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A comparative study on the effect of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on European Defence Cooperation

Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a turning point in European security policy, prompting a renewed focus on defence cooperation and strategic autonomy within the European Union (EU). This thesis examines whether heightened perceptions of threat among EU citizens have led to increased engagement in collective defence initiatives. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study combines Eurobarometer survey data and participation records in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects from 2017 to 2023. Two regression models are employed: the first examines how perceived threat influences public support for a common EU defence policy, while the second assesses whether this support translates into more substantial state-level cooperation. Findings show that although a higher perceived threat significantly increases public support for a common defence policy, this symbolic backing does not consistently correspond to increased participation in joint military initiatives. These results suggest a disconnect between public opinion and actual policy implementation, raising questions about the material limits of European strategic autonomy and the EU's capacity to collaborate in times of geopolitical crisis. The analysis contributes to debates on the future of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, the role of NATO, and the potential for greater defence integration in response to evolving geopolitical threats.

Keywords: EU defence cooperation, Russian invasion of Ukraine, PESCO, Eurobarometer, strategic autonomy, public opinion, perceived threat

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Introduction

Russia´s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally shifted European countries' approach to security. What many had perceived as a “post-Cold War era of relative stability” was abruptly disrupted, forcing both EU leaders and citizens to reassess long-held assumptions about peace, deterrence, and the role of collective defence. Following this geopolitical rupture, the EU has undergone what some have called a “geopolitical awakening,” which is characterised by a renewed emphasis on military preparedness, territorial resilience, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy (Moser, 2024).

This awakening led to significant increases in defence expenditure among many EU member states. One leading actor in this trend was Germany, which introduced the *Zeitenwende* project shortly after the Russian invasion. This project aimed at improving Germany's readiness to adapt to a “more hostile world” by increasing military spending by 100 billion Euros (Ausserladscheider, 2022; Maulny, 2023). Additionally, Poland increased its military spending by €28 billion in defence acquisitions between July 2022 and June 2023 alone. While these national-level budgetary shifts are noteworthy, the invasion also reignited deeper structural debates within the EU about its long-term strategic positioning. In particular, it has drawn renewed attention to Europe’s continued reliance on the United States and NATO, as well as the growing need to develop autonomous military capabilities within the European Union framework. These debates have gained additional relevance due to shifting transatlantic dynamics and the increasing unpredictability of US foreign policy commitments (Michaels & Sus, 2024).

Institutionally, the EU has several mechanisms in place to foster defence cooperation. Well-known examples of this are the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the European Peace Facility (EPF). These initiatives were designed to coordinate investments, pool capabilities, and promote joint operations

(European Union, 2023; European Peace Facility, 2024). However, in practice, their implementation has often fallen short of expectations. Political divergences among member states, differing threat perceptions, and everlasting concerns over national sovereignty continue to limit the EU's ability to act collectively in the defence domain (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022). Despite states' claims of unity and strategic ambition, a persistent gap remains between declarations of intent and actual outcomes of collaborative governance (European Parliament, 2022).

Considering the history of EU defence cooperation, this study examines whether the war in Ukraine has catalysed a measurable shift in defence cooperation among EU countries. While historical resistance to pooling military sovereignty has long limited extensive integration, the current crisis may finally change this structure. It provides a rare opportunity to assess whether heightened security concerns have weakened entrenched barriers to collaboration. More specifically, this research explores whether possible variations in perceived threat across member states have influenced their willingness to engage in collective defence initiatives, particularly through participation in PESCO.

The central research question guiding this thesis is therefore:
How has the perceived threat of the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected EU defence cooperation?

By linking public threat perceptions to actual patterns of policy engagement, this study contributes to broader discussions on European crisis response, the institutional development of EU defence cooperation, and the political dynamics shaping strategic autonomy in a time of heightened geopolitical uncertainty.

Theoretical and Empirical Context

This research draws on theoretical frameworks and empirical trends to understand the evolution of military cooperation in the EU. Theoretically, it contributes to the public administration and decision-making literature by examining how states adapt under conditions of high uncertainty, particularly in response to external security shocks such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This study builds on theories that explore how perceived threats influence bureaucratic and political behaviour, and offers insights into how such perceptions translate into concrete shifts in engagement in collaborative defence initiatives such as PESCO.

Empirically, the research contributes to a growing body of work on European defence integration by introducing a novel time-series dataset that tracks PESCO participation across its Member States from 2017 to 2023. While previous studies have documented broad trends in EU defence cooperation, few have systematically linked these developments to shifting threat perceptions and participation in PESCO projects in the post-invasion context.

By combining these perspectives, this study offers an original contribution to both theoretical debates and empirical understanding of how crises shape military cooperation in the EU.

The Impact of the War on European Defence Budgets and Procurement Trends

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a turning point in European security policy, leading to a temporary increase in defence budgets across the continent. However, it was Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 that accelerated military spending and strategic reassessment. The war has intensified security concerns across Europe, leading to substantial increases in military budgets (European Defence Agency, 2024). Especially Germany and Poland have increased their military spending. Germany changed its military tactics and introduced the Zeitenwende project, which increased military spending by €100 billion (Ausserladscheider, 2022), and Poland invested nearly €28 billion in defence acquisitions between July 2022 and June 2023 alone. Additionally, countries like Austria, the Baltic states, Finland, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden have also significantly increased their defence spending, with a remarkable 46% rise in real terms from 2022 to 2023 (Maulny, 2023).

These trends of generally increased military spending align with the expectation of traditional Rational Choice theory, which assumes that states strategically allocate resources to maximise their security (Petracca, 1991). According to this framework, states are rational actors that weigh costs and benefits to make decisions that best serve their national interest, particularly in response to external threats. However, bounded rationality suggests that policymakers often operate under cognitive and informational constraints, making decisions based on perceived rather than objective threats (Jones, 2002).

The evidence supplied above supports this notion: countries closer to Russia, such as Poland and the Baltic states, have allocated significantly larger shares of their GDP to defence (NATO, 2024). This variation in response demonstrates how geographical proximity and historical experiences shape national security strategies beyond purely strategic calculations (Jones, 2002). Proximity can increase the perceived immediacy of the threat and intensify the political and societal urgency to respond. This may lead to distinct patterns of investment and

engagement that reflect localised security imperatives (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). However, while increased military spending is a logical and often immediate response to perceived threats, it does not necessarily imply a greater willingness to engage in collaborative military efforts. Therefore, the key question remains whether this renewed focus on defence has also translated into deeper support for joint EU-level initiatives.

Besides the willingness of member states to participate in common defence projects, economic and political constraints continue to shape participation. While some countries may want to invest in collaborative defence, fiscal capacity and domestic political pressures may limit their ability to follow through. Economic conditions, such as GDP growth, inflation, and public debt, directly influence the feasibility of additional collaborative defence spending. While wealthier states may have greater fiscal flexibility, others must balance military spending with social and economic priorities (DiGiuseppe et al., 2023). Besides economic capabilities, political dynamics, including party ideologies and public opinion, also significantly affect defence capabilities. Even when public support for military preparedness is high, it may wane in the face of economic hardship or political resistance to reallocating social funds (Raunio & Wagner, 2020). Additionally, although the public may generally support defence spending, negative EU sentiments may limit their support for collaborative defence. These factors complicate the path from perceived threat to collective action, raising the question: under what conditions do EU member states choose collaboration over unilateral action?

Punctuated Equilibrium and Policy Shifts

The Punctuated Equilibrium Theory helps explain these dynamics by offering a framework for understanding why and when policy shifts occur. According to the theory, policy changes happen when long periods of policy stability are disrupted by sudden external shocks that trigger rapid change (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). The Russian invasion of Ukraine represents such a critical juncture, forcing a reassessment of security policy across the EU. While countries' immediate response was a rise in national defence spending, the Punctuated Equilibrium theory prompts us to ask whether this shock also created momentum for longer-term institutional change. In this particular case, has the Russian invasion created an environment in which a stronger EU-level defence cooperation can occur? Recent expansions in PESCO projects suggest that some countries may be moving in this direction, but the pattern is neither uniform nor guaranteed (European Union, 2023).

To fully understand the implications of this critical juncture, it is necessary to build on recent developments in this theory. Scholars have argued that the outcomes of external shocks not only depend on the disruption itself but also on how political actors frame the crisis and mobilise institutional change (Hogan, 2019; Schmidt, 2008). From this perspective, the Russian invasion provides an opportunity, but not a certainty, for deeper integration. Whether states use increased military budgets to reinforce national defence or to invest in collaborative military initiatives depends on both structural pressures and the agency of political leaders. Additionally, possible increased public support can provide political leaders with the necessary mandate or pressure to shift policies towards greater collaboration (Hogan, 2019). This research evaluates whether the EU's "geopolitical awakening" has extended beyond national responses to include strengthened support for joint defence mechanisms.

Policy Response: EU Defence Cooperation and Strategic Autonomy

If the Russian invasion of Ukraine marks a critical juncture that disrupted the existing policy equilibrium, the key question becomes: how are European institutions and member states responding in practice? Moreover, is this response shaped by elite strategy or public opinion? By tracing recent developments in European defence initiatives, the effects of the shock caused by the war can be examined. This is especially important because of the institutional and political dynamics of the European Union. These dynamics are based on the need for consensus among member states and the coexistence of national and supranational security interests, which can both enable and constrain deeper integration.

The European Commission has long sought to enhance military cooperation among EU members, yet progress has traditionally been slow and fragmented (European Parliament, 2022; Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022). The most significant of these efforts is the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which serves as the EU's primary framework for security and military cooperation. Established as part of the broader Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the CSDP aims to coordinate member states' defence strategies, enhance joint capabilities, and enable EU-led military operations. It has provided the institutional foundation for key initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), the European Peace Facility (EPF), and, most relevant for this research, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (European Parliament, 2022; European Peace Facility, 2024).

PESCO was launched in 2017 and enables willing member states to collaborate on concrete defence projects, ranging from the development of cyber defence capabilities to joint medical command structures and maritime surveillance systems. Participation is voluntary, yet binding once undertaken, making PESCO a central mechanism for operationalising the EU's ambition for strategic autonomy (European Union, 2023). Additionally, the European Defence Fund (EDF) was established in 2021 to improve industrial defence collaboration for

the 2021-2027 period (Moser, 2024). Despite the Commission's efforts to strengthen the EU defence industry, budget cuts occurred due to a lack of strong political will, competing financial priorities, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to the EDF's original €13 billion budget proposal being reduced to €8 billion during negotiations for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (Moser, 2024).

However, the security threats posed by the Russian-Ukrainian war have created incentives for European countries to invest in new defence projects, signalling a shift toward greater defence cooperation. As a result, the European Peace Facility (EPF) was established in 2021 as an off-budget funding instrument to enhance the European Union's capacity to prevent conflict, maintain peace, and strengthen international security. Additionally, joint procurement programs, including the EU's €1 billion ammunition and missile support initiative (Council of the European Union, 2023), have been implemented. Moreover, the EU has become the largest financial donor to Kyiv, accounting for 65% of governance support to Ukraine, while simultaneously implementing comprehensive sanctions against Russia and measures to enhance its defence-industrial capabilities (Moser, 2024).

Despite these advancements in cooperation, European defence procurement remains heavily reliant on non-EU suppliers. Between 2022 and 2023, approximately 78% of EU defence acquisitions came from external sources, particularly from the United States (Maulny, 2023). This continued dependence highlights the EU's ongoing struggle to achieve strategic autonomy, which is a key objective of its security policy (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022). While initiatives like the EDF and joint procurement programs aim to strengthen the European defence-industrial base, the Russian-Ukrainian war has deepened rather than reduced transatlantic dependencies. Europe's longstanding reliance on U.S. security guarantees continues to constrain the development of an independent defence policy, a pattern reflected in current procurement trends (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022).

Moreover, recent EU instruments, such as the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), have had limited immediate impact. Evidence suggests that EU-level initiatives still exert minimal influence on the structure of the European defence market. Most member states continue to prioritise bilateral agreements with non-EU suppliers, particularly the United States, reinforcing fragmentation across the European defence landscape (Maulny, 2023). While procurement decisions remain largely outside EU coordination, it remains unclear whether member states' increased defence budgets have translated into a greater willingness to collaborate on EU-based initiatives such as PESCO. Do heightened security concerns drive more collective engagement, or do national preferences still dominate in the face of crisis?

Failing Forward in EU Defence Policy

The persistent fragmentation of EU defence procurement makes integration in this area difficult, even in the face of existential external threats. To better understand this dynamic, the Failing Forward framework offers a useful complementary perspective to the Punctuated Equilibrium framework. While the Punctuated Equilibrium theory emphasises how external shocks can disrupt institutional inertia, the Failing Forward framework explains why such shocks rarely result in comprehensive integration within the EU. This approach emphasises how institutional weaknesses and intergovernmental constraints lead to partial, often fragmented reforms. In the context of EU defence, this helps explain why even existential threats like Russia's invasion of Ukraine produce only incremental policy shifts. When new crises emerge, the incompleteness of previous reforms is followed by adjustments that partially address lingering shortcomings (Jones et al., 2016; Bergmann & Müller, 2021). According to this theory, defence integration is not a linear or coherent process, but one

marked by repeated cycles of crisis, limited reform, and renewed fragmentation.

This recurring cycle is evident in multiple important defence policy shifts. One example of this incremental adjustment process is the 2017 reform of the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP). This reform marked a significant shift in EU security policy by expanding its scope to include military capacity-building in partner countries. While the IcSP was previously solely focused on non-military interventions, it was adapted in response to growing security challenges, such as instability in Africa and the Sahel region. This reform allowed for EU funding to support the training, infrastructure, and equipment of military forces in third countries, though it remained restricted from financing lethal weapons. The change was driven by functional pressures, including the need to address fragile states' security shortcomings and lessons learned from past EU crisis interventions (Bergmann & Müller, 2021).

Building on this shift, the European Peace Facility (EPF) was proposed in 2018 and launched in 2021. The EPF further expanded the EU's ability to provide direct military assistance (EPF, 2024). Unlike previous security funding mechanisms, which limited the EU's role in supplying arms, the EPF established a €5 billion off-budget fund to finance EU military operations and strengthen partner countries' defence capacities (Council of the EU, 2023). As mentioned above, the war in Ukraine accelerated the use of this mechanism, making it a critical tool for providing lethal military aid to Kyiv. This marked an unprecedented step for the EU (Moser, 2024).

By applying the Failing Forward framework, I will investigate whether EU member states' responses to the war in Ukraine represent yet another cycle of partial integration or whether the magnitude of the shock has been sufficient to overcome longstanding barriers to collaborative defence policy. This theory emphasises the significance of institutional weaknesses and intergovernmental constraints in determining the pace and depth of

integration. While crises such as the Russian-Ukrainian war can create pressure for reform, they often lead to incomplete solutions that leave core issues unresolved. In turn, these reforms will pave the way for future rounds of adjustment. The analysis underscores how functional spillover pressures and institutional learning contribute to incremental progress, while intergovernmental constraints rooted in national interests and intergovernmental bargaining continue to limit more ambitious or binding reforms (Verdun, 2020). Together, these dynamics raise central questions: has Russia's invasion merely triggered another round of limited, reactive cooperation? Or has it shifted member states' willingness to engage in deeper, more sustained collaboration, particularly through instruments like PESCO, which could signal a greater commitment to EU-based defence decision-making?

Hypothesis

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped the European security landscape (Moser, 2024). Strategic autonomy has reemerged as a central EU objective and has renewed debates about the Union's capacity to reduce its reliance on external actors such as the United States (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022). While the post-invasion surge in defence spending is well-documented (NATO, 2024), it remains less clear whether this translates into increased cooperation within EU military frameworks such as PESCO.

Drawing on theories of institutional change, including the Punctuated Equilibrium and the Failing Forward framework, I will examine whether the war has created a window of opportunity for deeper integration or whether entrenched national interests and intergovernmental constraints continue to constrain joint defence initiatives (Hogan, 2019; Bergmann & Müller, 2021). While functional pressures and heightened threat perceptions may incentivise cooperation, persistent fragmentation in procurement and political

divergences suggest that integration may remain limited and uneven (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022).

Furthermore, geography is a key factor shaping national threat perceptions and has long influenced military spending patterns (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; NATO, 2024). Public opinion also plays a critical role in shaping defence policy. When citizens perceive heightened concern over security threats, such as those posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, support for increased defence cooperation is likely to increase. However, this support may be moderated by competing concerns, including economic uncertainty, sovereignty sensitivities, or rising Euroscepticism (DiGiuseppe et al., 2023; Raunio & Wagner, 2020). These dynamics complicate the relationship between threat perception, public support, and defence cooperation.

To test these dynamics, I will test two hypotheses:

H1: *"Higher perceived threat levels following the Russian invasion result in greater public support for a common EU defence policy."*

H2: *"Countries with a closer geographic proximity to Russia are more likely to increase their participation in EU defence cooperation initiatives, reflecting a stronger commitment to collective defence."*

Research Design

To answer my research question, *How has the perceived threat of the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected EU defence cooperation?,* I investigate the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on both public attitudes toward EU defence integration and actual member state participation in joint military initiatives. I will assess whether the war has acted as a catalyst for deeper cooperation or whether national fragmentation continues to shape defence policy across Europe.

To address this question, I have combined data on threat perception, public opinion, geographic proximity, military spending, and participation in EU defence initiatives. I have tested this relationship with two models. Model 1 examines how the perceived threat of the Russian invasion influences public support for EU defence policy, using survey data. Model 2 examines whether countries located closer to Russia, where the perceived threat is presumed to be higher, have increased their involvement in common EU defence projects over time.

This dual-model approach enables a nuanced analysis of both the demand (public opinion) and supply (state behaviour) aspects of European defence integration in the aftermath of the Russian invasion.

Model 1: Public Support for Defence Cooperation

Data

The first model draws on individual-level data from the Standard Eurobarometer 97.5 (2022), conducted shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (European Commission, 2022). The Eurobarometer is a long-running public opinion survey series conducted on behalf of the European Commission. It collects data from representative samples across all EU Member States, covering a wide range of topics related to European integration, political attitudes, social values, and current events.

This particular wave, Eurobarometer 97.5, is especially valuable for this research as it captures public sentiment during a moment of acute geopolitical tension. Conducted just months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the survey reflects the immediate public response to this exogenous shock rushing through Europe. It includes targeted questions on citizens' perceptions of threat related to the invasion as well as their support for a common EU defence and security policy. This data offers essential insight into how public opinion may have shifted in response to the unfolding crisis.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of Model 1 is *support for defence cooperation***,** which captures individual-level support for a common EU defence policy. This variable is measured using a question from Eurobarometer 97.5 (2022): *"The European Union should develop a common defence policy."* Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a Likert scale, making this an ordinal variable. For the clarity of this research, I have recoded the variable into a binary format, where 0 indicates no support for EU defence cooperation and 1 indicates support.

Independent Variable

The key independent variable of Model 1 is *perceived threat*. This variable is measured using a question from Eurobarometer 97.5 (2022): *"Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a threat to the security of your country."* Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a Likert scale, making this an ordinal variable. I have recoded the variable so that 1 indicates no threat, and 5 indicates a high perceived threat.

Control Variables

Several control variables are included in the model to accurately isolate the effect of perceived threat on support for EU defence cooperation. These variables account for other factors that may simultaneously influence both threat perception and support for defence cooperation. Controlling for these related factors helps to reduce omitted variable bias and ensures a more reliable estimate of the relationship between perceived threat and support for EU defence cooperation.

First, trust in institutions is represented by a series of binary indicators, reflecting whether respondents trust the European Union, NATO, and their national armed forces. These institutions play central roles in security policy, and higher levels of trust may be associated with greater support for collaborative EU defence initiatives. Similarly, general support for the EU is controlled for, as a respondent's overall orientation toward the European project is likely to influence their views on deeper integration, including in the area of defence.

Next, political ideology is controlled for through respondents' self-placement on the left-right political spectrum. This variable is coded such that higher values represent more right-leaning orientations. Political ideology can influence individuals' perceptions of threat; for instance, right-leaning individuals may perceive security threats differently than left-leaning individuals. Additionally, one's political orientation can shape attitudes toward EU-level defence cooperation, particularly regarding views on national sovereignty and

international collaboration. Right-leaning individuals are often less inclined to limit their country's sovereignty in order to achieve closer collaboration than those with a more left-leaning worldview (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Controlling for political ideology thus helps to better isolate the effect of perceived threat on support for EU defence cooperation.

Economic hardship is also included as a control, measured by whether respondents reported having difficulties paying bills over the past 12 months. The possible answers to the question are: almost never, sometimes, and most of the time. I have included this variable because financial strain can influence public priorities, including reduced support for policies perceived as costly or less immediately relevant (Raunio & Wagner, 2020).

Additionally, demographic variables such as age and gender are taken into account. Age is recoded into six categories, spanning from 15 to 98 years old, while gender is treated as a binary variable with 'male' as the reference category (1 = female). These controls help assess whether generational or gender-based differences play a role in shaping defence attitudes.

Lastly, to account for unobserved national-level variation, country fixed effects are included through the variable 'Country'. Including the variable ensures that differences across member states, such as political culture or defence policy traditions, do not bias the results. Altogether, these control variables provide a more accurate estimate of the independent effect of perceived threat on public support for a common EU defence policy.

Method

A binary logistic regression model is used in this analysis because the dependent variable, support for a common EU defence policy, is binary. Unlike a linear regression, which is designed for continuous outcomes, a logistic regression estimates the probability of a particular outcome occurring, such as expressing support versus non-support for collaborative defence initiatives. This approach is well-suited to the research question, as it allows me to

assess how variations in perceived threat impact the likelihood of supporting EU defence cooperation. Additionally, logistic regressions effectively capture non-linear relationships and provide interpretable results through odds ratios, making it a robust tool for examining public opinion data.

Model 2: State-Level Participation in Defence Cooperation

Data

To examine the relationship between geographic proximity to the Russian threat and member states' participation in collective defence efforts, two primary data sources are used. First, I created a dataset containing information on the participation of EU countries in PESCO projects from 2017 to 2023 (a list of all the projects is provided in Appendix A). This dataset tracks the number of PESCO projects initiated and the countries that participated in them, making it an indicator to assess the level of support for EU defence integration. Denmark only entered this agreement in 2023; therefore, this country will be excluded from this dataset. The PESCO data will be split into two periods: before the invasion (2017-2021) and after (2023), with a particular focus on how the invasion may have influenced the number of new projects and the level of participation. There is no data available on projects launched in 2020 and 2022, which leads me to believe that no new projects were adopted in these years. Ultimately, this variable will provide insights into the extent to which the invasion has led to greater engagement in joint defence efforts.

Second, the NATO Barometer provides comprehensive data on military spending across NATO member countries from 2017 to 2023. NATO consists of 32 members, with 23 of these also being EU member states. The dataset includes information on each country's annual defence expenditures, as well as the GDP per capita of its members over time. Similar to the dataset on PESCO participation, the dataset is split into two time periods: before the invasion (2017-2021) and after the invasion (2022-2023).

I have chosen this division because it allows for a clear comparison between the period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the period following it. Due to data constraints, as some member states have not yet published their 2024 and 2025 data, I have chosen to only include data up to 2023. Creating this temporal division aligns with the

theoretical framework of the Punctuated Equilibrium theory, allowing for the assessment of whether a crisis-induced shock led to a substantive policy shift. With this dataset, I can analyse defence spending patterns that reflect shifts in national security strategies, economic conditions, and geopolitical dynamics over time.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this model is *PESCO participation*, operationalised as a discrete count variable representing the number of EU defence cooperation projects a country joins each year (2017-2023). This serves as a proxy for overall engagement in institutionalised defence integration over time.

Independent variables

The key independent variable in Model 2, "threat," is measured through the geographic proximity of member states to Russia. This proxy is supported by the theory that states geographical proximity may lead to higher threat perception, which in turn influences national military strategies (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Countries are grouped into six categories based on their distance from Russia, ranging from Group 1 (peripheral states, such as Ireland and Portugal) to Group 6 (bordering countries, including Finland and Estonia). For the complete list of the country divisions, see Appendix B.

Second, "military spending" is measured as the percentage of a country's GDP invested in defence. While the dataset also provides data on military spending in absolute numbers, the research will focus on military expenditure as a percentage of GDP. This allows me to use a standardised approach to compare countries of different sizes and economic capacities. The military expenditure will be compared before and after the invasion. By analysing these two periods, the aim is to examine how the Russian invasion has influenced the prioritisation of military expenditure in EU countries.

Lastly, the interaction term *DiD_effect* between two dummy variables (*High_Threat* × *Postwar*) is included. The dummy variable *High_Threat* is a binary variable coded 0 = low threat (the countries that are geographically further away from Russia, 1-3), and 1 = High Threat (the countries that are near Russia, 4-6). The binary dummy variable Postwar is coded as 0 = 2017-2021, and 1 is coded as 2022-2023. The interaction variable constitutes the core of the analysis and captures whether high-threat countries changed their defence cooperation behaviour more significantly after the invasion.

Control Variables

The model includes several control variables to ensure robustness. *GDP* is added to account for differences in economic capacity that may influence a country's ability to participate in defence cooperation. The variable *Postwar* is used as a fixed effect, a binary time indicator coded 0 for all years before 2022 and 1 for 2022 and later. This variable marks the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. Additionally, *country fixed effects* are included to account for EU-wide shocks or national characteristics, such as defence policy traditions, historical neutrality, or long-standing relations with NATO and Russia.

Method

To assess the causal impact of the invasion, the model employs a difference-in-differences (DiD) design. This method compares changes in PESCO participation over time between a *treatment group* of high-threat countries and a *control group* of lower-threat countries. The DiD approach is particularly well-suited for capturing the effects of exogenous geopolitical shocks, such as the invasion, on institutional behaviour. By isolating the differential effect of the war across varying threat perceptions, the model provides insights into whether EU defence cooperation is becoming more responsive to external threats, and whether this response is spatially differentiated across the European Union.

Results

Results Model 1: The Effect of Perceived Threat on Support for EU Defence Cooperation

To examine the relationship between the perceived threat from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and public support for a common EU defence policy, I performed a binary logistic regression analysis using data from the 2022 Eurobarometer survey.

Model Fit

Model 1's fit and explanatory power were assessed using standard binary logistic regression diagnostics. The -2 Log Likelihood value is 16,854.325, indicating a better fit than the null model. Additionally, two pseudo-R^2 values were used: Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.178$ and Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.285$, suggesting the model explains between 17.8% and 28.5% of the variance in support for a common EU defence policy. Although these figures may seem low, they are reasonable in the context of social science.

The Omnibus Test of Model Coefficients showed a significant improvement over the null model ($\chi^2 = 4235.435$, $df = 36$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the predictors add meaningful explanatory power.

To rule out multicollinearity, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores were examined for all independent variables. With values ranging from 1.036 to 2.265, well below the standard threshold of 5, there is no indication of problematic multicollinearity. Full results are provided in Appendix C.

Results

The regression results reveal that several predictor variables significantly influence public support for a common EU defence policy. The strongest predictors include the perceived threat from the Ukraine war, institutional trust, and socio-demographic factors. Table 1 presents the results of the Binary Logistic regression.

Table 1: Binary Logistic Regression Model of Support for Common EU Defence Policy

	Coëfficiënt (B)	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))
Constant	-1.661***	0.190
	(0.15)	
Ukraine War Threat	0.285***	1.329
	(0.020)	[1.278; 1.382]
Trust in NATO	0.870***	2.388
	(0.051)	[2.159; 2.640]
Trust in EU	0.244***	1.277
	(0.053)	[1.151; 1.415]
Trust in Army	0.363***	1.437
	(0.046)	[1.315; 1.571]
Political Position (Left, Centre, Right)	-0.030**	0.971
	(0.010)	[0.952; 0.989]
Difficulties Paying Bills	-0.273***	0.761
	(0.032)	[0.715; 0.809]
Image of EU (1=Negative, 5=Positive)	0.620***	1.858
	(0.024)	[1.771; 1.950]
Gender (Ref. = Male)	0.008	1.008
	(0.039)	[0.933; 1.089]
Age	0.043***	1.044
	(0.012)	[1.019; 1.069]
-2 Log Likelihood	16,854.325	
Cox & Snell R^2	0.178	
Nagelkerke R^2	0.285	
N	21775	

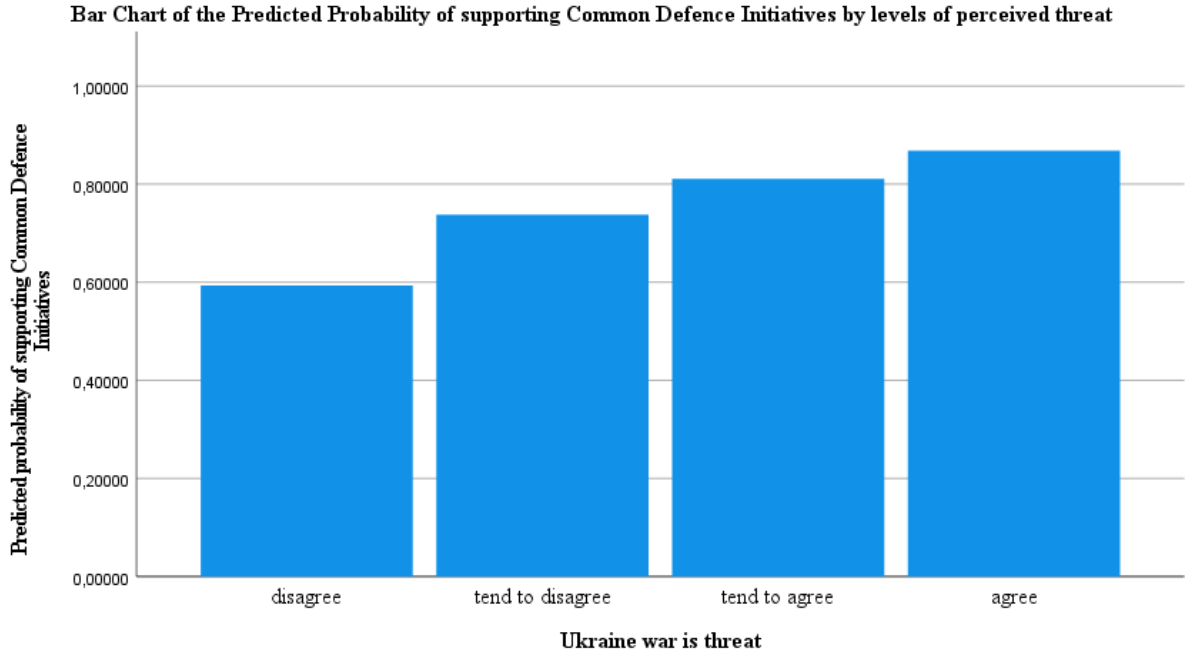
Dependent Variable: Support for EU defence cooperation

Note 1: binary logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.
Note 2: odds ratio's with 95% confidence intervals in brackets.
****p <0.001,** p<0.01, *p <0.05*

The independent variable, ‘perceived threat from the Ukraine war’, is a significant positive predictor of support for EU common defence projects (B = 0.285, Exp(B) = 1.329, $p < 0.001$). When respondents view the conflict as a major threat, a one-unit increase in perceived threat

from the Ukraine war is associated with a 29% increase in the odds of supporting a common EU defence policy. This reflects how geopolitical developments, such as warfare, shape public attitudes. See figure 1 for a visual representation of the relationship between support for defence cooperation and the perceived threat levels caused by the Russian invasion, holding other independent variables constant. This figure shows that the higher a threat participants perceive Russia to be, the more likely they are to support a common defence policy. This strong connection aligns with my hypothesis.

Figure 1:



Additionally, 'trust in NATO' is the most influential institutional factor. Individuals who express trust in NATO are significantly more likely to support a common EU defence policy (B = 0.870, Exp(B) = 2.388, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that they are 2.39 times more likely to support the policy compared to those who do not trust NATO. Trust in the European Union also plays a meaningful role (B = 0.244, Exp(B) = 1.277, $p < 0.001$), as does trust in the national army (B = 0.363, Exp(B) = 1.437, $p < 0.001$). All three control variables show

significant effects, indicating that higher levels of trust in these institutions are associated with greater support for a collaborative defence policy.

In addition to the positive relation between higher levels of trust and support for common defence practices, positive attitudes toward the EU also reinforce support for the outcome variable. A more positive image of the EU, measured on a 5-point scale from negative to positive, is significantly associated with greater support for a common EU defence policy ($B = 0.620$, $Exp(B) = 1.858$, $p < 0.001$). This means that for each one-unit increase in a respondent's favourability toward the EU (e.g., moving from a neutral to a somewhat positive view), the odds of supporting EU defence cooperation increase by approximately 86%. In other words, those with a more favourable view of the EU are substantially more likely, at each step up the scale, to support a common defence policy.

Political orientation is often associated with attitudes toward European integration, with individuals on the political left traditionally expressing stronger support for a more integrated European Union (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). This broader pattern of support based on political orientation aligns with the findings regarding defence cooperation. Respondents with a more right-leaning political orientation are slightly less likely to support a common EU defence policy. Political orientation, measured on a 3-point scale (1 = left, 2 = centre, 3 = right), shows a statistically significant relationship with support for EU defence cooperation ($B = -0.030$, $Exp(B) = 0.971$, $p = 0.002$). This indicates that the odds of support for common defence practices decrease by approximately 2.9% for each step toward the right. Resulting in an expected outcome.

Additionally, economic vulnerability is negatively associated with support for common defence. For each one-unit increase in perceived financial difficulty (e.g., from "almost never" to "sometimes", or from "sometimes" to "most of the time"), the odds of supporting EU defence cooperation decrease by approximately 27% ($B = -273$, $Exp(B) =$

0.761). This indicates a clear and statistically significant negative association between economic vulnerability and support for EU-level defence initiatives. This result was expected, as theory suggests that economic hardship often limits public support for military investments (DiGiuseppe et al., 2023; Raunio & Wagner, 2020).

As for demographic indicators, Age, measured in six ordered categories from 15 to 65+, shows a modest but statistically significant positive effect on support (B = 0.043, Exp(B) = 1.044, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that with each increase in age category, the odds of supporting a common EU defence policy increase by approximately 4.4%, holding other factors constant. In contrast, Gender, coded as 0 = male and 1 = female, does not exhibit a statistically significant effect (B = 0.008, Exp(B) = 1.008, p = 0.844). This finding suggests that there is no meaningful difference between men and women in their likelihood of supporting the policy.

Finally, the inclusion of country fixed effects reveals few differences in support for collaborative defence projects and threat perception (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2:

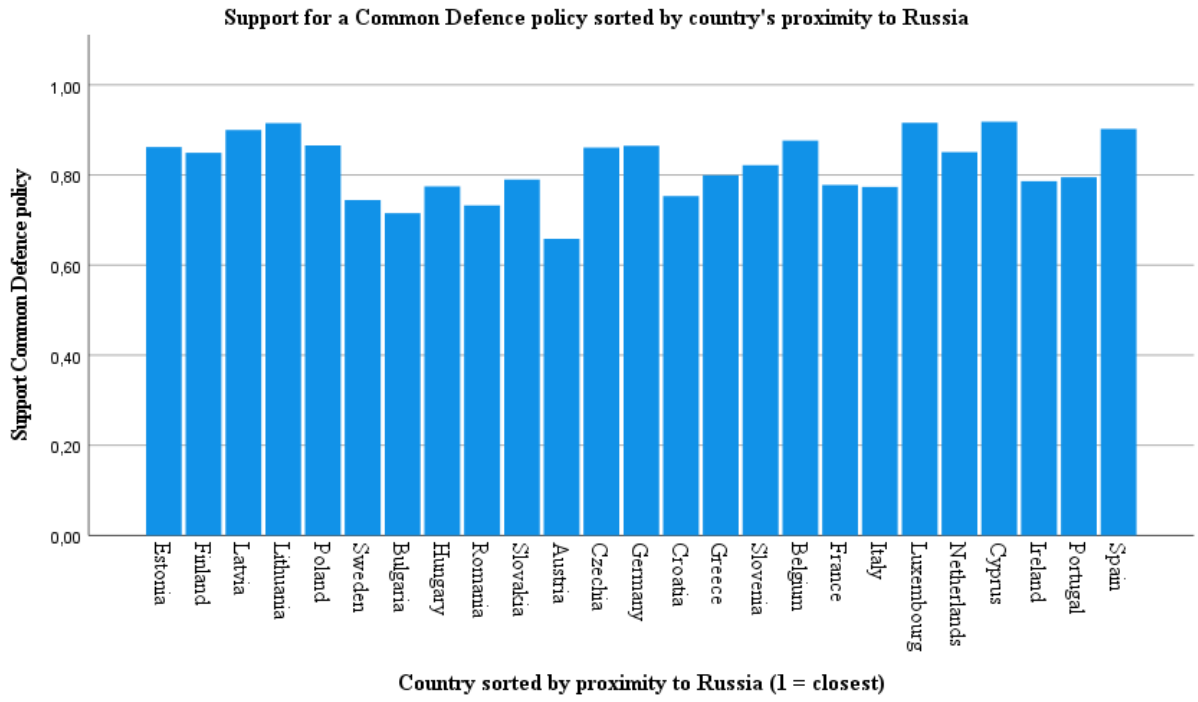
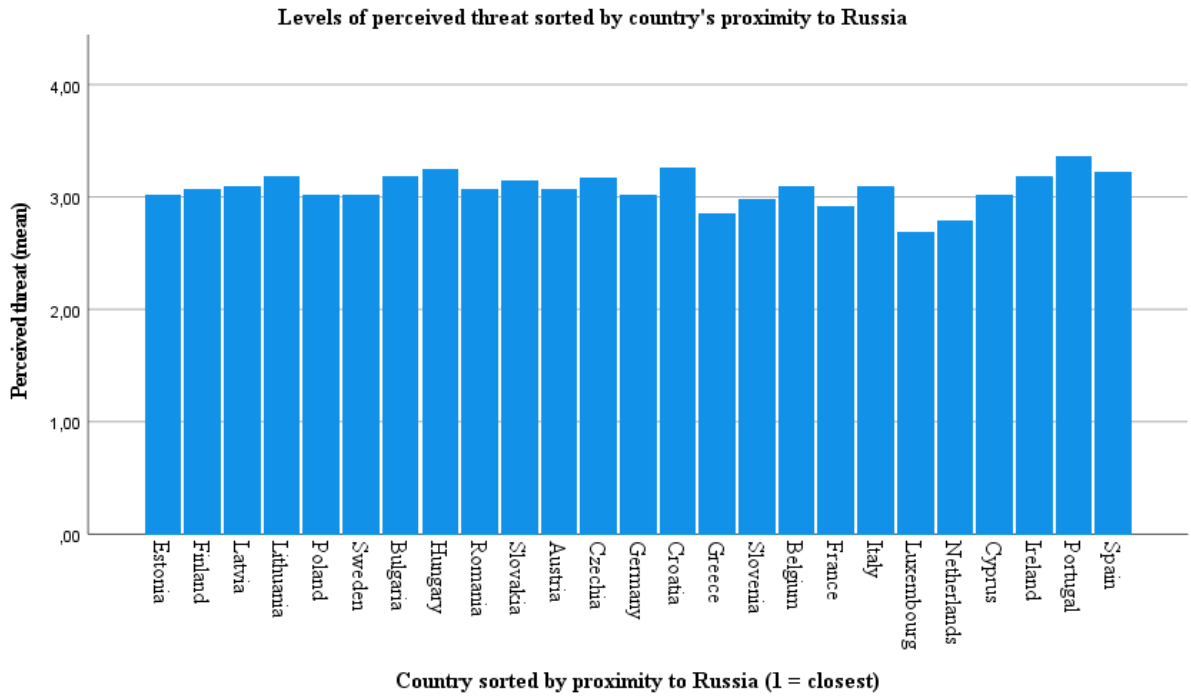


Figure 3:



Figures 2 and 3 show that neither average public support for a common EU defence policy nor perceived threat levels differ strongly across countries based on their geographic proximity to Russia. This likely reflects the widespread European media coverage and political attention to the war in Ukraine, which has created a broadly shared sense of insecurity (Eddy & Fletcher, 2022). Consequently, even citizens in countries farther from Russia report considerable threat perception and support for EU defence cooperation. This suggests that personal threat perceptions, rather than simple geographic proximity, are more critical in shaping attitudes toward EU defence cooperation.

To conclude, Model 1 provides strong evidence that perceived threat from the war in Ukraine significantly increases support for a common EU defence policy. Respondents who see the conflict as a serious threat are much more likely to support collective defence efforts, underlining the central role of threat perception in shaping public opinion. In addition to threat perception, trust in key institutions, including NATO, the EU, and national armed forces, also have a positive and significant effect on support for a common defence policy. Socioeconomic

factors such as financial difficulties and political orientation further influence attitudes, with economically secure and more centrist or left-leaning individuals expressing greater support. The minimal variation in public threat perception and support across countries suggests that national context has little influence.

These findings allow me to reject the null hypothesis that perceived threat from the Russian invasion does not affect public support for common EU defence policies. The results, however, indicate that a higher perceived threat is associated with increased support. In Model 2, I will examine whether this relatively uniform support and threat perception across countries translates into varying levels of actual governmental participation in PESCO projects.

Results Model 2: Difference-in-Differences Analysis of PESCO Participation Post-Ukraine Invasion

Model 2 assesses whether the uniform public's support for EU defence cooperation, identified in Model 1, translates into actual policy changes. While the first Model measures little to no difference in public threat perception and common defence support across countries, Model 2 will investigate if this public sentiment translates into governmental participation in PESCO projects using a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) regression design. The model specifically evaluates if the post-invasion period and geographic proximity to Russia, as a proxy for perceived threat, affect state-level involvement in EU defence initiatives. Two specifications are presented: Model 2A and an extended model with country and year fixed effects, Model 2 B.

Model Fit

Model 2A explains a modest portion of the variance ($R^2 = 0.071$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.049$), while the extended model improves upon this ($R^2 = 0.119$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.087$), indicating a better fit when accounting for country-specific and temporal effects. Both models are statistically significant, with F-statistics of 3.231 ($p = .014$) and 3.765 ($p = .002$).

For all variables, the VIF values are below the threshold of 5, which indicates that there is no indication of problematic multicollinearity. Full results are provided in Appendix C.

Results

Before looking at the regression results, it is helpful to examine the distribution of the outcome variable, PESCO projects participation, across countries and over time. As shown in Appendix A, countries closest to Russia exhibit divergent trends in PESCO participation following the invasion of Ukraine. Finland and Estonia, two of the geographically closest EU

members to Russia, expanded their involvement in PESCO post-war. Finland increased their participation from 5 projects in 2021 to 9 in 2023, and Estonia increased its participation by adding three cyber defence and space surveillance initiatives (European Union, 2023). Additionally, Sweden, despite being a long-time security outlier and only joining NATO in 2024 (Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2025), doubled its participation from 2 to 4 projects after the 2022 invasion. The country joined advanced capability projects such as the TWISTER missile defence system and the Strategic Command and Control System for EU Missions and Operations (European Union, 2023).

This pattern may initially appear to support the hypothesis that heightened threat perception due to geographical proximity drives greater engagement in EU defence cooperation. However, this is not observed in other countries in the same proximity group. States such as Latvia and Lithuania participated in fewer projects after 2022. Latvia reduced its projects from 4 to 2, and Lithuania withdrew from 2 initiatives related to maritime surveillance and shared logistics (European Union, 2023). Poland, which was traditionally one of the more active Eastern European participants in foundational projects such as military mobility and CBRN defence, also significantly reduced its PESCO involvement after the invasion. This decline suggests a strategic pivot toward national defence buildup or NATO coordination rather than deeper EU military integration.

Countries further removed from the Russian border, such as Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, have historically been among the most active participants in PESCO. France and Germany, in particular, led numerous foundational and high-technology initiatives prior to 2022, including the European Medical Command, the European Secure Software-defined Radio, and the European Patrol Corvette project (European Union, 2023). These states were instrumental in launching PESCO's first project waves from 2017 to 2019, which focused on broad-based capability building and inclusivity. However, even among these traditionally

proactive states, participation has declined in the post-2022 period. For instance, Germany, involved in 17 projects in 2020, dropped to 14 in 2023, and France also reduced its commitments from 30 to 27 projects. Italy and Spain reduced their engagement even further, particularly in projects requiring large-scale multilateral coordination (European Union, 2023).

A closer examination of the types of projects launched before and after the invasion reveals a shift in the focus of PESCO projects. Earlier PESCO projects (2017–2019) emphasised foundational capabilities with widespread participation. Examples are the Military Mobility project, which included nearly all member states, and the EU Training Mission Competence Centre. Both projects focused on operational interoperability and basic readiness, and were designed to be inclusive, serving as entry points for newer and smaller member states (European Union, 2023).

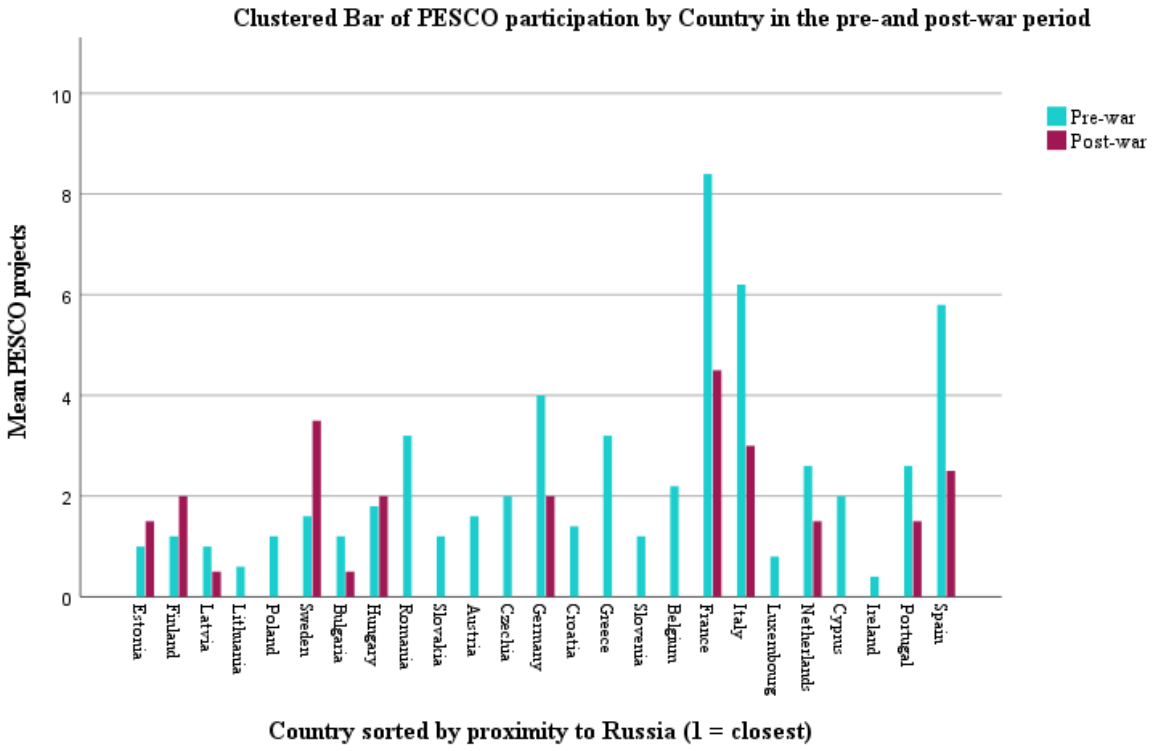
By contrast, post-2022 projects reflect a narrower and more advanced focus, often engaging fewer participants and demanding higher technological capabilities or operational specialisation. For example, new initiatives like the Collaborative Air Combat EU (ECA) and the European Hypersonic Defence Interceptor are led by small Western coalitions and require significant defence-industrial investments. This effectively limits participation to wealthier and more militarily advanced states such as France, Italy, and Sweden (European Union, 2023). These shifts imply a unification of cooperation among a smaller group of capable states rather than a broad EU-wide response to external threats.

Overall, these patterns indicate that neither the external shock of Russia's invasion nor proximity to the conflict consistently drives increased participation in PESCO. While a few frontline states (e.g. Finland and Estonia) increased their involvement, many others reduced or halted their participation. Additionally, core Western actors have become more selective in which projects to participate in and have reduced their overall participation. Thus, PESCO

participation has largely stagnated or declined since the invasion, despite the EU's rhetorical emphasis on strategic autonomy and collective defence (Moser, 2024).

Figure 4 provides a visual overview of the patterns found in Appendix A.

Figure 4:



The assumptions made based on Appendix A and Figure 4 align with the regression results. The post-war period following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has had a significant negative effect on PESCO participation (B = -1.949, p = 0.003), indicating that participation in PESCO projects has decreased following the Russian invasion. Furthermore, in both Model 2A and Model 2B, the coefficient for geographic proximity to Russia is negative and statistically significant. In Model 2B, the effect is especially strong (B = -0.493, p < .001). This suggests that countries geographically closer to Russia are involved in significantly fewer PESCO projects.

The full regression output is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: DiD Regression Model of Participation in Pesco Projects

	2A Coëfficiënt (B)	2A Odds Ratio (Exp(B))	2B Coefficient (B)	2B Odds Ration (Exp(B))
(Constant)	4.287***		4.609***	
	-1.038	[2.238; 6.336]	-1.056	[2.524; 6.694]
GDP Capita	-0.020	-0.163	-0.016	-0.130
	(0.011)	[-0.42; 0.003]	-0.011	[-0.38; 0.006]
Military as share GDP	-0.188	-0.041	0.050	0.011
	(0.427)	[-1.032; 0.655]	(0.426)	[-0.791; 0.890]
Geographic proximity to Russia	-0.360**	-0.235	-0.493***	-0.322
	-0,131	[-0.618; -0.101]	(0.138)	[-0.766; -0.219]
High_treat*post war	-0.597	-0.076	1.207	0.153
	(0.639)	[-1.857; 0.664]	(0.871)	[-0.511; 2.926]
Country			-0.003	0.029
			(0.029)	[0.060; 0.053]
Post-War			-1.949**	-0.315
			(0.649)	[-3.230; -0.669]

	Model 2A	Model 2B
R2	0.071	0.119
Adjusted R2	0.049	0.087
F-Ratio	3231*	3.765**

Dependent Variable: PESCO projects

Note 1: linear regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

Note 2: odds ratio's with 95% confidence intervals in brackets.

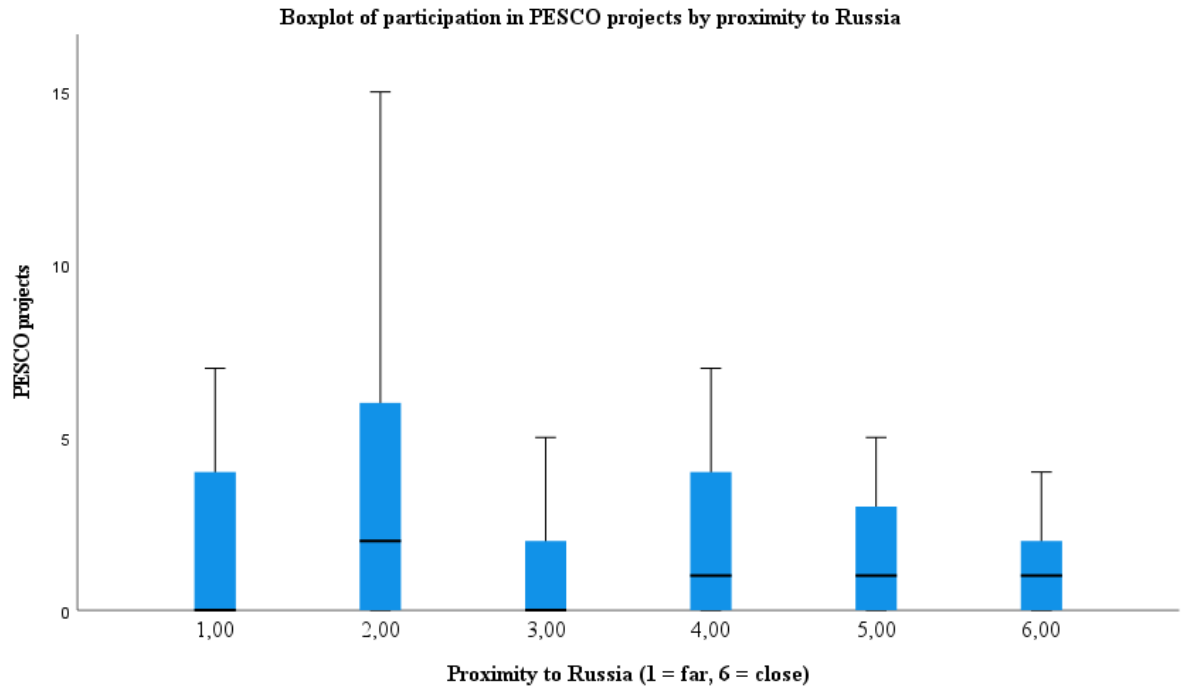
****p <0.001,** p<0.01, *p <0.05*

Therefore, neither the increased threat following the invasion nor geographic proximity to the perceived source of that threat leads to greater engagement in EU defence cooperation; in fact, both are associated with reduced participation. This finding contradicts the initial expectation that heightened threat perception would foster more collaboration at the EU level. Given that overall military investment has increased enormously post-invasion (Maulny, 2023), a possible interpretation of these results is that national governments may have redirected their renewed resources toward NATO commitments or domestic defence rather than EU-specific frameworks like PESCO. This pattern suggests that, for many member states, the EU remains

a secondary actor in matters of security coordination. Rather than prompting a unified institutional response, elevated threat levels appear to reinforce divergent national approaches shaped by existing capabilities, priorities, and strategic cultures.

Figure 5 shows the division of Pesco participation across countries' proximity to Russia. In this figure, you can clearly see that countries moderately far removed from Russia participate the most in PESCO projects, and the countries with the closest proximity participate the least.

Figure 5:



The interaction term between perceived threat and the post-war period (High_treat * Postwar) is not statistically significant in either model (B = 1,207, p = 0,167). The fact that the outbreak of the war has not led to more cooperation, but less, was contrary to my expectations and makes the interaction term (based on binary variables, with 1 for post-war and 1 for geographical proximity) insignificant. While threat perception and the post-war context independently influence PESCO participation, their combined effect does not produce a uniquely amplified response. This implies that countries already less inclined toward EU

defence cooperation did not change their stance significantly after the invasion.

Finally, economic factors such as GDP per capita and military spending as a share of GDP do not emerge as significant predictors. This indicates that participation in EU defence initiatives is largely shaped by geopolitical and strategic considerations rather than fiscal capacity.

Analysis

This study set out to examine how the perceived threat posed by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has shaped both public support for EU defence cooperation and actual intergovernmental collaboration through PESCO. The results reveal a significant disconnect between rising public demand for collective defence and limited policy response at the EU level.

Model 1 reveals a clear and intuitive pattern: citizens who perceive the Russian invasion as a greater threat show significantly stronger support for a common EU defence policy. This supports the idea that heightened insecurity can generate public solidarity and a desire for collective action at the European level. According to this model, citizens respond to external threats by increasing their desire for integration and shared security mechanisms.

However, Model 2 complicates this narrative. Contrary to expectations, while some of the countries closest to Russia have increased their participation in EU defence initiatives post-invasion, the overall trend among proximate countries does not uniformly support the hypothesis. This discrepancy may reflect differing national strategies, with some states prioritising sovereign military buildup or NATO engagement over EU-based cooperation. The findings suggest that increased threat perception does not lead to an institutional response. Instead, this response is mediated by domestic preferences, strategic culture, and capacity. Frontline states have increased military spending (NATO, 2024), but deprioritised common defence initiatives. Even more so, overall collaboration across all states, regardless of threat

level, declined in the post-invasion period. While citizens may call for stronger EU-level responses, governments appear to follow a different logic. For states on the frontlines, the urgency of the threat may prompt them to reinforce national defence capabilities or pursue strategic partnerships outside the EU framework, such as NATO, rather than investing in longer-term and often slower-moving EU cooperation structures.

The overall decline in PESCO participation after the war further undermines the notion that Russia's invasion would serve as a critical juncture for EU defence integration. Instead, it suggests that in moments of crisis, national responses often take precedence over collective ones, even when public support for shared action is high. As such, I cannot reject my second null hypothesis: the increase in perceived threat did *not* lead to greater intergovernmental collaboration in EU defence.

These results point to a deeper institutional disconnect between the preferences of EU citizens and the strategic calculations of national governments. Potential explanations include political risk aversion, competing institutional loyalties (such as a preference for NATO), or the practical constraints of contributing to new defence projects amid ongoing conflict. Ultimately, while public support for EU defence may rise in response to external threats, this does not automatically translate into increased collective action. The findings raise important questions about the responsiveness of EU security structures to shifting geopolitical realities and whether current institutional frameworks are adequate to translate public support into concrete defence cooperation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The divergence between increasing public support for common EU defence and declining participation in collective initiatives such as PESCO raises critical questions about the mechanisms linking public opinion to actual policy outcomes in European security and defence. This disconnect suggests that while citizens may increasingly favour the idea of shared defence, institutional and strategic realities limit governments' ability, or willingness, to act accordingly.

A closer look at the Eurobarometer item used to measure public support in Model 1 reveals that it captures general attitudes toward the idea of a "common defence policy," but does not specify what such a policy entails in practical terms. As a result, respondents may endorse the symbolic value of European unity in defence, as a reflection of shared identity or solidarity in the face of external threats, without necessarily supporting more controversial or costly measures such as increased defence spending or deeper military integration. As such, the support captured in Model 1 may be more values-driven than policy-specific.

Meanwhile, the results from Model 2 show that, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, EU member states largely reverted to familiar national, bilateral or transnational defence arrangements. This outcome reflects entrenched institutional path dependencies in military practices, reinforcing the enduring reality that defence remains a core national competence (DeVore, 2012). In other words, this strategic fallback reveals a deeper structural tension: while public sentiment may support EU ideals of collective security, national governments continue to operate within long-established frameworks that limit the scope for deeper integration. Rather than using the invasion as a critical juncture to deepen multilateral cooperation through EU channels, states most exposed to the threat appear to adopt a more

inward-looking stance that prioritises territorial defence, independent procurement, or NATO's established infrastructure.

Another factor that may explain the disconnect between public and elite-level action is the temporal lag between shifts in public opinion and institutional response. While the perceived threat levels that influence public opinion increased rapidly after the Russian invasion, defence planning and multilateral cooperation require time, coordination, and political will. Additionally, the structure of PESCO, based on voluntary project participation, further complicates the process of rapid collective action. Therefore, the choice of governments to pursue alternative security measures right now does not mean that PESCO participation cannot increase further in the future. These results may merely be an initial disjuncture that could narrow over time as governments align their policies with evolving threat perceptions and public demands. Therefore, a follow-up analysis in two to three years would help determine whether this gap represents a temporary delay or an indication of a deeper structural constraint.

If it appears to be structural, this tension has broader implications for the EU's democratic legitimacy and its pursuit of strategic autonomy. When citizens express clear support for a common defence policy but see little concrete follow-through at the policy level, a representational gap emerges. If left unaddressed, this gap risks undermining public trust in both national and EU-level institutions, weakening the perceived responsiveness and credibility of EU security frameworks.

It is also important to recognise that participation in PESCO is shaped by more than just threat perception. While financial constraints appeared not to significantly influence participation, domestic political contexts and administrative capacity can influence whether a country can or will participate. Moreover, PESCO projects vary widely in scope, from logistical coordination to cyber defence, indicating that participation alone may not reflect

readiness for joint military action. Future research could disaggregate PESCO involvement by project type to better understand whether perceived threats are more likely to drive operational versus symbolic forms of cooperation. Additionally, they can asses the types of projects that states choose to participate in, rather than focusing solely on the number of participations. This will provide a qualitative indication of their genuine commitment and intention to contribute meaningfully to EU defence cooperation.

To conclude, the EU finds itself in a structural dilemma. On one hand, public support for collective defence is growing, which is a potentially powerful foundation for legitimacy and further integration. On the other hand, the EU's institutional architecture and member states' sovereignty over defence policy significantly constrain its capacity to act on this support. Without greater alignment between citizen preferences and governmental action, the EU risks undermining its ambitions for strategic autonomy and credibility as a cohesive actor in international security.

Conclusion

This study began with the research question: How has the perceived threat of the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected EU *defence cooperation?* I expected that the threat posed by Russia after its invasion of Ukraine would encourage closer military collaboration across EU member states. Instead, the regression results reveal a growing divergence between public sentiment and intergovernmental action in EU defence policy.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, public perceived threat levels increased significantly across the continent. As predicted by the Punctuated Equilibrium theory (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012), this heightened sense of insecurity served as a critical juncture to change attitudes, leading to a notable rise in public support for a common EU defence policy. This finding aligns with my first hypothesis that higher perceived threat levels following the Russian invasion lead to greater public support for a common EU defence policy. However, the increase in public support has not been matched by greater intergovernmental cooperation through mechanisms like PESCO. Despite the external shock presented by the war, most member states have not expanded their participation in joint projects, and many have reduced their overall involvement since 2022 (European Union, 2023). Because the increase in perceived threat did not lead to greater intergovernmental collaboration in EU defence, I can not reject my second null hypothesis.

Interestingly, countries geographically closer to Russia are among the least likely to deepen EU-level cooperation. While countries like Estonia and Finland modestly increased their participation in PESCO, others such as Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania scaled back or ceased their involvement altogether (European Union, 2023). At the same time, countries further removed from the Russian border, such as Germany, France, and Italy, historically demonstrated higher levels of PESCO participation, yet also exhibited a decline in the post-invasion period (European Union, 2023). This uneven pattern of participation indicates that

neither geographic proximity to the conflict nor increased threat perception alone is sufficient to incentivise deeper EU defence integration. Instead, it highlights the enduring importance of national defence preferences and the structural barriers that limit collective responses at the EU level (Ausserladscheider, 2022; Michaels & Sus, 2024). Even in the face of a significant external shock, the EU's defence architecture remains constrained by institutional inertia and entrenched norms of national sovereignty, which continue to shape member states' strategic choices and inhibit cohesive policy shifts (DeVore, 2012).

The Failing Forward framework can explain these limits by seeing European integration as an incomplete and reactive process (Jones et al., 2016; Bergmann & Müller, 2021). According to this perspective, integration is rarely the result of coherent, forward-looking design; instead, it evolves through crisis-driven responses that fail to resolve underlying structural problems. In the case of EU defence, the institutional design of intergovernmental mechanisms, such as PESCO, which are voluntary, loosely coordinated, and lacking strong enforcement, has proven insufficient to channel shared threat perceptions into robust collective action. Rather than triggering deeper defence integration, the crisis has exposed the EU's continued reliance on fragmented national preferences and ad hoc cooperation.

Ultimately, this suggests that while public opinion may shift rapidly in response to geopolitical shocks (DiGiuseppe et al., 2023; Raunio & Wagner, 2020), path dependency and the EU's intergovernmental architecture in defence remain significant barriers to transformative change (Jones et al., 2016). The result is an apparent structural mismatch between rising public expectations and the EU's limited capacity to deliver collective defence policy. Crises may prompt incremental adjustments, but without strong institutions, this rarely leads to comprehensive reform (Bergmann & Müller, 2021). Therefore, without stronger institutional mechanisms, clearer incentives, and closer alignment between national interests

and EU-level initiatives, the Union's capacity to act autonomously in the defence sphere will remain constrained. Bridging the gap between public support and institutional delivery will be essential if the EU is to enhance its democratic legitimacy and present itself as a cohesive and capable security actor in an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment.

More broadly, this study contributes to longstanding debates in public administration and political behaviour studies: To what extent do public preferences shape high-stakes policy domains, such as defence? The findings suggest that while public opinion can signal demand for collective action, policy outcomes are often shaped by bounded rationality (Jones, 2002), institutional path dependencies, strategic cultures, and the constraints of intergovernmental bargaining (DeVore, 2012). In such sovereignty-sensitive areas, democratic responsiveness remains limited, even in the face of significant external shocks.

This gap between popular legitimacy and administrative feasibility underscores a persistent tension in modern governance. Structural inertia, political reluctance, and limited resources can all inhibit the translation of public support into tangible policy change (Koay & Devitt, 2024). As European integration advances within an increasingly contested international landscape, identifying when and how public preferences influence collective action will remain central to both academic and practical understandings of international cooperation and public administration.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring the evolving relationship between public support and institutional responsiveness over a longer timeframe. As this study has shown, immediate post-crisis expectations of policy change may be premature given the structural inertia embedded in the EU's intergovernmental defence framework. Longitudinal studies tracking both public sentiment and policy outcomes, such as PESCO participation, defence spending, and procurement coordination, could help determine whether current dynamics represent a temporary misalignment or a persistent structural disconnect.

Scholars could also conduct case studies of specific member states to understand how national administrative capacity, political leadership, and public pressure shape participation in EU defence initiatives.

Moreover, disaggregating PESCO project types into operational, technological and symbolic could provide a more nuanced understanding of how threat perception translates into different forms of engagement. Future research could also assess whether alternative EU defence mechanisms, such as the European Defence Fund or the Strategic Compass, offer more flexible or politically viable pathways for cooperation compared to PESCO's voluntary, project-based model. These analyses would benefit from employing mixed methods: combining quantitative datasets with qualitative interviews among defence planners, civil servants, and political elites to uncover how internal political calculations mediate public preferences.

From a theoretical standpoint, researchers could also test the applicability of the Failing Forward logic across other policy domains that exhibit similar gaps between public support and institutional performance. Comparative institutional studies might explore whether areas governed more heavily by supranational authority (e.g., trade or monetary policy) exhibit higher responsiveness to public opinion than those dominated by intergovernmentalism, such as defence. Finally, integrating insights from political psychology, particularly regarding the public's understanding of abstract concepts like strategic autonomy, could clarify whether public support is truly informed and policy-relevant or primarily symbolic and identity-driven. Understanding these nuances is crucial if scholars and policymakers wish to overcome institutional inertia and move beyond crisis-induced incrementalism toward a more responsive and cohesive European security architecture.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Projects of PESCO (2017-2023)

Table 1A: All Pesco projects over time, with participating countries

Project Number	Project Name	Launch Year	Participating Member States
1	European Medical Command	2017	Germany, Czech Republic, Spain, France, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden
2	European Secure Software Defined Radio (ESSOR)	2017	France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Finland
3	Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations	2017	Germany, Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Hungary, Netherlands, Slovenia, Slovakia
4	Military Mobility	2017	Netherlands, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden
5	EU Training Mission Competence Centre (EU TMCC)	2017	Germany, Belgium, Czech Republic, Ireland, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Austria, Romania, Sweden
6	European Training Certification Centre for European Armies	2017	Italy, Greece
7	Energy Operational Function (EOF)	2017	France, Belgium, Spain, Italy
8	Deployable Military Disaster Relief Capability Package	2017	Italy, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Austria

9	Maritime (semi-) Autonomous Systems for Mine Countermeasures (MAS MCM)	2017	Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania
10	Harbour & Maritime Surveillance and Protection (HARMSPRO)	2017	Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal
11	Upgrade of Maritime Surveillance	2017	Greece, Bulgaria, Ireland, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus
12	Cyber Rapid Response Teams and Mutual Assistance in Cyber Security	2017	Lithuania, Spain, France, Croatia, Netherlands, Romania, Finland
13	Cyber Threats and Incident Response Information Sharing Platform	2017	Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Hungary, Austria, Portugal
14	Strategic Command and Control (C2) System for CSDP Missions and Operations	2017	Spain, Germany, Italy, Portugal
15	Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle / Amphibious Assault Vehicle / Light Armoured Vehicle	2017	Italy, Greece, Slovakia
16	Indirect Fire Support (EuroArtillery)	2017	Slovakia, Italy
17	EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core (EUFOR CROC)	2017	Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus
18	Helicopter Hot and High Training (H3 Training)	2018	Greece, Italy, Romania
19	Joint EU Intelligence School	2018	Greece, Cyprus
20	EU Test and Evaluation Centres	2018	France, Sweden, Spain, Slovakia

21	Integrated Unmanned Ground System (UGS)	2018	Estonia, Belgium, Czechia, Spain, France, Latvia, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Finland
22	EU Beyond Line Of Sight (BLOS) Land Battlefield Missile Systems	2018	France, Belgium, Cyprus
23	Deployable Modular Underwater Intervention Capability Package (Divepack)	2018	Bulgaria, Greece, France
24	European Medium Altitude Long Endurance Remotely Piloted Aircraft System — European MALE RPAS (Eurodrone)	2018	Germany, Czechia, Spain, France, Italy
25	European Attack Helicopters TIGER Mark III	2018	France, Germany, Spain
26	Counter Unmanned Aerial System (C-UAS)	2018	Italy, Czechia
27	European High Atmosphere Airship Platform (EHAAP) — Persistent Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) Capability	2018	Italy, France
28	One Deployable Special Operations Forces (SOF) Tactical Command and Control (C2) Command Post (CP) for Small Joint Operations (SJO) — (SOCC) for SJO	2018	Greece, Cyprus
29	Electronic Warfare Capability and Interoperability Programme for Future Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR) Cooperation	2018	Czechia, Germany

30	Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Surveillance as a Service (CBRN SaaS)	2018	Austria, France, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia
31	Co-basing	2018	France, Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Spain, Netherlands
32	Geo-meteorological and Oceanographic (GeoMETOC) Support Coordination Element (GMSCE)	2018	Germany, Greece, France, Romania
33	EU Radio Navigation Solution (EURAS)	2018	France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Italy
34	European Military Space Surveillance Awareness Network (EU-SSA-N)	2018	Italy, France
35	Integrated European Joint Training and Simulation Centre (EUROSIM)	2019	Hungary, Germany, France, Poland, Slovenia
36	EU Cyber Academia and Innovation Hub (EU CAIH)	2019	Portugal, Spain
37	Special Operations Forces Medical Training Centre (SMTC)	2019	Poland, Hungary
38	Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Defence Training Range (CBRNDTR)	2019	Romania, France, Italy
39	European Union Network of Diving Centres (EUNDC)	2019	Romania, Bulgaria, France
40	Maritime Unmanned Anti-Submarine System (MUSAS)	2019	Portugal, Spain, France, Sweden
41	European Patrol Corvette (EPC)	2019	Italy, France
42	Airborne Electronic Attack (AEA) for JISR	2019	Spain, France, Sweden

43	Cyber and Information Domain Coordination Centre (CIDCC)	2019	Germany, Czechia, Spain, Hungary, Netherlands
44	Deployable Modular Underwater Intervention Capability Timely Warning and Interception with Space-based TheatER surveillance (TWISTER)	2019	France, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Finland
45	Materials and components for technological EU competitiveness (MAC-EU)	2019	France, Spain, Portugal, Romania
46	EU Collaborative Warfare Capabilities (ECoWAR)	2019	France, Belgium, Spain, Hungary, Romania, Sweden
47	European Global Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) Insertion Architecture System	2019	Italy, France, Romania
48	Main Battle Tank Simulation and Testing Centre (MBT-SIMTEC)	2021	Greece, France, Cyprus
49	EU Military Partnership (EU MilPart)	2021	France, Estonia, Italy, Austria
50	Essential Elements of European Escort (4E)	2021	Spain, Italy, Portugal
51	Medium-sized Semi-Autonomous Surface Vehicle (M-SASV)	2021	Estonia, France, Latvia, Romania
52	Strategic Air Transport for Outsized Cargo (SATOC)	2021	Germany, Czechia, France, Netherlands, Slovenia
53	Next Generation Small RPAS (NGSR)	2021	Spain, Germany, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia
54	Rotorcraft Docking Station for Drones	2021	Italy, France
55	Small Scalable Weapons (SSW)	2021	Italy, France

56	Air Power	2021	France, Greece, Croatia
57	Future Medium-sized Tactical Cargo (FMTC)	2021	France, Germany, Sweden
58	Cyber Ranges Federations (CRF)	2021	Estonia, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Finland
59	Automated Modelling, Identification and Damage Assessment of Urban Terrain (AMIDA-UT)	2021	Portugal, Spain, France
60	Common Hub for Governmental Imagery (CoHGI)	2021	Germany, Spain, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Austria, Romania
61	Defence of Space Assets (DoSA)	2021	France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romani
62	European Defence Airlift - Training Academy (EDA-TA)	2023	France, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Portugal
63	Integrated Unmanned Ground Systems 2 (iUGS 2)	2023	Estonia, Germany, France, Italy, Latvia, Hungary, Netherlands, Finland, Sweden
64	Counter Battery Sensors (CoBaS)	2023	France, Netherlands
65	Anti-Torpedo Torpedo (ATT)	2023	Germany, Netherlands
66	Critical Seabed Infrastructure Protection (CSIP)	2023	Italy, Germany, Spain, France, Portugal, Sweden
67	Future Short-Range Air to Air Missile (FSRM)	2023	Germany, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Sweden
68	Next Generation Medium Helicopter (NGMH)	2023	France, Spain, Italy, Finland
69	Integrated Multi-Layer Air and Missile Defence System (IMLAMD)	2023	Italy, France, Hungary, Sweden
70	Arctic Command & Control Effector and Sensor System (ACCESS)	2023	Finland, Estonia, France, Sweden

71	Robust Communication Infrastructure and Networks (ROCOMIN)	2023	Sweden, Estonia, France
72	ROLE 2F	2023	Spain, Bulgaria, France, Portugal, Finland, Sweden

Appendix B: Proximity to Russia

Table 1B. Coding Proximity to Russia

Group 6: Bordering or Very Close (Distance Score = 1)
Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden
Group 5: Close Eastern Europe (Distance Score = 2)
Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia
Group 4: Central Europe with Moderate Distance (Distance Score = 3)
Austria, Czechia, Germany
Group 3: Southeast and Southern Europe (Distance Score = 4)
Croatia, Greece, Slovenia
Group 2: Western Europe (Distance Score = 5)
Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands
Group 1: Far Periphery (Distance Score = 6)
Cyprus, Ireland, Portugal, Spain

Note: Proximity to Russia means its land border, but also includes the land border of the Kaliningrad Oblast. Furthermore, maritime borders (Baltic Sea, Black Sea, the North Sea) are also measured as proximity.

Appendix C: Assumption Checks

Table 1C: VIF values of the Statistical model 1

Binary Logistic model (1)	Tolerance	VIF
1		
Country (Ref. Albania)	0,983	1,018
Political position Left, Centre, Right	0,985	1,015
Gender	0,993	1,007
Have you had difficulties paying bills this year?	0,948	1,055
Binary of trust NATO	0,638	1,566
Binary of trust EU	0,544	1,839
Age 6 categories	0,983	1,017
Image of the EU (1=negative, 5=positive)	0,632	1,582
Ukraine war is threat (1=no threat, 4=strong threat)	0,931	1,074

a. Dependent Variable: EU Common Defence

Table 2C: VIF values of the Statistical model 2

DiD Regression (2)	Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)		
GDP Capita	0,616	1,622
Military as share GDP	0,622	1,607
Geographic proximity to Russia	0,743	1,345
High_treat*postwar	0,829	1,206
2 (Constant)		
GDP Capita	0,607	1,647
Military as share GDP	0,601	1,664
Geographic proximity to Russia	0,640	1,564

High_treat*postwar	0,428	2,334
Country numeric	0,965	1,036
Post-war	0,478	2,090

a. Dependent Variable: PESCO projects