two, dimensions are connected as they must be present for policy making to be effective (Bretherton & Vogler, 2013, p. 381). Vertical coherence is the coherence between levels of policy making. It measures the commitment of a European member state to the common policies of the EU. Horizontal cohesion refers to the tensions between policy sectors that hinder effective policy formulation and implementation (Bretherton & Vogler, 2013, p.382). This means that policies do not undermine policies in another sector. Institutional coherence refers to the internal policy coordination procedures of the EU.

#### **2.4 Level of Actorness**

To look at whether actorness is effective, the concept of effectiveness can be used to deter the level of actorness. Effectiveness of EU policies has been widely discussed by scholars in the last decades. Young (1994) describes this concept as the extent of the EU to reach the main goals of its common position in the results of international negotiations. Among the concepts to measure the effectiveness of international actors, goal attainment and problem solving have been widely used by scholars to measure the effectiveness of the EU (Young, 1994; Groen & Niemann, 2013; Elsig, 2013; da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014). Goal achievement is seen as a measure of the extent to which a government's objectives are achieved over time, while problem solving refers to whether the actions and policies are working to solve the problems they were intended to solve (Young, 1994). Nonetheless, effectiveness of the EU is known to be very difficult, reflecting the belief of many scholars that the EU has shown not to be effective in all fields (Smith, 2000). On the other hand, scholars have shown the importance of coherence associating with the EU's external policy effectiveness. The coherence of the EU reflects that the EU is more effective when it is a unified front and speaks with one voice (Niemann & Bretherton, 2013). Based on coherence, Groen and Niemann (2013) argue that effectiveness is the result of the internal factors that determine actorness. This is also in accordance with the findings of da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier (2014) who argues that internal cohesiveness can result in external effectiveness leading to a more efficient global governance.

#### **2.5 Conceptual model**

A conceptual model reflects the three mentioned dimensions of actorness proposed by Bretherton and Vogler to answer the research question whether the EU has gained more

strategic autonomy due to PESCO. As mentioned earlier, these three variables are interrelated with each other. While the main explanatory variable is capability, both presence and opportunity are needed to get actorness. A combination of the three dimensions of actorness enables us to not only consider the complexities of the internal aspect of policy making, but also the factors that are associated with the external aspect in terms of perceptions and expectations (Bretherton & Vogler, 2013, p.262). When level of actorness is effective enough it can lead to strategic autonomy. Based on the findings of Da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier, and Groen and Niemann the external dimension (presence and opportunity) can only be effective when there is a high level of internal cohesiveness (capability).

The conceptual model below visualizes the expectations for this study. This model has the three dimensions of actorness as independent variables, with the variable capability, the internal dimension as the main explanatory variable, while the two external dimensions are presence and opportunity. The combination of the three variables make actorness. When the variable capability is effective this will impact the effectiveness of the external dimensions, namely presence and opportunity. The combination of an effective internal dimension and external dimension leads to effective actorness that in turn will gain strategic autonomy as dependent variable. In the conceptual model this is visualized by having the variables that are determined to be effective in white boxes. The three variables are effective when it meets the characteristics described by Bretherton and Vogler. Capability refers to the shared willingness, the same priorities and consistent policy instruments for developing and implementing the policies, or also a high degree of coherence (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). Presence is effective when the EU has the ability to impact non-member states and opportunity is effective when the external environment influences the frames and shapes of EU action or inaction (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). When the capability variable cannot become effective as it lacks coherence, the external dimension cannot be effective which makes actorness lack effectiveness that in turn does not lead to strategic autonomy.

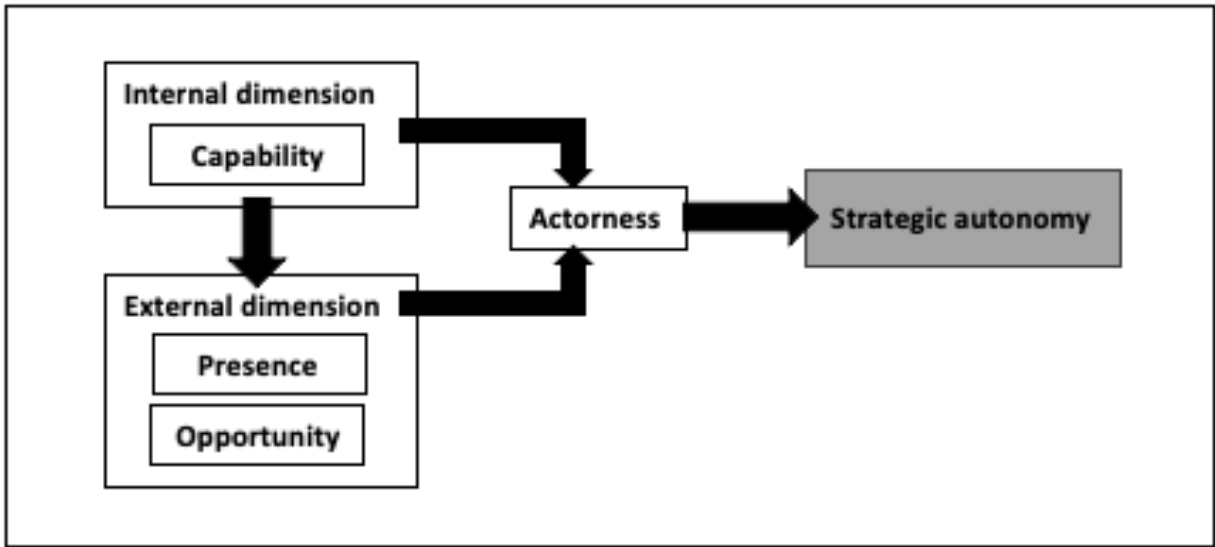


Figure 1. Conceptual model developed by author, based on Bretherton & Vogler's (2013) conceptualization of actorness.

## **3. Methodology**

This chapter will present the methodological approach that has been used in the analytical chapter. The discussion covers the type of research conducted and which method has been used. In addition, the time frame that is explored and relevant actors for this study will be discussed. It will also explain in what way the data is collected and analyzed. This chapter will conclude with looking at the reliability and validity of the study.

### **3.1 Study design**

To answer the research question of this study, a case study will be used by examining a certain aspect of European military integration, namely PESCO. For this study is the most appropriate type of research qualitative research. Conducting a qualitative research is based on data in the form of words. It describes, explains, and interpret the collected data (Williams, 2007). The reason behind this is that PESCO is still underdefined as a construct for stimulating cooperation amongst nations. We will look for mechanisms that do stimulate or obstruct cooperation within PESCO.

The method that has been used is process tracing. This is a method that test theories based on the literature that has been used for the analysis. Process tracing is a way to point out the course of events that has happened in the case of PESCO. It will point out the causal mechanisms that explains how certain evens came about. The time frame covered by the research in this study extends from the introduction of the first PESCO projects in March 2018, followed by the successive implementation of the other four phases in which these projects were introduced. The most recent phase of implementation took place in May 2023. The projects are examined by looking at the Strategic Compass whether PESCO projects have been successful or able to reach the deadline of 2025. The collaboration within the PESCO projects is orchestrated by the member states.

To get a good idea of what the study design for the analysis is based on, it is good to provide insight through an introduction to PESCO. PESCO is based on article 42, a compressive set of packages were adopted in 2016 and 2017. Besides PESCO, the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) were part of this. To understand PESCO, it is important to explain the other packages as they are all important parts to the strategic autonomy and actorness of



PESCO (Fiott, Missiroli, & Tardy, 2017). The European Union Global Strategy was introduced in 2016 and is the doctrine of the EU's foreign and global strategy. The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence monitors the defence plans of the EU. Its objective is to “develop, on a voluntary basis, a more structured way to deliver identified capabilities based on greater transparency, political visibility and commitment from Member States” (Council of the European Union, 2016, p. 9). CARD therefore provides an overview of the military cooperation of the EU's member states and their commitment towards PESCO. The European Defence Fund promotes and coordinates investments European defence. It is therefore an aim to “encourage governments to develop defence capabilities” (Fiott, Missiroli, & Tardy, 2017, p. 48).

The Permanent Structured Cooperation is a permanent framework for closer cooperation and a structured process that gradually deepens defence cooperation within the Framework of the EU (EEAS, 2021). PESCO has two dimensions, namely operational development and capability development. The operational part refers to the obligation member states have by participating in PESCO: “proceed more intensively to develop its defence capacities through the development of its national contributions and participation, where appropriate, in multinational forces, in the main European equipment programmes, and in the activity of the Agency in the field of defence capabilities development, research, acquisition and armaments” (European Union, 2008).

### **3.2 Data collection**

For this study, data has collected through two different ways: official documents and interviews. A complete collection of official documents from relevant EU institutions, national governments, and international organizations, such as treaties, policy papers, reports, and legislative acts, have been compiled. These publications will lay the groundwork for comprehending the legislative framework and policy objectives relating to PESCO. Besides using other research that is focussing on PESCO and actorness, certain data will be further explained. The relevant documents for this study are as following:

- PESCO strategic review
- PESCO strategic compass
- 2022 Coordinated Annual Review on Defence report
- 2023 annual report on the status of PESCO implementation

- Defence data 2022
- 2023 EU capability development priorities.

The strategic review looks at the achievements of PESCO during its first phase (2018-2020). It is based on the member states' national implantation programs (NIP), The second phase of PESCO has started in 2021 but will be finalised in the year 2025. Therefore, the Strategic Compass will be used to see whether member states will be able to reach the goals of 2025 when the projects are finished. The 2022 Coordinated Annual Review on Defence report and the 2023 annual report on the Status of PESCO implementation will be used to look at the progression that the member states combined have made. The 2023 EU capability development priorities sets out the priorities for the next couple of years.

However, collecting data is not enough. It is good to get in touch with people who work around PESCO and provide valuable information and insights that might be not easily accessible online. This is why another way of collecting data is to conduct interviews. To answer these questions six interviews were conducted with various experts in the field of PESCO. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, the respondents have indicated that they prefer not to be identified by their names. Therefore, their names are not disclosed in this paper for privacy reasons. Respondents have been selected based on their relevance to this topic. One respondent works for the European Defence Agency. The other five respondents are from various member states. This gives us a better understanding of how some member states view PESCO. The interviews were held either by using Teams and Email. The transcripts have been attached in the appendix. The following six people were interviewed:

- I. Policy officer PESCO, European Defence Agency
- II. The CSDP head of the German Permanent Representation to the European Union.
- III. Official from the Polish Permanent Representation to the European Union.
- IV. PESCO national point of contact, Romanian Ministry of Defense.
- V. Official from the Austrian Military Representation to the European Union.
- VI. Defence counsellor from the Belgian Permanent Representation to the European Union.

### **3.3 Data analyses**

The conceptual model that has been introduced in chapter 2 shows that the concepts of opportunity, presence, and capability are being used. These three concepts are operationalised in the table below. Each concept has a dimension. For capability the two dimensions are the

ability to formulate priorities and the availability and capacity to utilize policy instruments. Presence has the dimension perceptions and expectations that is built around the indicators regarding CSDP missions and cooperation with partners. Opportunity has the dimension influence based on the ongoing war in Ukraine.

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Indicator</b>
<u>Capability</u>	Ability to formulate priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defence spending</li> <li>• Participation in projects</li> <li>• Aligning defence planning framework</li> </ul>
	Availability and capacity to utilize policy instruments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambitions for the European security and defence agenda</li> <li>• Creation of European equipment programs</li> </ul>
<u>Presence</u>	Perceptions and Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforcing CSDP missions and operations</li> <li>• Cooperation with partners</li> </ul>
<u>Opportunity</u>	Influence of external events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russian-Ukrainian war</li> </ul>

Table 1. Operationalization scheme developed by author, based on Bretherton & Vogler's (2013) conceptualization of actorness.

The following questions were asked:

1. *What is your position within the European Union and what do you do with PESCO?*
2. *What is the countries' commitment to PESCO?*
3. *How does the country see PESCO (as it relates to NATO) on the world stage and in the region (with the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe)?*
4. *How adaptive is PESCO and what are the possibilities?*

All interviews and studied documents were coded and labelled, according to table 1. The interviews held with officials representing a member state were asked specific their countries' point of view. The topic list has been continuously adjusted during the research process. This is due to the discovery of new operationalizations because of studying new interviews or documents. The ongoing improvements made to the topic list reflect the evolving nature of the research. In figure 2, four steps are defined regarding the analysis of textual data. These steps include the overall analysis of the text material, the detailed examination of text passages, and the determination of findings and conclusions. To prepare the collected empirical material for these steps, the examined texts were coded (Rietjens, 2014). This involved the application of both "open", "axial", and "selective" coding. The use of "open" and "axial" coding primarily focuses on the overall analysis of the textual material. Open coding entails assigning labels to quotes from the studied documentation and interviews. This is crucial for contextualizing and interpreting texts within their specific context (Fairclough, 2003, p. 28) since statements have no meaning without context.

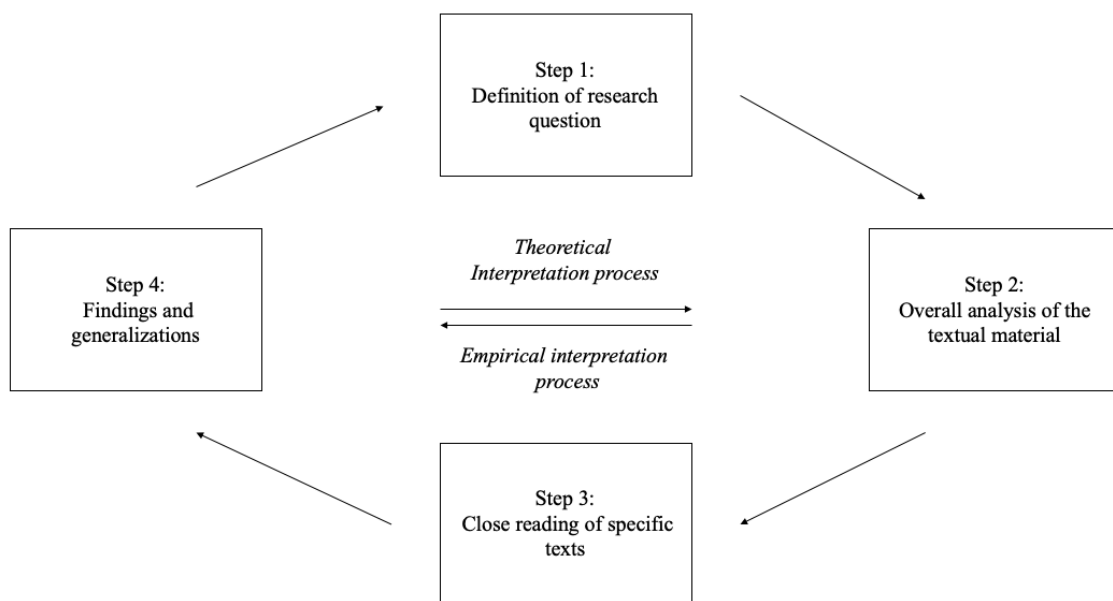


Figure 2: Relationship between data collection and data analysis.

Text segments were labelled with the indicators identified in figure 2. Subsequently, axial coding was applied by grouping coded texts according to themes. Selective coding, on the other hand, aligns with the second step of the analysis, namely the detailed examination of text passages. In this step, we qualify the meaning of specific statements from the perspective of the interviewees and the actor group they represent. According to Fairclough (2003), three aspects of meaning can be represented in any text. Fairclough derives this categorization from

the following statement by Foucault:

*“[These] practical systems stem from three broad area's: relations of control over things, relations of action upon others, relations with oneself. This does not mean that each of these three area's is completely foreign to the others. It is well known that control over things is mediated by relations with others; and relations with others in turn always entails relations with oneself, and vice versa. But we have three axes whose specificity and whose interconnections have to be analyzed: the axis of knowledge, the axis of power, the axis of ethics... How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?”*  
(Foucault, 1994, p. 318)

The final step in the analysis involved reaching findings and conclusions by comparing the thus coded qualitative data per actor group and research phase, and then incorporating theoretical insights.

### **3.4 Reliability and validity**

In order to ensure the robustness of this research, it is of importance that the gathered information is subject to being reliable and that it can be validated. Reliability relies on accuracy and precision. To ensure this, information is gathered from official documents and respondents working with or within the field of PESCO. Official documents act as solid information sources that relies on policy, initiatives and facts. The reliability is also supplemented with the involvement of various respondents. Through interviews, the experiences and expertise of these respondents provide an important nuance to further increase reliability. Validity resolves around the credibility. To strengthen internal validity, the approach of triangulation is being used. Triangulation combines various sources and methods to provide as much corroborating evidence as possible. Besides the multifaceted lens of combining data collection and interviews, triangulation will help to acts as a safeguard for potential biases and limitations when only data or interview results are gathered. In addition to enhancing the internal validity, external validity is also important. By a variety of respondents from different member states will help to increase the generalizability of the findings beyond the scope of this research only.

### **3.5 Limitations**

Research PESCO faces a lot of limitations. As PESCO focuses on further security cooperation in Europe with a certain sensitivity, not all information is available online for publication. Interviews also show that certain topics are subject to confidentiality. In addition, PESCO is an ongoing project and many of the projects will not be deployed until 2025. This combination makes it difficult to obtain a complete picture. With the war in Ukraine, there is a greater reluctance, especially among Member States in Eastern Europe, to share information regarding their military expenses and projects, which means that not all information can actually be investigated or verified.

## **4. Analysis**

The aim of the analysis is to look at how PESCO is implemented by its member states and the institutions and whether it has been effective to achieve strategic autonomy. The representatives of the member states of PESCO that were interviewed will help to look at some specific countries. Each of the elements will be built on a document analyses and by the perception of respondents on the content (that is policies and plans) of those documents. Each part of the chapter then will be finalized in a sub conclusion by integrating the written empirical data and its perception and meaning by respondents before the three sub conclusions come together in a general conclusion of the analysis.

### **4.1 Capability**

Capability is the most critical dimension of actorness that refers to the internal part of the external action of the European Union. This section will split in two subsections, policy formulations and policy instruments in coherence with the operationalization scheme.

#### **4.1.1 Policy formulation**

Vertical competence is important. A lack of vertical coherence can challenge the actorness of the EU. This has been the case with the CSDP. The CSDP is not an EU competence as matters related to the armed forces of the member states and integration has been politically too sensitive (Törö, 2014). Instead, the CSDP's decision making requires unanimity (Törö, 2014). Member states therefore act parallel. The differences among the member states have reflected in different commitments and historical traditions. Austria, Finland, Ireland, and Sweden have been known for their neutrality while Cyprus and Malta are countries considered to be non-aligned. Denmark even stayed out the CSDP as it had an opt-out for everything military related within the EU. However, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Danish population voted overwhelmingly in favor of ending the opt-out the country had on European military integration (Reuters, 2022). As of 2024, all the member states of the EU, with the exemption of Malta are part of PESCO. The adoption of PESCO meant that countries must adhere to certain commitments so that the countries' external policies are consistent and complementary to the EU. PESCO has a total of 20 binding commitments. These commitments can be divided into five categories. Fiott, Missiroli and Tardy (2017) summarize the commitments as following: "spending more on defence equipment and research; aligning defence planning frameworks;

making available defence capabilities when needed; working together to reduce capability shortfalls and gaps; and, participating in major joint European equipment programmes” (p. 43). Each member state of PESCO needs to adhere to these commitments. The Austrian official has the following to say about it:

“A commitment to collaboration among member states are essential for the ongoing success and improvement of PESCO. The effectiveness of PESCO will depend on the collective efforts and engagement of all participating countries in addressing common security challenges”

(Austrian official, personal communication, 2024).

The commitments accounts for roughly “90 percent” of PESCO (Belgian official, personal communication, 2024). By doing so, every country needs to present annually an update of their individual National Implementation Plan (NIP) where they outline their intend to meet the required commitments. In addition, the Council of the EU releases the Annual Report of the Status of PESCO implementation. The report states that each national implementation plan underline that member states “have stepped up their efforts towards fulfilment of the more binding commitments, including through PESCO projects that demonstrate progress in all domains” (EEAS, 2023, p. 2). The most recent report concluded that the national implementation plans show a mixed picture of cooperation across the commitments and that the overall progression is still not sufficient (EEAS, 2023, p. 7). However, the different interviewees told that their countries are committed to adhere to PESCO’s binding commitment.

#### ***4.1.1.1 Defence spending***

One way of looking to the member states’ commitment towards PESCO is to examine whether member states have spent more on their defence. The CARD report of 2022 showed that the 2020 report recommendation of increasing defence expenditure, in accordance with PESCO’s first commitment, has been largely followed (European Defence Agency, 2022). Almost every member state has increased their budget allocated towards their defence capabilities. In 2021, the defence spending of the PESCO member states grew to a total of 214 billion Euros with the expectations that in 2025 defence spending will rise to 284 billion Euros (European Defence Agency, 2022). In 2022, defence spending went up to a total of 240 billion Euros (European Defence Agency, 2022). With the record high investments, the member states are on track to reach the defence spending in 2025 (European Defence Agency, 2022). In 2022, compared to



2021, 20 member states have increased their defence spending, while 7 member states have decreased spending (European Defence Agency, 2022). Focusing on defence investments, such as research and equipment, the member states reached a record of 58 billion Euros in 2022 (European Defence Agency, 2022). Investments account for roughly 24 percent of all defence spendings (European Defence Agency, 2022). This shows that the member states are committed to strengthen PESCO in accordance with the second PESCO commitment that member states should use at least 20% of their defence spending in investments (Council of the EU, 2017).

Multiple national implementation plans have shown that military investments has grown in 2023 or will grow in the year 2024. This is also evident from the interviews. The Polish official said that Poland will invest almost 5 percent of their annual GDP into their military to “fully commit to the security of Europe making it one of the biggest armed forces in the European Union” (Polish official, personal communication, 2023). Also Germany will increase their investment in their armed forces but “the 100 billion euros Scholz promised takes time” (German official, personal communication, 2023). The Romanian official states that “the strategic objective is to increase the defence spending from 2% to 2.5%” (Romanian official, personal communication, 2024). Both Belgium and Austria are still lacking behind in terms of military spending. The Belgium official states that Belgium is “determined to follow the binding commitments of the NIP” (Belgian official, personal communication, 2024), while Austria states that “PESCO emphasizes the need for more efficient defense spending and cooperation in developing military capabilities”. In addition, the Austrian tells that “Austria, like other member states, may see the benefit of pooling resources, avoiding duplication, and achieving economies of scale in defense-related projects” (Austrian official, personal communication, 2024).

#### ***4.1.1.2 Project participation***

Another way to look at is whether member states are taking part in the many PESCO projects. By doing so, we can look at how many projects each country participate in. Since its adoption, there have been a total of five different waves of projects: the first found of 17 projects in March 2018; the second round of another 17 projects in November 2018; the third round of 13 projects in 2019; the fourth round added 14 more projects in November 2021 and finally 11 projects in 2023 (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The Romanian official states that “the most important indicator of success is the active involvement of participating Member States in the respective project activities” (Romanian official, personal communication, 2024). This is also agreed by the EDA official, she states that “the projects within PESCO are expressions of the commitments of the Member States, which serve to strengthen these commitments and promote political cohesion and cooperation” (EDA official, personal communication, 2023). The graph below shows the number of projects that each Member State participated in in all five waves. A first glimpse shows that there is a different level of commitments per member state. As Denmark joined PESCO last year it cannot participate in any past projects but needs to wait for the sixth wave to take part.

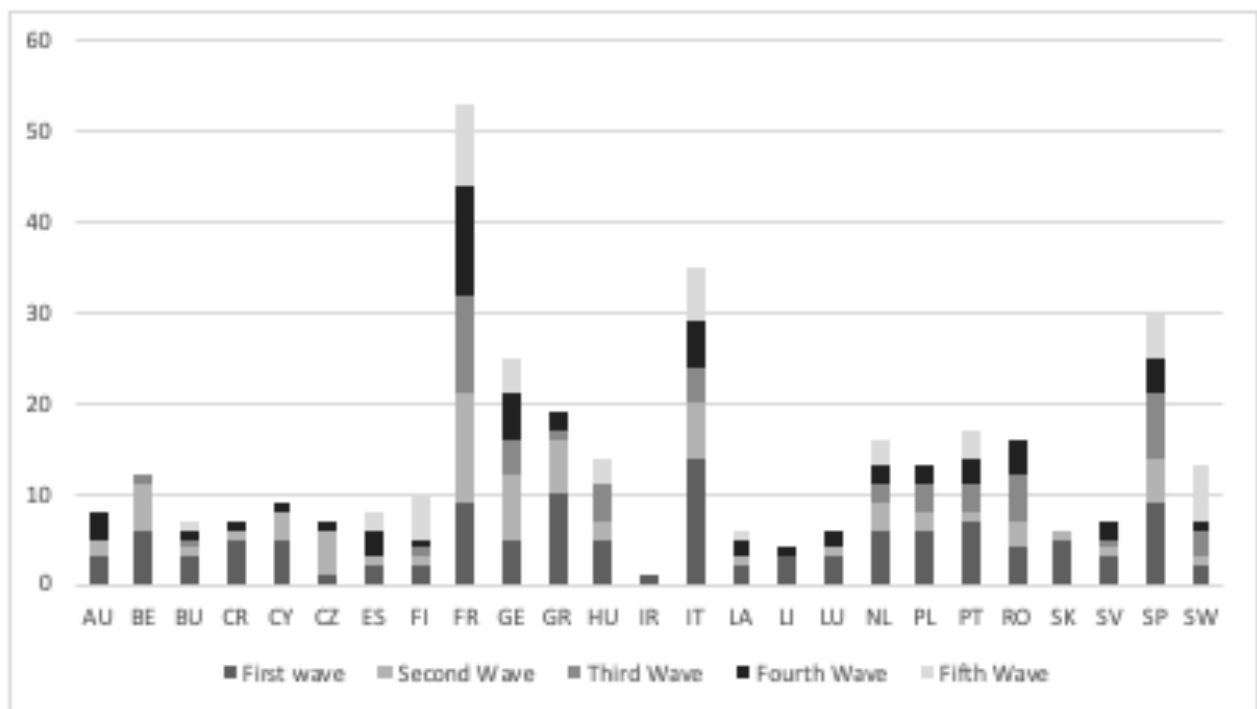


Figure 2. An overview of PESCO projects created by the author, based on data of the Council of the European Union (2023).

Each country participated in the first wave of projects in March 2018 with at least one project. Bigger countries such as Italy, France, Greece and Spain even joined in a minimum of 9 projects while smaller countries participated in a few or just one project. The so called “neutral countries” Austria, Finland, Ireland, and Sweden took part in just a few projects. The reason of this low number is explained by the Austrian official:

“Neutral countries traditionally place a strong emphasis on maintaining a non-aggressive stance and avoiding military alliances that could compromise their neutrality. They are more inclined to support PESCO initiatives that focus on civilian capabilities, crisis management, and peacekeeping rather than those with a strong

emphasis on military capabilities or collective defense”.

(Austrian official, personal communication, 2024).

The commitments towards new projects have gone down in the following four waves. In the fourth wave, the commitments of the countries have gone up again with just four countries not participating. However, the participation per country were low (maximum of 4). Germany and Italy took part in five projects, while France took the crown with a total of 12 projects. In the fifth wave, 12 countries did not participate. Noticeably, two of the neutral countries Finland (joined NATO) and Sweden (in the process of becoming a NATO member) took part in five and six projects respectively, which is equal as their previous projects combined. With the five waves now in developments it is clear that France, Italy, Spain, and Germany being the member states that are taking part in multiple projects in every wave that took place.

However, a certain refutation is needed to see the commitments per country based on project participation. According to the German official participation in the different projects can demonstrate a certain commitment from each Member State, “but PESCO is not just about projects”. He states that many projects are in “a questionable state” (German official, personal communication, 2023). Six projects are falling behind the goal of 2025, while 17 projects in total are facing delays due to various reasons such as the complexity of tasks and lack of planning (PESCO, 2023). According to the German official “projects that have been delayed or do not show progress are either retired or need to redefine their scope and objectives” In the future the he hopes that “we are able to consolidate projects and reduce the number of projects and really concentrate on projects that deliver” (German official, personal communication, 2023). The Belgian official even explains that PESCO projects have become too technical. He says that: “PESCO can better continue without any projects” referring that the “more important steps” happen “among the different member states’ armed forces in the background” (Belgian official, 2024).

#### ***4.1.1.3 Aligned defence planning framework***

Another way to measure commitments is to look whether member states have aligned their defence planning framework. It is an important part of PESCO “alignment can facilitate smoother integration of PESCO projects into the broader defense strategies of participating countries” (Austrian official, personal communication, 2024). This can be measured through CSDP missions and operations. According to the 2022 CARD report, the different member

states have not made significant progress on missions and operations (CARD, 2022). However, the annual report on the status of PESCO implementation came to the conclusion that multiple PESCO projects have produced concrete deliverables (PESCO, 2023). The German official named the European Medical Command (EMC) and the Cyber and Information Domain Coordination (CIDCC) as two successful projects (German official, personal communication, 2023). The fact that the projects have been completed is evident from the 2023 annual report on the status of PESCO implementation. Both projects have already been used and activated last year in support of the CSDP missions in Ukraine and in Mozambique (EEAS, 2023). According to the Belgian official, deployment of soldiers and missions account just for “roughly 10 percent of military integration” (Belgian official, personal communication, 2024).

#### **4.1.2 Policy Instruments**

Bretherton and Vogler (2013) describe military means as one of the instruments that is being employed in pursuit of external policy objectives. With the launch of the CSDP progression was remarkably rapid with the ability to use instruments for both military and crisis management. Since 2003, the EU has deployed multiple CSDP missions. Despite the continued duration of these missions, the persistent shortage of dedicated resources remains a major barrier to deployability (European Defence Agency, 2016). The extent of these shortcomings has always dependent on the commitment of the member states. With the objective of making the different European armed forces more coherent and enhancing their efficiency, PESCO aims for far reaching collaboration and coordination in different areas where CSDP fell short. This includes the target of reducing the various weapon systems in Europe through collaboration and the development of new weapon systems, but it also focusses on strengthening the collective deployability of the member states’ armed forces and increase its logistics (EEAS, 2021). The Austrian official states the following:

“fostering collaboration in research and development of defense technologies.  
Encourage the sharing of best practices and the development of cutting-edge capabilities to strengthen the EU's overall defense posture”  
(Austrian official, personal communication, 2024).

##### **4.1.2.1 Ambitions**

PESCO has four ambitions for the European security and defence agenda (EEAS, 2022). This includes to provide a shared assignment for the strategic environment, threats and the

challenges that the EU is being confronted with; to bring greater coherence and a common sense of purpose to security and defence actions; to set out new means and ways to improve the ability to collectively defend the security of the EU and its citizens and to specify clear targets and milestones to measure progress (EEAS, 2022, p.11). To commit to these ambitions, the strategic Compass sets out a couple of instruments which is divided in four groups: act, secure, invest and partner (EEAS, 2022). All the representatives of the countries that were interviewed agree that PESCO is useful and are committed to enhance the EU defence capabilities. The Romanian official states that “PESCO remains the driving force of the whole architecture set in place in the last couple of years” (Romanian official, personal communication, 2024). The Belgian official emphasized this due to the nature of the EU’s intergovernmentalism. “If everyone participates to the commitments of PESCO, the progression happens at the speed of those who progress the slowest”. Instead, Belgium is keen “to give more competences to the Commission through supranationalism”. Any expansion of Commission initiatives such as the European Defence fund are welcomed by the Belgians. The official noted that “a model requiring unanimous agreement within all member states is, in fact, not functioning well” (Belgian official, personal communication, 2024). The EDA official agrees that PESCO is a “slow progress” but “the shared commitments, involving national parliaments in the decision-making process, and tailoring projects to the willingness and ability of each state, [...], gradually increase the role and coherence of PESCO within the EU's defense ambitions” (EDA official, personal communication, 2023). The Romanian official states that “embedding of EU initiatives and instruments in the national planning system is key” (Romanian official, personal communication, 2024). The Austrian official also emphasizes the importance of the decision making by its member states, saying that each member states “evaluates its national security interests and assesses the potential benefits of cooperation within the PESCO framework” (Austrian official, personal communication, 2024).

#### ***4.1.2.2 European military industry***

As mentioned in the previous section, the military industry is important to achieve strategic autonomy. All the interviewed countries are agreeing with this. According to the Belgian official, the main aim of an own European military industry is “for the European countries to make their own choices” (Belgian official, personal communication, 2024). In the view of the Romanians, PESCO must deliver to prove its viability, “for instance prototypes or series production of advanced defence capabilities whose research & development was supported by

the EU through instruments such the European Defence Fund” (Romanian official, personal communication, 2024). The Austrian official says that the objectives of any future PESCO initiative “should not only be clear and realistic it should also prioritize areas where the EU can add significant value and avoid duplication with NATO” (Austrian official, personal communication, 2024). He says that initiatives should align with the national implementation plans to facilitate smoother integration of PESCO projects. One of the main ambitions of PESCO is to create new unified weapon systems. The Belgian official claims that “the European military defence industry will be the most important to achieve strategic autonomy” (Belgian official, personal communication, 2024). However, the different European armed forces has to deal with a huge variety in equipment which has frequently resulted in incompatibility issues that led to higher costs and significant challenges in terms of logistics (Matthews, 2017). The EU operates roughly five more times as many weapon systems as the United States (Chinn & Lavandier, 2023). This includes the variation of Main battle tanks (Europe has 15, while the United States only has one), Fighter planes (20 vs 7), and destroyers and frigates (26 vs 4) (Chinn & Lavandier, 2023). PESCO has launched several projects with the aim of creating new unified weapon systems. This includes the creation of a various systems for various armored vehicles, maritime boats and air systems. Multiple projects also focusses on creating new vehicles, including a new armored vehicle, a new military ship named the European Patrol Corvette, and a next generation attack helicopter (PESCO, 2023). According to the annual report, the capabilities of different systems have been enhanced (EEAS, 2023). The German official states that that the development of new weapon systems is a “highly intensive process” (German official, personal communication, 2023). According to the Romanian official, “connecting PESCO to the defence industrial opportunities would be essential” (Romanian official, personal communication, 2024). The Polish official states that Poland supports creating European weapon systems that is “not only taking part in the bigger member states, but also medium-sized and smaller member states” (Polish official, personal communication, 2023). The Belgian official refers to invest in a European weapon industry:

“An ideal scenario involves European member states to create a defence industry which enables it to decide what to produce and what to do with it, rather than rely on foreign countries such as the United States for their permission”.

(Belgian official, personal communication, 2024)

### **4.1.3 Sub conclusion**

It is evident that the 20 binding commitments of PESCO are the way to deter a country's commitment to PESCO. From both research and interviews it seems that spending more on defence budgets and clear instrument formulation seem big steps to the capability of PESCO. While research and interviews show that there are many similarities among the willingness of countries, this does not seem to be the case with projects. From research alone, projects seem of a vital importance for PESCO and to achieve a certain strategic autonomy. Germany seems to be more hesitant to call these projects a success when they are done in 2025. The Belgian official even called for PESCO without any projects at all. When it comes to a joint military industry there seems to be strong agreement among the member states. Which can play an important factor for achieving strategic autonomy. Even though the commitments are a work in progress and certain parts are not yet reached, there is a broad consensus among member states to adhere to the 20 commitments. This shared commitment is an important step to enhance PESCO's role of achieving strategic autonomy. As the internal dimension can be considered to be effective, this can in turn make the external dimension of actorness effective as well.

## **4.2 Presence**

Presence refers to the perceptions and expectations third parties have on the EU by virtue of its existence (Bretherton & Vogler, 2013). The perception is based on the prosperity and security that the EU has. While the presence of the EU had a big influence on Eastern Europe after the Cold War, militarily it had less of an impact.

### **4.2.1 CSDP missions**

Under the CSDP, the EU has multiple missions (past and present) outside of its own territory. Operation Atlanta (previously the European Union Naval Force Somalia (EU NAVFOR) has been a leading actor in anti-piracy missions in the region (Boşilcă, Stenberg, & Riddevold, 2020). However, the missions of the EU have so far been relatively low key. The Strategic Compass has set out multiple goals to increase the presence. One of those goals is to reinforce CSDP missions and operations (EEAS, 2022). According to the annual report on the status of PESCO implementation multiple projects including the PESCO projects European Medical Command and the Cyber Rapid Response Teams have been implemented and contributed to CSDP missions in the Western Balkans and in Africa (EEAS, 2023). The German official refers

that “the strategic c2 system projects will be an important part of PESCO and will enhance the CSDP missions drastically” (German official, personal communication, 2023). The goal of the c2 system is a unified command and information system which might lead to more effective CSDP missions in the future increasing the presence (PESCO, 2024). The official says that the PESCO project aims for an c2 system focusing on information systems when the project is completed will increase and enhance the coordination and decision making processes during CSDP missions. The Austrian official has the following to say about military activities that are in line with the objectives of the Common Security and Defense Policy.

“Austria, as part of its commitment, may contribute to the development of specific defense capabilities, such as joint procurement of military equipment, research and development projects, and improvements in military infrastructure”

(Austrian official, personal communication, 2024).

The Belgian official states that Belgium is taking lead in the MAS MCM project. This project involves developing technological means for future mine countermeasures. According to the official that makes sense as “Belgium is the benchmark country for mine countermeasures both within NATO and the EU” (Belgian official, personal communication, 2024).

#### **4.2.1 Cooperation with partners**

Another goal of the Strategic Compass is to strengthen the cooperation with partners to increase the presence in the region. Non-EU member states are able to participate through various PESCO projects. The strategic compass sets out 3 points. The first point is to reinforce strategic partnerships with NATO and the United Nations. In addition, the plan of PESCO is to cooperate with other regional organisations, including ASEAN, OSCE and the African Union. Also cooperation with bilateral partners is very important. “PESCO can be open to third countries” (EDA official, personal communication, 2023). These partners share the same interest and values as the EU, including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Norway and Japan (EEAS, 2023). Additionally, tailored partnerships with countries in the Western Balkans, Asia, Africa and South Africa needs to be developed. In 2023 Canada started to participate in multiple projects regarding logistics and to support operations. The United Kingdom became part of the Military Mobility project in 2022 (EEAS, 2023). For many member states, the strategic partnership between NATO and PESCO is the most relevant for their commitments towards the goals of PESCO. Many member states argued that PESCO should not undermine NATO. According to the Polish official, the Polish government used to be critical towards



PESCO and advocated that it would not be a “defence entity excluding NATO” (Polish official, personal communication, 2023). Prior to joining PESCO, Poland argued that certain commitments and tasks of PESCO should not be duplicating commitments and tasks of NATO. However, the Polish position of PESCO has been softened, but continues to “emphasize the strong cooperation between PESCO and NATO rather than PESCO developing its own separate competences” (Polish official, personal communication, 2023). As one of the initiative takers of PESCO, the German official states that the EU seeks to become a geopolitical actor and that PESCO “contributes to integrating capabilities that are both useable for the European Union without diminishing the role of NATO” (German official, personal communication, 2023). The Romanian official states:

“NATO remains the cornerstone of the collective defence for 23 EU Member States, and it is fully compatible with the CSDP efforts, Romania is committed to further strengthen practical EU-NATO cooperation”

(Romanian official, personal communication, 2024).

In the view of the Romanian’s, “PESCO should be more aligned to NATO when it comes to the assessment of binding commitments, but also to reduce the administrative burden related to reporting” (Romanian official, personal communication, 2024). The Austrian official states that the EU recognizes NATO as the forum for the collective defense of its members and that there is a commitment to coordination and avoiding duplication of efforts between the two organizations:

“PESCO is seen as a way to enhance the EU's defense capabilities in areas where NATO might not be directly involved, such as crisis management, conflict prevention, and peacekeeping missions”

(Austrian official, personal communication, 2024).

This is particularly important to ensure the efficient use of resources and to maintain a cohesive approach to defense and security matters. The Belgian official emphasizes the importance of the prior agreements that were made. He states that NATO is mostly to protect the outer borders while EU focusses on stabilization (Belgian official, personal communication, 2024). The Austrian official refers to the Berlin plus agreements that “sets out to allow the EU to have access to NATO assets and capabilities for EU-led operations, under certain conditions and with the agreement of both organizations” (Austrian official, personal communication, 2024). The German official argues that supporting the defence industry, member states and developing capabilities can add “to the available funds, “because that’s a comparative advantage compared to NATO” (German official, personal communication, 2023).

### **4.2.1 Sub conclusion**

While multiple PESCO projects are still developing, a couple of them already showed to be effective. Despite of this PESCO has not led to significant presence in the region, but rather within Europe itself. In terms of PESCO-NATO relations is it clear that the different member states agree that NATO is the cornerstone of security in Europe and with PESCO the presence of Europe is increasing within NATO. However, the plans for PESCO to complement NATO is not fully incorporated. Therefore PESCO has not led the EU to be military more present in the region so far, making the presence variable not yet very effective.

### **4.3 Opportunity**

Opportunity is the influence external events has on the EU. As mentioned in the introduction, the adoption of PESCO is the direct result of multiple events outside of the EU: Trumps presidency, the Brexit, and the war in Ukraine prior to its full scall invasion by the Russian federation two years ago. Since the adoption of the PESCO, the war in Ukraine has intensified with a full scale invasion in February 2022. As an external event, the war in Ukraine has significantly impacted PESCO. The scope of projects has shown to be remarkably adaptable (Rutigliano, 2023). The wide challenges of Russian aggression demonstrated that the member states were able to contribute to the various binding commitments of PESCO. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the most visible measure were the increase of military investments throughout the EU. The fifth wave of PESCO projects that were launched in 2023 emphasized on critical capabilities with a direct operational impact. With the threat on the eastern borders, requirements for high-intensity warfare is taken into account (European Defence Agency, 2023). Several of the projects that were launched during this wave are focusing on the technological needs required for future systems in maritime, air, but also space sectors. The Romanian official states:

“As the activities in the area of security and defence have evolved considerably, the work that has been done at EU level in the last couple of years indicates that there is a huge potential to build a more effective, capable and joined-up Union that can do more for the protection of its own citizens”

(Romanian official, personal communication, 2024).

To address “common security challenges”, should PESCO be subject to “continuous review” and the effectiveness of PESCO “will depend on the collective efforts and engagement off all

participating countries” (Austrian official, personal communication, 2024). The EDA official argues that “the near future for PESCO involves a strategic review, prompted by recent global events such as the war in Ukraine, to reassess its objectives and performance. This period of reflection is crucial for identifying future commitments and adapting to the changing geopolitical landscape, so that PESCO remains an important pillar in the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy and defense cooperation” (EDA official, personal communication, 2023).

#### **4.3.1 Sub conclusion**

The influence external events had on the EU showed that PESCO is able to quickly adapt to the new reality. With the war in Ukraine since the full scale invasion as the main external event that happened since PESCO's adoption, it shows that PESCO is due to a high level of coherence among the member states, able to adapt. This shows that this dimensions is effective as a result of an effective capability variable.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In this study, an answer was sought to the research question: *Will PESCO contribute to strategic autonomy for the European Union's defence and if so, why?* To find an answer, qualitative research has been conducted. The analysis was split in three parts referring to the three dimensions of actorness. The capability part has shown to be effective. Member states are aligned with minor differences, but after all it seems that there is no dispute in adhering to PESCO's binding commitments. While the expectation was that when capability would be effective that it would positively influence the external dimensions of presence and opportunity. However, this is partly true. Presence seems to not be effective at the moment. With the implementation of PESCO, CSDP missions are so far not yet effective and PESCO-NATO relations are for the member states important in which the countries agree that NATO as the entity is responsible for safety. On the other side, PESCO shows that countries are able to take part in initiatives that leads to PESCO completing NATO competences and can have a rol regarding certain competences to fill the gap in the future. A clear difference prior to PESCO is not yet reached which makes the presence variable not effective at the moment. With the war in Ukraine, The European Union had to deal with this external event which showed that it seems to be really adaptive in terms of reacting to the war in Ukraine making this part of the external dimension more effective than presence. With these three variables, actorness for the European Union regarding its defence entity is rather not effective which in turn does not result

in strategic autonomy at the moment. However, PESCO seems to be promising and therefore the answer to the research question can be answered with a yes. PESCO will be an important factor to contribute to the strategic autonomy for the European Union's defence, through new weapon systems, high level of coherence among the member states, and its adaptability. But as projects are still in development and the next review is in 2025, PESCO's full potential takes time.

## **5. Reflections and recommendations**

### **5.1 Reflection on answer to the research question**

This study complements previous literature on PESCO. As PESCO is still in development it is good to know where PESCO stands so far in achieving strategic autonomy for the European Union. This is especially relevant for the changing world we live in. The war in Ukraine shows that Europe cannot simply continue to be dependent on other countries such as the United States. This study concludes that PESCO as an instrument will eventually lead to strategic autonomy for the European Union. It needs times, but the coherence among the member states show that the European Union is willing to take the next step. This can be seen, among other things, in the many projects where military cooperation is not only becoming more intensive, but also easier and more efficient. In addition, creating a European military industry is a good way to become less dependent on other countries. 2025 will be an important step for PESCO because a new review is coming. With these parts, PESCO will be able to take a good step further into the future.

### **5.2 Reflection on conceptual model**

For this research, a conceptual model is outlined in which PESCO through the help of the three variables of actorness, if effective, can lead to strategic autonomy. The model has proven to be effective because it has been able to look and differentiate the internal and external aspect of actorness. This model was used to see whether an effective internal dimension would lead to the external dimension also being effective, resulting in an effective form of actorness. The operationalization scheme was very useful to divide the variables and to measure their effectiveness to a certain bit. However, the complexity of a topic like PESCO requires more than just looking at actorness as described in the conceptual model. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the relationship between data collection and data analysis requires contextualizing and interpreting text. This is due to the limitations of the scope of the study, which does not allow all information to be taken into account as more variables are needed to explain everything. This is also the case with the questions used to for the different interviews. Besides of that not all information is available online which the respondents could also not answer.

To answer the research question with the help of the conceptual model, an attempt was made to interview a broad group of respondents in order to provide a clear picture of how different EU member states feel about PESCO. The six respondents for this study already provide a good

picture because there are various factors involved, including someone who is working for the EU itself, but also a respondent from a neutral country (Austria) and two eastern European member states (Poland and Romania). Given that the respondents were largely like-minded and from document research which revealed similar goals among the member states, it suggests that a repeat of this study with other respondents could lead to largely similar conclusions. In order to strengthen the external validity of this study, it would have been even better to let respondents from all member states have their say. After all, this could provide a complete picture. However, due to various factors, including the limitation of time and the inability to come into contact with as many possible respondents as it was not possible. The interviews and documents were useful to determine whether the three variables can be considered to be effective.

### **5.3 recommendations on policy and future research**

The research showed that PESCO does still need to take some steps to increase its presence in the region to be considered fully effective. This was evident from the case that CSDP missions are not yet as effective and that member states still mainly look to NATO when it comes to protection. It is therefore also good to do more at a European level, including using capability to ensure that all member states make enough military investments, including increasing the budget, but also playing a greater role in building a European industry. Research and interviews indicate that Europe must make the necessary investments in order to no longer be dependent on other countries. Future research should therefore focus on how PESCO can reduce dependence on the US and its role in NATO without duplicating efforts. In addition, future research can also further examine the influence of external events. The war in Ukraine shows that PESCO can be adaptive, but how did this come about in the various member states and how can the member states in a PESCO context arm themselves against warfare and threats in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including tackling disinformation and cyber-attacks.

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# Appendix

## Interview held with a policy officer PESCO of the European Defence Agency

Date: 4 December 2023

Method: Zoom video call.

### **1. What is your position within the EU and what do you do with PESCO?**

As a member of the PESCO unit within the European Defense Agency (EDA), under the Capacities Directorate, my main role is to support Member States in their defense capabilities and improve internal coordination within the EDA. PESCO operates within a strategic framework agreed upon by member states to strengthen European defense capabilities. Having worked in this capacity for the past four to five years, and previously at policy level for three years, my focus has been on strategizing and implementing policies to promote cooperation and capacity development between EU Member States.

### **2. What are the member states' commitment to PESCO**

The importance of PESCO lies in the legally binding commitments on defense spending, technological progress and mission operations among the participating member states. With 68 projects launched in five waves, PESCO aims to strengthen the EU's military capabilities in all domains. The projects within PESCO are expressions of the commitments of the Member States, which serve to strengthen these commitments and promote political cohesion and cooperation.

### **3. How can PESCO be seen (as it relates to NATO) on the world stage and in the region (such as with the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe)?**

PESCO is part of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), which is designed to complement, rather than conflict with, the EU's broader security and defense efforts. Defense matters remain the responsibility of individual states within the intergovernmental structure of the CSDP, supporting both EU and possibly NATO operations. PESCO has the potential to reshape the way third parties and regions, such as the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, view the EU's defense capabilities. By being open to cooperation with non-EU countries such as the United States, Canada and Norway, which have joined projects such as Military Mobility, PESCO demonstrates the EU's ability to act as a defense force and underlines the EU's commitment to broader security and defense cooperation.

### **4. How adaptive is PESCO and what are the possibilities?**

Despite being a slow process, PESCO has made progress in increasing cohesion among Member States and within the EU institutional framework. The shared commitments, involving national parliaments in the decision-making process, and tailoring projects to the willingness and ability of each state, including countries with a neutral stance such as Ireland and Austria, gradually increase the role and coherence of PESCO within the EU's defense ambitions. The near future for PESCO involves a strategic review, prompted by recent global events such as the war in Ukraine, to reassess its objectives and performance. This period of reflection is crucial for identifying future commitments and adapting to the changing geopolitical landscape, so that PESCO remains an important pillar in the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy and defense cooperation.

## **Interview held with CSDP head of the German Permanent Representation to the European Union.**

Date: 13 December 2023

Method: Zoom video call

### **1. What is your position within the EU and what do you do with PESCO?**

I'm the Deputy PSC Ambassador to the Political and Security Policy Committee and inside the German Permanent Representation I'm the lead on all of the CSTP issues, so military and civil and CSTP. And as part of that I also follow with my team and the onboarding work on PESCO.

### **2. What is Germany's commitment to PESCO**

We are very committed to PESCO; we were there from the first steps of PESCO because with the limitations in the EU treaty we find it nevertheless important to move forward on security and defence. Not so much for reasons of strategic autonomy but more and because we want the EU to become a chief political actor and to do so and it also needs to be able to act on security and defence. And we know that this is a long road and PESCO only is part of that.

The strategic conference has been a milestone on that path, setting up the European Peace Facility as we know and then the next step will be the EU rapid deployment capacity in 2025. So, PESCO was even before that and if I may say that I think it is a very important project I think so it's the first step towards the EU to become a Geopolitical actor.

As I said, Germany is very committed to that. It's in our national security strategy that the EU needs to become a Geopolitical actor. Because we're one of the larger EU member states, we also confute to many classical projects. Also, Germany is going to invest a lot in the future as we are still not reaching the 2 percent of our GDP as NATO has asked us. With the war in Ukraine especially is Germany planning to invest a lot in their military, but the 100 billion euros Scholz promised takes time.

While the projects of PESCO are important, I would hesitate to measure the commitment to PESCO by the participation in PESCO projects. As you may know, there are 68 projects and many of them are in dubious status. PESCO is not all about projects. It's more about commitment and it's more about developing the EU towards security.

In terms of projects, Germany is leading eight projects. This includes the

- European Medical Command,
- Eurodrone,
- The crisis response operation core,
- Cyber and Information Domain Coordination Center,
- Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and support to operations,
- Geo-Meteorological and Oceanographic Support Coordination Element,
- Anti-torpedo torpedo, and
- Future Short-Range air-to-air Missile.

We have just concluded the Cyber and Information Domain Coordination Center a few weeks ago and handed it over to the External Action Service (EEAS). Besides, Germany is focussing on strategic air transport for cargo. We keep on innovating to make PESCO a success.

In terms of creating new weapon systems, I have to say that things like creating a European tanks is a highly intensive process, the developments of capabilities is always difficult. It is difficult on a national level, and it is even more difficult on the European level. From our perspectives, there are many different aspects towards the development of the capabilities.

And a role that's there, it's a big role for the EU. To support the defense industry, to support member states and development capabilities, because that's where you can add some value to the available funds, because that's a comparative advantage compared to NATO.

**3. How does Germany see PESCO (as it relates to NATO) on the world stage and in the region (such as with the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe)?**

I would not talk about PESCO like an actor, because PESCO is a tool for the European Union to strengthen the security and defense pillar. So in that regard, when I talk about EU, of course the EU is facing multiple security challenges. It is basically an instability surrounding the European Union. And the EU needs to be able to face these threats and to have a good burden sharing with NATO. And when we look at that burden sharing, NATO's priority is collective defense, and they are doing everything to prepare NATO allies to prepare NATO allies to be able to defend themselves. And with the new country in any role, it's first of all of developing capabilities for the European allies, the European pillar of defense. With the CSDP missions the European Union has implemented certain projects that contributed to missions. One of these projects uses the c2 system. The c2 system will be an important part of PESCO and will enhance the CSDP missions drastically. But then also, and work in partner countries and for partner countries such as Ukraine, such as Western Balkans, such as Northern African states, and work with them to stabilise their capabilities. That is really what you can rightly accept.

**4. How adaptive is PESCO and what are the possibilities?**

Well, we hope that in the future we are able to consolidate projects and reduce the number of projects and really concentrate on projects that deliver and we hope that we will be able to also review the council decision for PESCO next year. There will be a PESCO review next year and most of all we will look at the binding commitments and we will take a look at that, and they are still up to date so to say or whether we need to beef up our commitments towards security. We think that this will also reflect in a geopolitical environment that PESCO is adaptive obviously. However, it requires of course the consent of the participating members and as you know it's 26 out of 27 now so.



## **Interview held with an Official from the Polish Permanent Representation to the European Union.**

Date: 15 December 2023

Method: Email

### **1. What is your position within the European Union and what do you do with PESCO?**

I am part of the Common Security and Defence Policy team of the Polish Permanent Representation of Poland to the EU. Within this team we work together with the Polish ministry of Defence regarding everything militarily related. PESCO is a very important part of our tasks.

### **2. What is the Polish commitment to PESCO?**

For Poland's security policy we focus on our NATO membership, cooperation with multiple partners and our commitment to the Common Security and Defence Policy which PESCO is part of. It is a treaty instrument for all the EU member states which goes further than the CSDP. An important part of PESCO are the 20 binding commitments. Poland is very committed to adhere to these commitments as Poland borders both Russia and Ukraine. Poland is one of the most active member of the EU regarding the different CSDP missions as Polish armed forces took part in all of the missions. With the Russian aggression our defence industry is only growing. In 2024, Poland will invest almost 5 percent of their annual GDP into their military to fully commit to the security of Europe making it one of the biggest armed forces in the European Union according to the Polish National Implementation Plan. We also take part in a lot of PESCO projects. Poland is taking part in various categories of projects including cyber, land formations, maritime, space and training. Poland is leading the Special Operations Forces Medical Training Centre or SMTC together with our neighbor Hungary. For us is taking part in the military mobility project the most important. This project makes the EU reinforce NATO and allows troops to travel quickly to help eastern member states. We also believe in creating and harmonizing weapon systems in Europe. This should not only taking part in the bigger member states, but also medium-sized and smaller member states can be key players.

### **3. How does Poland see PESCO (as it relates to NATO) on the world stage and in the region (with the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe)?**

Poland is committed to both cooperation on an Atlantic level with NATO and European integration with the EU. Especially the NATO membership of Poland is considered to be very important. For us is NATO's deterrence and deploying troops in Eastern Europe very important. President Trump made the future of NATO unclear, even though many American troops were sent from Germany to be deployed in Poland. As a result of concerns regarding the sustainability of NATO due to the Americans, we supported PESCO. For Poland are there a couple of assumptions regarding further military integration in Europe. This is that PESCO should not be a defence entity excluding NATO and certain commitments and tasks of PESCO should not be duplicating commitments and tasks of NATO. For us it should also be emphasized the strong cooperation between PESCO and NATO rather than PESCO developing its own competences.

### **4. How adaptive is PESCO and what are the possibilities of PESCO in the future?**

Poland believes in a strong military cooperation in the European Union. This should be especially the case with the war in Ukraine. This means first of all that all EU member states that are also part of NATO should invest at least 2% of their GDP. A strong defensive Europe is needed but it needs to take the interests of its member states into account. For Poland, NATO and EU partnership should be protected and should be not competing.

## **Interview held with the PESCO national point of contact, Romanian Ministry of Defense.**

Date: 29 Januari 2024

Method: Email

### **1. What is your position within the European Union and what do you do with PESCO?**

PESCO is one of the key initiatives that leverages our common efforts aimed to strengthen European defence. Romania is fully committed to this initiative and considers that the mutual sharing of knowledge and experience within the PESCO framework is a great opportunity to advance common efforts between EU Member States.

In our view, the embedding of EU initiatives and instruments in the national planning system is key in order to implement the PESCO commitments. Furthermore, ensuring a proper defence allocation is also of great importance and should represent a good practice among EU Member States. In order to be able to keep up the pace with the recent security developments in the region, starting from 2023, Romania set a strategic objective to increase the defence spending from 2% to 2.5% of GDP.

Thus, Romania is fully committed to substantially invest in defence capabilities that would bring the EU defence landscape to the next level on short and medium term. Beyond the financial aspects, we will continue our efforts to optimize our processes in the area of capability development in line with EU and NATO commitments.

#### **1. What is Romania's commitment to PESCO?**

Romania is a strong supporter of PESCO, being currently involved in 23 projects out of the 68 launched during the five PESCO waves. Based on our experience in the last few years, the most important indicator of success is the active involvement of participating Member States in the respective project activities.

As a concrete contribution, Romania coordinates two PESCO projects: *EU Network of Diving Centres (EUNDC)* and *CBRN Defence Training Range (CBRND TR)* which will bring added value to the European capability landscape in the field of Armed Forces' training facilities.

The projects' dimension of PESCO is of particular importance for Romania, as it allows us to directly address the identified capability and operational shortfalls. Thus far, we are involved in 18 PESCO projects as participating Member State and in 5 projects as observer:

1. *European Medical Command (EMC)* – coordinated by DE
2. *Maritime (semi) Autonomous Systems for Mine Countermeasures (MAS MCM)* – coordinated by BE
3. *Cyber Rapid Response Teams and Mutual Assistance in Cyber Security (CRRT)* – coordinated by LT
4. *Military Mobility* – coordinated by NL
5. *European Patrol Corvette (EPC)* – coordinated by IT
6. *GeoMETOC Support Coordination Element (GMSCE)* – coordinated by DE
7. *Helicopter Hot and High Training (H3T)* – coordinated by EL
8. *Deployable Modular Underwater Intervention Capability Package (DIVEPACK)* – coordinated by BG
9. *European Union Network of Diving Centres (EUNDC)* – **coordinated by RO**
10. *CBRN Defence Training Range (CBRND TR)* – **coordinated by RO**

11. *Materials and components for technological EU competitiveness (MAC-EU)* – coordinated by FR
12. *EU Collaborative Warfare Capabilities (ECoWAR)* – coordinated by FR
13. *European Global RPAS Insertion Architecture System (GLORIA)* – coordinated by IT
14. *Next Generation Small RPAS (NGSR)* – coordinated by ES
15. *Common Hub for Governmental Imagery (CoHGI)* – coordinated by DE
16. *Defence of Space Assets (DoSA)* – coordinated by FR
17. *Medium size Semi-Autonomous Surface Vehicle (M-SASV)* – coordinated by EE
18. *EU Cyber Academia and Innovation Hub (EU CAIH)* – coordinated by PT
19. *Cyber Ranges Federation (CRF)* – **observer** – coordinated by EE
20. *Automated Modelling, Identification and Damage Assessment of Urban Terrain (AMIDA UT)* – **observer** – coordinated by PT
21. *EU Military Partnership (EU MP)* – **observer** – coordinated by FR
22. *Integrated European Joint Training and Simulation Centre (EUROSIM)* – **observer** – coordinated by HU
23. *Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations (NetLogHubs)* – **observer** – coordinated by DE

## **2. How does Romania see PESCO (as it relates to NATO) on the world stage and in the region (with the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe)?**

As a member of both NATO and the EU, Romania considers that a stronger European defence implies advanced capabilities and the ability to act effectively in response to the evolving threats and challenges.

Bearing in mind that NATO remains the cornerstone of the collective defence for 23 EU Member States, and it is fully compatible with the CSDP efforts, Romania is committed to further strengthen practical EU-NATO cooperation, including through PESCO projects, in the field of capability development.

In our view PESCO should be more aligned to NATO when it comes to the assessment of binding commitments, but also to reduce the administrative burden related to reporting.

## **3. How adaptive is PESCO and what are the possibilities of PESCO in the future?**

PESCO remains the driving force of the whole defence architecture set in place in the last couple of years. Despite current challenges, the more important point is that we have made a huge progress comparing to where we were in 2017. If we have to compare the context then and now, the activities in the area of security and defence have evolved considerably.

The work that has been done at EU level in the last couple of years indicates that there is a huge potential to build a more effective, capable and joined-up Union that can do more for the protection of its own citizens.

In our view, PESCO must deliver a set of impacting results by 2030 in order to prove its viability – for instance prototypes or series production of advanced defence capabilities whose research & development was supported by the EU through instruments such the European Defence Fund (EDF). In this regard, connecting PESCO to the defence industrial opportunities would be essential.

Romania actively supports the ongoing efforts made at EU level dedicated to build a more efficient and capable Union, including to strengthen the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). Our view is that promoting the inclusiveness in defence industrial matters will contribute to fostering the EU resilience, addressing capability shortfalls, supporting competitiveness and innovation, cross-border cooperation for SMEs and MidCaps as well as capitalizing European value chains.

## **Interview held with an official from the Austrian Military Representation to the European Union.**

Date: 29 January 2024

Method: Email

### **1. What is your position within the EU and what do you do with PESCO?**

The political position of Austria within the EU can be characterized by its general support for European integration, economic cooperation, and participation in the common European project. However, like in many EU member states, there are variations in opinion and political perspectives within Austria.

Austria has traditionally been supportive of European integration and has actively engaged in the EU decision-making processes. The country has benefited from its EU membership, particularly in terms of economic growth, trade, and the free movement of people.

Austria actively participates in various EU initiatives and collaborations. It engages in discussions on policy areas such as economic governance, social issues, environmental policies, and foreign affairs within the framework of the EU.

While Austria, in general, is pro-EU, like in other member states, there are pockets of Euroscepticism. Some political parties or movements may express concerns about specific EU policies or advocate for certain reforms. However, these sentiments were not dominant in mainstream Austrian politics. Austria, like many EU countries, has a strong interest in maintaining stability within the Eurozone and the EU as a whole. Stability is crucial for economic growth, investment, and overall political cohesion.

Austria aligns with the common values and principles of the EU, including democracy, rule of law, and human rights. It participates in discussions on issues related to these values within the EU framework.

PESCO is a framework for deeper defense cooperation among EU member states. It was established by the Treaty of Lisbon, and it aims to enhance the effectiveness of the EU's defense capabilities and foster more efficient defense spending.

Austria's participation in PESCO can be attributed to several factors:

- **Enhancing Defense Capabilities:** PESCO provides a platform for EU member states to collaborate on developing and deploying defense capabilities. By participating, Austria aims to enhance its own defense capabilities and contribute to the overall strengthening of the EU's ability to respond to security challenges.
- **Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP):** PESCO is part of the broader Common Security and Defense Policy of the European Union. By engaging in PESCO, Austria demonstrates its commitment to the CSDP and its willingness to contribute to the EU's efforts in crisis management, conflict prevention, and peacekeeping.
- **Shared Security Concerns:** EU member states, including Austria, share common security concerns and interests. Participating in PESCO allows Austria to collaborate with other member states on addressing shared security challenges, such as terrorism, cyber threats, and regional instability.
- **Efficiency in Defense Spending:** PESCO emphasizes the need for more efficient defense spending and cooperation in developing military capabilities. Austria, like other member states, may see the benefit of pooling resources, avoiding duplication, and achieving economies of scale in defense-related projects.
- **Integration into EU Defense Initiatives:** By participating in PESCO, Austria integrates itself into EU-led defense initiatives and contributes to the overall coherence of the EU's defense policy. This can also lead to increased interoperability between the armed forces of member states.

It's important to note that the decision to participate in PESCO is a sovereign one made by each member state. Austria, like other EU countries, evaluates its national security interests and assesses the potential benefits of cooperation within the PESCO framework.

## **2. What is Austria's commitment to PESCO?**

Austria, like other participating countries, has made specific commitments within the framework of PESCO. The commitments are outlined in a set of national implementation plans that detail how each country intends to contribute to the common objectives of PESCO.

Austria, while participating in PESCO, has focused on various aspects related to defense cooperation. Some of the key areas of commitment for Austria within PESCO include:

- **Capability Development:** PESCO aims to enhance the military capabilities of participating member states. Austria, as part of its commitment, may contribute to the development of specific defense capabilities, such as joint procurement of military equipment, research and development projects, and improvements in military infrastructure.
- **Crisis Management and Operations:** PESCO involves commitments to contribute to the EU's common security and defense missions. Austria may commit to participating in crisis management operations, peacekeeping missions, and other military activities in line with the objectives of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP).
- **Interoperability and Standardization:** PESCO encourages member states to work towards greater interoperability of their armed forces. Austria may commit to adopting common standards, procedures, and interoperable technologies to facilitate joint military operations with other PESCO participants.

The specific projects in which Austria is participating are subject to confidentiality.

## **3. How does Austria see PESCO (as it relates to NATO) on the world stage and in the region (such as with the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe)?**

The European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are two distinct entities with different purposes and memberships, but they share a common goal of ensuring the security and defense of their member states.

PESCO is an initiative within the framework of the European Union, aiming to enhance defense capabilities and cooperation among EU member states. It was established in 2017 as a way for EU countries to work more closely together on defense matters. On the other hand, NATO is a military alliance comprising North American and European countries focused on collective defense.

While there is some overlap in the member countries of the EU and NATO, not all EU member states are NATO members, and vice versa. The memberships are not identical, and some countries are only part of one organization.

PESCO and NATO are designed to complement each other. The EU recognizes NATO as the primary forum for the collective defense of its members. PESCO is seen as a way to enhance the EU's defense capabilities in areas where NATO might not be directly involved, such as crisis management, conflict prevention, and peacekeeping missions.

There is a commitment to coordination and avoiding duplication of efforts between the two organizations. This is particularly important to ensure the efficient use of resources and to maintain a cohesive approach to defense and security matters.

The EU and NATO have established a set of arrangements known as the "Berlin Plus" arrangements to facilitate cooperation in crisis management. These arrangements allow the EU

to have access to NATO assets and capabilities for EU-led operations, under certain conditions and with the agreement of both organizations.

In summary, while PESCO and NATO are distinct entities, they aim to work together and avoid duplication of efforts. The coordination between the two organizations is essential for addressing security challenges faced by their member states. The Berlin Plus arrangements serve as a practical mechanism for cooperation in crisis management situations.

Yes, there are different expectations regarding PESCO among different member states of the European Union, and these expectations may vary based on factors such as a country's historical context, security concerns, and geopolitical considerations. Here are some distinctions that might exist:

Neutral countries traditionally place a strong emphasis on maintaining a non-aggressive stance and avoiding military alliances that could compromise their neutrality. They are more inclined to support PESCO initiatives that focus on civilian capabilities, crisis management, and peacekeeping rather than those with a strong emphasis on military capabilities or collective defense.

Countries in Eastern Europe may have heightened security concerns due to historical factors, proximity to potential threats, and regional dynamics. These countries may be more interested in PESCO initiatives that strengthen collective defense capabilities, especially in the face of perceived external threats.

Even within Eastern Europe, there can be diversity in perspectives. For example, Baltic States might have specific concerns related to their proximity to Russia, while countries like Poland may have broader regional considerations.

In summary, the expectations regarding PESCO can indeed vary based on a country's historical, geopolitical, and security context. Neutral countries may have a preference for initiatives that align with their commitment to non-aggression, while countries in Eastern Europe might prioritize measures aimed at strengthening collective defense capabilities. It's essential to recognize the diversity of perspectives within the EU and consider the different security challenges faced by member states when discussing PESCO.

#### **4. How adaptive is PESCO and what are the possibilities?**

Improving PESCO in the future involves addressing various challenges and maximizing its potential to enhance the EU's defense capabilities.

- Ensure that member states are fully committed to PESCO objectives and actively participate in its initiatives. Strong political will is crucial for the success of cooperative defense efforts.
- Establish clear and realistic objectives for PESCO initiatives. Prioritize areas where the EU can add significant value and avoid duplication with NATO efforts. A focused and well-defined agenda can enhance effectiveness.
- Design PESCO structures and projects to accommodate the diverse needs and capabilities of member states. Allow for flexibility in participation and contribute to building a sense of ownership among all members.
- Secure sufficient financial resources to support PESCO initiatives. Develop mechanisms to pool resources efficiently and promote burden-sharing among member states.
- Ensure that PESCO initiatives align with the national defense plans of member states. This alignment can facilitate smoother integration of PESCO projects into the broader defense strategies of participating countries.

- Foster collaboration in research and development of defense technologies. Encourage the sharing of best practices and the development of cutting-edge capabilities to strengthen the EU's overall defense posture.
- Simplify and harmonize defense procurement procedures across member states to facilitate joint projects. Streamlining these processes can contribute to cost-effectiveness and interoperability.
- Implement regular assessments of PESCO initiatives to gauge their effectiveness. Ensure accountability and transparency in reporting progress and use feedback to make necessary adjustments.
- Continue efforts to enhance cooperation and coordination between PESCO and NATO. Maintain open channels of communication and explore opportunities for synergies, especially in crisis management and response.
- Focus on enhancing the EU's rapid response and crisis management capabilities. This can involve improving strategic airlift capabilities, intelligence sharing, and coordination mechanisms.

Continuous review, adaptation, and a commitment to collaboration among member states are essential for the ongoing success and improvement of PESCO. The effectiveness of PESCO will depend on the collective efforts and engagement of all participating countries in addressing common security challenges.



## **Interview held with the Defence counsellor from the Belgian Permanent Representation to the European Union.**

Date: 1 February 2024

Method: Zoom video call

### **1. What is your position within the EU and what do you do with PESCO?**

I am the defense advisor to the Belgian ambassador in the Political and Security Committee, i.e. the PSC. Before that, I was head of the EU department within the Strategic Department of Belgian Defense. And as such, I witnessed the launch of PESCO.

I was also responsible for the Belgian position in the governance of PESCO, i.e. how the content of PESCO came about. So I have been involved with PESCO since the beginning. And that is why I advise the Belgian ambassador in all defense positions.

### **2. What is Belgium's commitment to PESCO**

I'm going to start right away with the fact that very clearly, the way you ask the question, it is already clear to me that you too probably have a wrong perception of what PESCO is and what PESCO is not. Many people think that PESCO is the framework for doing projects. That's not PESCO. PESCO is primarily, and I would dare say a ratio of 90% of PESCO, are the 20 binding commitments. These are the commitments that the countries have made to actually increase defense, the importance of defense within the European institutions by means of a budget increase, by making more resources available for operations, by ensuring that the purchasing mechanisms in the different countries take into account the mechanisms developed in the EU to determine the priorities of what needs to be purchased. And also to ensure that everything benefits the European defense industry.

That is actually PESCO. That's the most important part. And so as far as I'm concerned, PESCO can exist perfectly without projects. And in fact, I would like to go further myself, PESCO would exist better without the projects. Because we are now reaching a situation where people primarily look at the projects and in fact the most important part of PESCO fades into the background and is only handled by experts. So every year, countries have to indicate how they submit their PESCO national implementation plan and how they actually answer the questions in those 20 binding commitments.

Both for the past year and for the five years to come. That's actually a whole has become a technical matter, meaning that a maximum of 10 people in each country understand what it is about. Very difficult for the ministers to commit themselves on a political level because PESCO has become far too complicated.

Belgium is one of the countries that has joined PESCO, just like most other countries. While PESCO in 2007 in the Lisbon Treaty was actually intended for a small number of Member States who had the resources and who wanted to move faster than the others in developing a defense logic for the European Union. Because PESCO was only actually launched in 2017, so 10 years after the treaty, and it was of course clear in the meantime with the war in Ukraine that started in 2014 that this was going to become an important fact. Suddenly all but two countries, then Denmark and Malta and now Denmark have also joined PESCO.

As a result, if everyone participates, we will naturally progress at the speed of those who progress the slowest. Because we are still in an intergovernmental logic where decisions are made by a unanimity of countries. So that's a very important point.

Those projects were intended as a kind of display window. To say, look, now we have PESCO and now we can do a number of things with it. Yes, but the European Defense Agency already had about 250 projects underway.

They actually did not wait for PESCO to arrive, and those projects are going very well. Those are what they call the category A and the category B projects within the European Defense Agency. And these are projects in which everyone participates except the countries that are leaving.

Or the countries that work together or decide to work together and those projects are running very well. Those PESCO projects have been added as an additional format. And because we started with something new, we attached a lot of criteria and conditions to it.

It all had to be done with European companies, it had to be ensured that Turkey could not be involved. That's what the Greeks and Cypriots wanted. The French wanted only European companies to be involved and no foreign companies.

And the Italians wanted the PESCO projects to receive privileged treatment under the European Defense Fund. In other words, there are so many caveats and so many conditions attached to those projects. Countries that have ambitious projects would be foolish to put them within PESCO.

Because then you have to fulfill a lot of criteria and conditions that actually do not exist if you just do that project outside the PESCO projects. And then

of course they are like, but how come there is not a single ambitious project within PESCO? Yes, look, because it will be far too difficult for the countries participating in such a project to meet all those criteria and conditions. And so PESCO is more likely to be used to do some long-term research projects or non-operational projects or non-capability projects such as military mobility.

But in fact we need to move away from that idea that the important part of PESCO is the projects.

we neatly complete our national implementation plans. Well, it is no secret that Belgium is not exactly a good student when it comes to defense spending. So that's a political question.

So we are honest, we don't try to sell what is not true. We write in our implementation plan what we are actually going to do. So we fully participate in the PESCO story.

We also think it is very important. Belgium is usually one of the countries that is in favor of bringing more competences to a supranational level, so to the committee. Because we find that a model in which we must always have unanimity within all member states does not actually work well.

So in the short term we have no choice but to participate. But if it depends on us, much more can be decided by the committee tomorrow. In general, Belgium is in favor of more supranational powers in the field of defense. So we welcome initiatives that come from the committee, such as the European Defense Fund and so on. And if this can be expanded tomorrow, Belgium will certainly be in favor of this. In terms of projects, Belgium is participating in a number of projects. And Belgium is also leading one of the projects, namely what we call MAS MCM. That is developing the technological means for future mine action. And that makes sense too. Belgium is the reference country for mine action at both NATO and EU level. By the way, in the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation, you know that Belgium and the Netherlands have one integrated navy, so the Netherlands takes the lead for the frigates. And so Belgium simply buys the same frigates as the Netherlands.

We are not going to draw up our own specifications or anything like that. The Netherlands is simply in the lead the purchase and training and the care and maintenance of the frigates. And Belgium is doing the same for mine action. Where Belgium completely writes the specifications and conducts the tenders. And the Netherlands simply buys the same mine countermeasures vessels as Belgium. So, in that niche of mine hunting and mine countermeasures, Belgium has the lead in research and in developing the resources, both at NATO and EU level.

So, in that logic, Belgium has the lead in some PESCO projects. Not immediately for the new mine vessels that are now arriving, because that had already been decided earlier, but to see what tools we will have within ten years to continue mine action. That project is going very well and that project is one of the only PESCO projects that has actually adhered to the original plan and timelines.

We have now reached the point, that project has already produced concrete results and the industry is already working on a sub-project called Miracle, which has actually already received resources from the European Defense Fund to be developed. So we are co-operative in that, we are not among the largest, but we work in a number of projects and we do our share of the work, except for this project where we are in charge.

*Question 3 and 4 were combined during the interview because of the lack of time.*

**3. How does Belgium see PESCO (as it relates to NATO) on the world stage and in the region (such as with the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe)?**

**4. How adaptive is PESCO and what are the possibilities?**

There is no competition between NATO and the EU. I'll go back a little bit and that might be something you can include. In 1992 there was such a thing as the Western European Union. All countries of the Western European Union were also NATO countries at the same time. At that time there were no Austrians yet, there were no countries that were in the EU and not in NATO or vice versa. All EU countries that were in the Western European Union were also NATO countries.

So that means that the collective self-defense part, i.e. defense against threats that came from outside the Euro-Atlantic Zone and that were actually the task of NATO, the countries of the Western European Union, of course they did not say, we are going to are now going to do this on their own, not even the French. We are now going to do that on our own within the EU. Yes.

The Western European Union decided in 1992, during the Petersberg meetings, which tasks the EU would perform in the military field. These tasks are described in Article 42.1 of the treaty. These are therefore tasks of humanitarian aid, these are tasks of stabilization in the evacuation of European citizens from crisis areas.

And that could extend to imposing peace through a military mission abroad. Yes. What is striking here is that the EU only looks at what it will do outside the European Union.

Besides, the common security and defense policy prohibits a European mission from having an operational deployment on European territory. So very clearly, NATO is for the protection of external threats, the European Union looks at how it can project stability outside. So that means that we are talking about very different assignments.

And that the resources we need to carry out those assignments, or the resources we need to do collective defense against the Russian threat and, tomorrow, the Chinese threat, are completely separate. So you asked the question about a European army. There is no NATO army.

It simply doesn't exist. NATO is a command structure and it is the Allies who provide the troops. Well, just as there is little point in asking whether there is a NATO army, there is no point in wondering whether there is a European army.

What then is strategic autonomy? And PESCO is a small part, a small part of what could be done to lead to European strategic autonomy. When we talk about military missions, we are talking about defense integration, and when we talk about defense integration, everyone immediately thinks of soldiers and assignments and deployment of troops and so on. Again, this is less than 10% of European integration.

European integration is first and foremost an integration in terms of capabilities, resources. NATO tells all countries what we must be able to supply to NATO as resources to carry out the mission. That is the famous NDPP, NATO Defense Procurement Plan.

That tells the Netherlands, for example, that I expect the Netherlands to be able to supply so many brigades, so many aircraft and so many brigades to NATO to carry out the task. And each country receives its instructions from NATO on what they have to deliver. NATO doesn't tell anyone how to acquire those resources.

And now comes the story of the European Union. Because the European Union, unlike NATO, does have an industrial policy. And the committee has included in its attributions the role in making European industry competitive.

So the competitiveness of the European industry is included in the treaty. The European Union may provide resources for this. What has now been decided? This means that the European defense industry, just like other industries, may also receive support from the committee.

And that is the famous European defense fund. EDF, European Defense Fund. So you already heard it. NATO is going to tell you what you need. But how the countries ensure that they can acquire those resources is a decision that both countries make. So this means that the countries should actually use European resources to develop, produce and preferably jointly purchase capabilities in the European defense industry. And then deploy those resources to be used within the framework of NATO, within the framework of the UN, for their own use. So ideally we should arrive at a situation where Member States exclusively produce and purchase their resources within Europe to create that European technological and defense base. So that Europe becomes autonomous and that it can decide for itself what it is going to produce and, for example, that it can also decide for itself what it is going to do with the weapons it has produced. The big problem is when we buy weapons in America and at a certain point we say, okay, we now want to buy other weapons, so we are going to sell our weapons to other countries. Should we ask the Americans for permission to sell those weapons to another country? Worse still, if we buy weapons from Americans today and there is an upgrade of the software for those weapons, then we have to ask permission from the Americans to also get that upgrade for our weapons. So that means that they can actually decide what we can or cannot do with the weapons that we have purchased. Strategic autonomy mainly aims to ensure that Europe is allowed to make its own choices and that we are not dependent on third parties to decide what we want to buy. Very nice, if tomorrow we are not able to, for example, buy new tanks, okay, that means that we cannot decide for ourselves what we are going to do with those tanks.

Because in a technological environment it is the person who sells our tanks who gets to decide at what technological level our weapons can be. That is strategic autonomy. Much more, so the strategic autonomy to be able to decide for ourselves what our weapon systems look like and what we do with them, that is strategic autonomy.

Strategic autonomy does not mean that tomorrow we will defend European territory against Russia without the Americans or without the Canadians. That's not it. By the way, if we say yes, but we can't do it without the Americans, then yes, I would like to point out that the only time Article 5 was invoked in NATO was for Afghanistan and that was invoked by the Americans and there it is the Europeans who went to Afghanistan for ten years to support the Americans and not the other way around.

So the story of the Americans who say of you, your free riding, your security, your free riding on American means, no, on the contrary, since the start of NATO it has been the other way around. It is the Europeans who supported the Americans when they needed it. Which of course does not mean that we should neglect the American presence in Europe, nor did I say that. But it is a, and if, for example, the Americans start saying yes, but look, that whole Pesco story, you are keeping us out of it and that is a European story and that is not fair and so on, well look, before I was a naval officer I was in the industry. And I have tried to bring European resources and European products to the American market. And then the American said yes, but wait a minute, you can only do that if you set up a local company here where the majority of the shares are in American hands. So what we are saying now is: look, if you really want us to provide our share of the resources for our own defense in the area of burden sharing, then we must be able to convince our politicians somewhere that it is worthwhile to invest in that defense. to invest. If we invest in defense by simply buying American equipment, it will cost us money but it will not yield us anything. If tomorrow we can realize a macro economic model in which we buy European, then yes, then it will be a different story. For every euro that is spent. Look, the country pays the income from taxes by the people who work in that industry, they get the taxes from the companies, but they also get a return in terms of European companies that then become more competitive and perhaps also sell European products to other markets. can start selling in the world. So we will contribute much more efficiently and much better to burden sharing in NATO if we have our own European industry tomorrow. Yes, absolutely fine.