Master's thesis

Does Europe’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine reflect balancing or bandwagoning behaviour, and what does this tell us about the limits of realist alliance theory?

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Abstract

This thesis examines whether Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reflects balancing or bandwagoning behaviour, and what this reveals about the explanatory limits of realist alliance theory. It addresses a central puzzle in contemporary European security: the coexistence of NATO's renewed military primacy and the European Union's expanded role as a security actor after 2022.

The study adopts a qualitative single-case study design and uses theory-guided qualitative document analysis to examine NATO and EU institutional material alongside secondary academic literature. It asks whether Europe's response points towards autonomous security provision, reinforced Atlantic dependence, or a more complex pattern that challenges classical realist categories.

The findings show that Europe's response is more convincingly explained by bandwagoning than by balancing. Under conditions of acute external threat, European actors relied primarily on NATO as the indispensable framework for deterrence, collective defence, and military credibility. At the same time, the European Union significantly expanded its security role through sanctions, military assistance, training, defence-industrial initiatives, and broader strategic coordination. However, this increased activism did not amount to full strategic autonomy or to a transfer of military primacy away from NATO.

The thesis argues that Europe's post-2022 response is best understood as a hybrid pattern that remains closer to bandwagoning, while also exposing the limits of a rigid balancing/bandwagoning dichotomy. In this sense, the study contributes to the literature by showing that realist alliance theory explains the hierarchy of hard security in Europe well, but only partially captures the institutional complexity of the contemporary European security order.

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1. Introduction – Context and relevance

1.1 Context

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a decisive moment in the European security order. The return of large-scale interstate war to the European continent challenged one of the main assumptions of the post-Cold War period: that European security would be organised primarily around crisis management, limited expeditionary operations, and cooperative security arrangements rather than around territorial defence and high-intensity deterrence. Cottey, Cladi, and Ewers-Peters describe the invasion as a fundamental disruption that pushed European states, NATO, and the European Union into a new phase of confrontation with Russia (Cottey et al., 2025). Srichandan likewise argues that the war revived a defence-oriented logic in European security, restoring military preparedness, deterrence, and hard-power considerations to the centre of the agenda (Srichandan, 2022).

This shift matters because the war activated questions about how European security is structured and which institutions remain decisive when the threat becomes immediate and existential. Gheciu and von Hlatky argue that the war forced NATO back toward its core task of collective defence and accelerated its adaptation to a much more dangerous strategic environment (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). At the same time, Hekimler and Cavlak contend that Russia's aggression acted as a turning point in the European Union's transformation into a security actor, pushing the Union towards a more geopolitical and security-focused posture (Hekimler & Cavlak, 2024). The post-2022 context is therefore defined by a dual development: the renewed centrality of NATO in hard security and the visible expansion of EU security activism.

1.2 The puzzle: strategic autonomy versus NATO

For several years, the debate on European security had already been shaped by the question of whether the European Union was gradually moving toward greater strategic autonomy or whether its defence role remained structurally dependent on NATO and, above all, on the United States. Wouters and Naert had already shown in the post-Cold War period that European security was developing through a layered institutional architecture in which NATO remained the core provider of collective defence, while European defence initiatives developed as an additional layer rather than as a substitute (Wouters & Naert, 1999). More recently, Rynning has argued that NATO continuity rests on the conjunction of power and purpose: the United States still possesses the capabilities required to sustain the alliance, and European states still lack the means to replace it (Rynning, 2005).

At the same time, the concept of strategic autonomy has become increasingly central to academic and political debates on European defence. Knutsen argues that a weakening transatlantic relationship has generated a European security deficit, but he also concludes that any meaningful development of strategic autonomy can only occur through close EU–NATO cooperation rather than outside it (Knutsen, 2022). Ewers-Peters similarly argues that strategic autonomy has not displaced transatlantic cooperation, but has instead reshaped the EU–NATO relationship into a more recalibrated and still interdependent form (Ewers-Peters, 2025). This means that the debate is not simply about whether Europe is becoming more active. It is about whether

greater European activism signals a movement away from NATO or a reinforcement of Europe's role within a still Atlantic-centred order.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine makes this tension much sharper. On the one hand, NATO was revitalised as the primary framework for deterrence, territorial defence, and force posture adaptation. On the other hand, the European Union expanded its role through sanctions, military assistance instruments, training missions, and defence-industrial initiatives.

1.3 Research question

With this background, the central research question guiding this thesis is the following:

Does Europe's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine reflect balancing or bandwagoning behaviour, and what does this tell us about the limits of realist alliance theory?

This question addresses a specific theoretical and empirical problem. It moves beyond broad and often vague claims about "European security" and instead focuses on alliance behaviour under acute external threat. Cladi and Locatelli argue that European defence cooperation is more convincingly understood as bandwagoning with the United States under unipolar conditions than as balancing against it (Cladi & Locatelli, 2012). By contrast, Pohl argues that European security policy cannot be adequately captured through either balancing or bandwagoning, because the EU case does not fit neatly within those classical realist categories (Pohl, 2013). Driedger adds a methodological warning that is especially important for this thesis: realism should not be treated as a vague common-sense vocabulary of power politics, but as a properly specified theory whose claims must be clearly delimited and tested (Driedger, 2024). The research question is therefore designed not only to identify the dominant behavioural pattern in Europe's response, but also to evaluate how far realist alliance theory can actually explain the European case.

1.4 Main argument

The main argument of this thesis is that Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is more convincingly explained by bandwagoning than by balancing, although the case does not fit either category in a pure classical sense. The immediate strategic response to the return of high-intensity war in Europe was organised around NATO rather than around an autonomous European military framework. Rynning's argument is central here: NATO remains the most credible provider of hard security because it combines the military capabilities of the United States with an enduring strategic purpose that European actors still regard as indispensable (Rynning, 2005). Knutsen reinforces this interpretation by arguing that Europe continues to face a structural security deficit which limits the practical reach of strategic autonomy (Knutsen, 2022).

At the same time, the thesis does not argue that Europe simply aligned passively with NATO while leaving its own structures unchanged. The European Union did become significantly more active as a security actor after 2022. Hekimler and Cavlak describe this development as a turning point in the Union's transformation into a security actor (Hekimler & Cavlak, 2024). However, Dani and Menéndez caution that stronger EU

defence discourse and activism should not be confused with the achievement of real strategic autonomy, since EU action still unfolds within a framework of dependence on NATO and the broader American strategic base (Dani & Menéndez, 2025). The argument of this thesis is therefore twofold: the dominant strategic logic of the European response points towards bandwagoning around NATO, but the simultaneous strengthening of EU security instruments reveals a hybrid pattern that exposes the limits of applying the balancing/bandwagoning dichotomy too rigidly.

The contribution of the thesis lies in clarifying the alliance-theoretical meaning of Europe's post-2022 response. Existing scholarship already explains important parts of the picture. Rynning explains why NATO remains strategically central (Rynning, 2005). Knutsen explains why strategic autonomy remains constrained by structural dependence (Knutsen, 2022). Hekimler and Cavlak explain why the EU has become a more visible security actor after the invasion (Hekimler & Cavlak, 2024). Cottey, Cladi, and Ewers-Peters show that the war generated a dual movement in which NATO was strengthened as the military core of European security while the EU simultaneously expanded its role in complementary areas (Cottey et al., 2025).

What remains less clearly developed in the literature is how these developments should be interpreted in alliance-theoretical terms. Cladi and Locatelli argue that Europe is better understood as bandwagoning than balancing (Cladi & Locatelli, 2012). Pohl, by contrast, argues that neither category adequately captures the European case (Pohl, 2013). Helferich adds that NATO–The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) relations should be understood as a "grey zone" characterised by overlap, asymmetry, and functional ambiguity rather than institutional substitution (Helferich, 2025). This thesis contributes to that debate by bringing these strands together within a single framework. Its contribution is not to show merely that NATO became more central or that the EU became more active, since both points are already well established. Its contribution is to assess whether Europe's response is best understood as balancing, bandwagoning, or as a hybrid pattern that reveals the conceptual limits of realist alliance theory in the contemporary European security order.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Realist alliance theory as the theoretical lens

This thesis adopts realist alliance theory as its theoretical lens because the research problem concerns a narrowly strategic issue: how European actors respond to acute external threat when they must rely on, reinforce, or reposition themselves within existing security arrangements. In classical realist terms, Morgenthau (1985) treats international politics as a struggle for power in which security remains inseparable from the capacity of states to protect their interests. In structural realist terms, Waltz (1979) argues that states operate under anarchy and therefore cannot depend on any higher authority for their security. Building on that logic, Mearsheimer (2001) treats survival as the primary goal of states and emphasises that strategic behaviour is shaped by uncertainty about the intentions and capabilities of others. Taken together, these authors make realism relevant to a case such as Europe's response to Russia's invasion because they direct analytical attention to threat, security, and strategic dependence rather than to institutional aspiration alone.

At the same time, realism is not used here as a loose synonym for "power politics," nor as a retrospective label attached to any behaviour that appears strategic. This point is essential in light of the tutor's criticism. Driedger (2024) explicitly distinguishes between realism-as-theory and realism-as-heuristics. For Driedger, realism-as-theory consists of explicitly specified assumptions and causal expectations, whereas realism-as-heuristics reduces realism to intuitive rules of thumb that may sound plausible but are not theoretically disciplined. This thesis therefore adopts realism only in the first sense. In other words, realist alliance theory is treated here as an explanatory framework that must generate clear expectations and then be assessed against observable patterns of European behaviour.

Within the broader realist tradition, alliance theory provides the most appropriate analytical entry point for this study. The reason is straightforward: the thesis is not primarily interested in whether realism explains every dimension of the war in Ukraine, but in whether Europe's response can be understood as a particular form of alliance behaviour. In this respect, Esitashvili and Martín (2020) define the core realist alliance premise clearly: states facing a common geostrategic external threat form or maintain alliances in order to secure themselves, survive, and remain independent. That proposition is especially relevant here because it links external threat directly to alliance choice, which is the core object of analysis in this thesis.

Realist alliance theory is also especially well suited to the European case because European security has long been organised through a dual institutional structure. NATO has remained the central framework for collective defence, whereas the European Union has developed a more limited, though increasingly important, security role. Under ordinary conditions, that coexistence can be described institutionally. Under conditions of acute threat, however, the more decisive question becomes which framework actors prioritise when deterrence and military credibility become urgent. Here, Rynning (2005) is particularly useful. He argues that NATO continuity rests not only on institutional persistence but on the continuing conjunction of power and purpose: the United States still possesses the capabilities required to sustain the alliance, while European states lack the means to replace it. From this perspective, realist theory is valuable because it helps identify the hierarchy of security provision rather than assuming that all institutions matter equally.

Nevertheless, adopting realist alliance theory does not imply that realism is assumed to be either complete or automatically sufficient. On the contrary, part of the reason for choosing this lens is that the literature itself reveals tensions within realist explanations. Esitashvili and Martín (2020) show that NATO's post-Cold War endurance forced realist scholarship to refine its own expectations rather than simply repeat them.

This more disciplined use of theory is further reinforced by Edinger (2022). Although Edinger examines structural realism in relation to the war in Ukraine, his broader point is methodological: structural realist concepts such as power differentials, rational interest, and threat response can illuminate analysis, but only if they are not applied rigidly or imprecisely. That observation is important here because it underlines the need to move from general realist language to more specific alliance expectations. Thus, the value of realist alliance theory in this thesis lies in its ability to provide a focused framework for analysing how actors respond to danger, which alliance structures they privilege, and what that reveals about the strategic organisation of European security.

Accordingly, realist alliance theory performs three functions in this study. First, it provides a material and strategic perspective from which to analyse Europe's response without treating institutional discourse as self-explanatory. Second, it offers concepts that make alliance behaviour analytically tractable. Third, it allows the thesis not only to ask whether Europe's response fits realist expectations, but also to assess where those expectations may reach their limits in the contemporary European case. For that reason, the next subsection turns to the two core concepts that structure the empirical argument of the thesis: **balancing** and **bandwagoning**.

2.2 Alliance theory and NATO's role in European security

Alliance theory is central to this thesis because the research problem is not simply about institutional coexistence between NATO and the European Union, but about how European actors respond to acute external threat through existing security arrangements. In realist terms, alliances are not neutral frameworks of cooperation. They are strategic instruments through which states seek protection, survival, and political independence under conditions of uncertainty. Esitashvili and Martín (2020) define this realist premise clearly when they state that states facing a common geostrategic external threat form military alliances in order to secure themselves, survive, and remain independent. Their argument is especially relevant here because it links external danger directly to alliance behaviour, which is the core issue examined in this thesis. At the same time, the same authors also show that NATO's endurance after the Cold War created a problem for traditional realist alliance theory, since the alliance survived, deepened, and expanded even after the disappearance of the Soviet threat. For that reason, they argue that realism must be refined rather than discarded, and that NATO's persistence should be treated as a theoretical puzzle rather than as an unproblematic confirmation of realist expectations (Esitashvili & Martín, 2020).

This debate matters because NATO occupies a particular position in European security. Unlike the EU, NATO was built around the logic of collective defence, integrated military planning, and the strategic role of the United States. For this reason, alliance theory helps explain not only why NATO emerged, but also why it continued to matter in Europe even after the Cold War. Rynning (2005) provides one of the clearest formulations of this argument. He contends that NATO continuity rests on both power and purpose. In terms of power, the United States possesses the capabilities needed to sustain the alliance, while European states lack the means to replace it. In terms of purpose, the alliance continues to reflect enough shared interests and values to remain strategically useful. This argument is particularly important for the present thesis because it helps explain why NATO has remained the core provider of territorial defence in Europe even as debates on European defence cooperation and autonomy have grown more intense (Rynning, 2005).

From this perspective, NATO's centrality is not simply a matter of institutional inertia. It reflects a deeper hierarchy of security provision. Under normal conditions, European security may appear institutionally layered, with NATO and the EU both playing important but different roles. Under conditions of severe external threat, however, alliance theory suggests that states will privilege the framework that offers the most credible deterrence and the greatest concentration of military capability. This is precisely why NATO is so central to the argument of this thesis. If Europe's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine moved above all through NATO, this would support the view that the alliance remains the decisive framework when strategic urgency is highest. In that sense, NATO's role in European security is not only institutional but also analytical: it provides the clearest test of whether Europe turns towards greater strategic autonomy or towards reinforced reliance on the transatlantic alliance.

At this point, the debate between balancing and bandwagoning becomes especially important. Realist scholarship has often treated European defence cooperation as a possible step toward balancing against American predominance. However, Cladi and Locatelli (2012) challenge this view directly. They argue that balancing accounts of European security policy are both theoretically and empirically flawed, and that European behaviour is better understood as bandwagoning with the United States under unipolar conditions. Their key point is not that Europe has remained passive. On the contrary, they recognise that European states have sought to increase defence cooperation and capabilities. Their argument is that these efforts have largely reinforced rather than weakened transatlantic ties. In other words, European defence initiatives have often developed inside a broader Atlantic security logic rather than against it (Cladi & Locatelli, 2012).

This argument is highly relevant for understanding NATO's role in Europe. If European states respond to insecurity by strengthening their position within the alliance rather than by building a genuine alternative to it, then NATO's centrality is not merely residual. It is reproduced by strategic choice. Cladi and Locatelli also show why many balancing-based accounts struggle to explain the European case. They argue that a number of realist scholars have confused balancing with bandwagoning and have overestimated the extent to which European security cooperation was driven by a genuine desire to offset the United States. Their critique is important for this thesis because it suggests that increased European defence activity does not automatically imply a movement away from NATO. Instead, it may indicate that European states are trying to avoid abandonment while increasing their capabilities within a fundamentally Atlantic order (Cladi & Locatelli, 2012).

At the same time, NATO's role in European security cannot be understood only through classical alliance logic detached from recent empirical developments. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reactivated the question of what NATO is for in a much sharper way than in previous years. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) show that the war forced NATO to rethink its force posture and return decisively to a collective defence focus. They underline that the 2022 Strategic Concept marked a clear reorientation toward deterrence and defence and that NATO rapidly adapted to what was understood as a far more dangerous security environment. This is directly relevant to the present thesis because it supports the claim that the invasion restored NATO's traditional core function to the centre of European security (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024).

However, Gheciu and von Hlatky are also important for a second reason. They do not interpret NATO's response as a straightforward vindication of structural realism. Instead, they argue that NATO's reaction to Russian aggression is better understood through a constructivist framework centred on security community, norms, and the meaning attributed to threat. Their point is that NATO did not simply respond to material danger in a mechanical way. It also responded to a perceived challenge to the values and norms of the transatlantic community. This matters for the present study because it introduces an important caution. The fact that NATO returned to collective defence after 2022 does not automatically prove that realism alone explains the case. Rather, it shows that alliance behaviour under threat may be shaped by both material and political meanings. For the purposes of this thesis, that insight is valuable not because it displaces realist alliance theory, but because it sets clear limits on overly deterministic interpretations of NATO's behaviour (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024).

Taken together, these contributions show why alliance theory is indispensable for analysing NATO's role in European security. Esitashvili and Martín clarify the realist logic that links threat and alliance behaviour, while also showing why NATO's post-Cold War survival forced refinements within realist theory. Rynning explains NATO continuity through the combination of American power and enduring strategic purpose. Cladi and Locatelli challenge balancing-based readings of European security cooperation and show why bandwagoning provides a more convincing explanation of European reliance on the Atlantic order. Gheciu and von Hlatky, finally, demonstrate that NATO's post-2022 recentralisation is real and significant, while warning that this development should not be read as a simple or automatic confirmation of realist assumptions.

For this thesis, the implication is clear. NATO remains central to European security not only because it exists as a longstanding institution, but because it continues to provide the most credible framework for deterrence and collective defence under acute external threat. This does not resolve in advance whether Europe's overall response to the invasion of Ukraine should be understood as balancing, bandwagoning, or something more complex. But it does establish the essential analytical baseline: any serious account of European security behaviour after 2022 must begin from the continued primacy of NATO in the field of hard security.

2.3 The EU as a security actor: CSDP, strategic autonomy and structural limits

Alongside NATO, the European Union has gradually developed a security and defence role through the Common Security and Defence Policy. Yet the relevant literature does not support the view that this development has produced a fully fledged alternative to NATO. Instead, the literature points to a more limited and uneven process in which the EU has expanded its institutional and operational presence in security affairs without overcoming the structural constraints that continue to limit its military autonomy.

Rynning (2011) offers a realist reading of this problem. He argues that realism helps explain both why the European Union has entered the field of power politics through the CSDP and why it has remained weak as a military actor. More specifically, he finds that the strongest realist interpretation is a classical realist one, according to which the CSDP is partly a response to international power trends but also an institutionalisation of the weakness of European nation-states. In that reading, the CSDP is a fragile power project rather than the basis of a self-sufficient European defence order. Rynning therefore treats European defence integration with caution and argues that it should be understood within, not against, the wider transatlantic framework (Rynning, 2011).

Haesebrouck (2015) reaches a related conclusion from the operational record of the CSDP. His article shows that the policy has mainly been used to deploy small-scale and generally unambitious operations that did not provide member states with clear security benefits. He argues that liberal and constructivist approaches help explain domestic pressures and diverging strategic cultures, but that the CSDP's disappointing operational track record is also linked to ineffective institutional design and, ultimately, to the reluctance of member states to transfer sovereignty to international organisations. This is highly relevant for the present thesis because it shows that the limits of the CSDP are not merely rhetorical or temporary. They are built into the political and institutional conditions under which EU defence cooperation has developed (Haesebrouck, 2015).

Dyson (2013) sharpens this point by criticising explanations that rely too heavily on strategic culture alone. He argues that patterns of progress and stasis in the CSDP cannot be fully explained by normative convergence or by the resilience of national strategic cultures. Instead, he contends that material power offers greater analytical leverage for understanding both the drivers and the constraints of Europe's search for military autonomy. In particular, he shows that persistent capability shortfalls, dependence on the United States for key strategic enablers, and differences in geography and energy dependency continue to shape how European states position themselves between NATO, the CSDP, and national strategic autonomy. Dyson does not deny that strategic culture matters, but he clearly treats it as insufficient on its own. His argument is therefore especially important for this thesis, because it underlines that claims about strategic autonomy cannot be assessed at the level of discourse alone. They must be judged against the material distribution of military capability (Dyson, 2013).

The more recent contribution by Helferich (2025) reinforces the argument that the EU's security role has expanded without resolving the basic structural ambiguity of European defence. He describes NATO–CSDP relations as a "grey zone" in which two overlapping institutions share responsibility for European security without fundamentally settling their relationship. His argument is not simply that the two organisations cooperate. Rather, he shows that NATO and the CSDP fulfil similar military purposes but different community functions, which makes radical institutional reform difficult. Crucially, he argues that even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the structural parameters of the NATO/CSDP relationship have remained largely unchanged. What has emerged instead is a more compartmentalised approach to strengthening European security within a broader transatlantic framework. This makes Helferich particularly useful here, because his analysis supports the view that increased EU activity does not by itself amount to a decisive move beyond NATO (Helferich, 2025).

Taken together, these authors point in the same general direction, but they do so for different reasons. Rynning (2011) emphasises the fragility of the CSDP as a power project rooted in the weakness of European nation-states. Haesebrouck (2015) shows that the CSDP's operational record has remained small-scale and institutionally constrained. Dyson (2013) demonstrates that material capability gaps continue to obstruct meaningful military autonomy. Helferich (2025) argues that the post-Ukraine period has not dissolved the structural ambiguity of the NATO–CSDP relationship, but has instead reproduced it in a new form. The common implication is clear: the European Union has become a more visible security actor, but it has not overcome the structural, institutional, and material constraints that prevent it from replacing NATO as the core framework of European defence.

For the purposes of this thesis, this conclusion is central. If the EU's security role remains constrained by weak military integration, limited operational ambition, dependence on allied capabilities, and persistent institutional overlap with NATO, then periods of acute external threat should be expected to reinforce Atlantic security structures rather than produce a rapid shift towards a fully autonomous European defence framework. The war in Ukraine therefore does not begin from a blank slate. It unfolds against a pre-existing European security architecture in which EU activism has grown, but NATO remains the militarily indispensable actor.

2.4 Ukraine war and the reconfiguration of European security

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a decisive rupture in the European security order. More than a regional military escalation, it challenged one of the central assumptions of the post-Cold War period: that large-scale interstate war had largely disappeared from the European continent. In that sense, the war constituted a major strategic shock that forced European states and institutions to reassess the foundations of European security, the role of deterrence, and the relative weight of NATO and the European Union within the continent's security architecture (Cottey et al., 2025; Ditrych & Laryš, 2025).

One of the clearest consequences of this rupture was the return of territorial defence and military deterrence to the centre of European security politics. As Srichandan (2022) argues, the war revived a defence-oriented logic that had been comparatively less central during the post-Cold War decades, when crisis management, stabilisation and limited expeditionary missions had often dominated the security agenda. In practical terms, the invasion reasserted the importance of military preparedness, defence spending, and alliance-based deterrence. This shift also reinforced a broadly realist reading of European security, in which hard power, strategic vulnerability, and external threat again became central explanatory factors (Driedger, 2024).

At the same time, the war did not emerge out of nowhere. The conflict must also be understood against the background of the longer deterioration in Russia–Ukraine relations since 2014. Cortés (2023) shows that Russia's pressure on Ukraine before the full-scale invasion already included a broad repertoire of hybrid tactics, including support for insurgent actors, information manipulation, cyber operations, and other methods designed to blur the boundary between conventional coercion and deniable interference. Similarly, Călin (2025) interprets Russian behaviour as a revisionist strategy aimed at preserving a sphere of influence, countering Western expansion, and combining direct and indirect instruments of pressure. This is important because it suggests that the reconfiguration of European security after 2022 was not only a response to open interstate war, but also to the cumulative destabilising effect of years of Russian hybrid and revisionist behaviour.

The most immediate institutional consequence of the invasion was the renewed centrality of NATO. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) argue that the war forced NATO back to its core task of collective defence and accelerated its adaptation to a far more dangerous strategic environment. The reinforcement of the eastern flank, renewed force posture planning, and a stronger emphasis on deterrence all pointed in the same direction: when high-intensity conflict returned to Europe, NATO again became the indispensable military framework for European defence. In this regard, the war did not weaken the transatlantic alliance. It revitalised it.

Miller's earlier study on NATO's durability helps clarify why this recentralisation was possible so quickly. Writing long before the 2022 invasion, Miller (2009) argued that multilateral asymmetric alliances led by a hegemonic power tend to be especially durable, particularly when they generate what he calls "club goods" for their members and when the alliance functions as a tool through which the leading power preserves influence and prevents the rise of peer rivals. His argument was not developed for the Ukraine war specifically, but it is highly relevant here because it helps explain why NATO remained available as the default framework of hard security even after the disappearance of the Soviet threat. In other words, the war did not have to rebuild NATO from scratch. It reactivated an alliance structure that had already proven institutionally and strategically resilient.

Yet the post-2022 transformation cannot be reduced to NATO alone. The European Union also expanded its role as a security actor. Hekimler and Cavlak (2024) explicitly describe Russia's aggression as a turning point in the EU's transformation into a security actor, arguing that the war accelerated a more security-centred and geopolitical understanding of the Union's role. The EU became more active through sanctions, military assistance instruments, defence-industrial initiatives, and broader coordination on security-related questions. This matters because it shows that the war generated not only renewed alliance dependence, but also an expansion of EU-level security activism.

However, greater EU activism should not be mistaken for a decisive transfer of military primacy away from NATO. Knutsen (2022) remains highly relevant on this point, as he argues that European strategic autonomy continues to be constrained by structural dependence on the United States and by the limitations of European military capabilities. Dani and Menéndez (2025) reinforce this conclusion by showing that the war has intensified European defence discourse and activism, but not in a way that eliminates reliance on NATO or on the American defence-industrial and strategic base. Increased EU activity therefore does not automatically imply a genuine redistribution of strategic authority within European security.

This is why the literature increasingly points to a dual rather than a singular development. Cottey et al. (2025) are particularly useful here because they capture the central dynamic of the post-2022 environment: NATO was strengthened as the primary framework for deterrence and defence, while the EU simultaneously expanded its security role through non-identical but complementary functions. The result is not a simple substitution of one institution for the other. It is a more layered security order in which NATO remains militarily central, while the EU becomes more active in sanctions, assistance, capability support, coordination, and political mobilisation.

For the purposes of this thesis, the significance of the Ukraine war lies precisely in this dual movement. The invasion strongly reinforced NATO's military primacy, which supports expectations derived from realist alliance theory about the continued importance of the most credible security provider under acute external threat. At the same time, the war also accelerated EU security activism, which complicates any overly simple reading of Europe's response as mere dependence on the Atlantic framework. The post-2022 reconfiguration of European security is therefore best understood not as a complete institutional transformation, but as a strategic reordering in which NATO's centrality was reaffirmed while the EU acquired a broader, though still secondary and structurally constrained, security role.

2.5 Identified gap in the literature

The literature reviewed so far provides important but still partial explanations of how European security has evolved after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Wouters and Naert (1999) showed at an earlier stage that European security was already structured through a layered institutional architecture rather than through a single organisation. Their contribution is important because it established the idea that NATO, the EU, the WEU, and the OSCE performed different but partly overlapping functions within European security governance . However, their analysis belongs to an earlier post-Cold War setting and does not address how a major interstate war might reorder the hierarchy inside that architecture.

A first strand of scholarship helps explain NATO's persistence and renewed centrality. Miller (2009) argues that multilateral asymmetric alliances led by a hegemonic power tend to be especially durable, particularly when they generate selective benefits for their members and allow the leading power to preserve influence and constrain potential rivals. His work is highly relevant because it helps explain why NATO did not disappear after the Cold War and why it could remain available as a credible security framework when a major threat re-emerged in Europe . Yet Miller does not address the specific post-2022 question that matters here: whether NATO's renewed importance has come at the expense of the EU's security role or alongside it.

A second body of literature explains the limitations of the EU as a defence actor. Haesebrouck (2015) shows that CSDP operations have historically remained limited in scale and ambition and have been shaped by political reluctance, weak institutional design, and constraints linked to member-state preferences. His argument is important because it demonstrates that the EU's security role has long been narrower than the role performed by NATO . Dyson (2013) adds that European debates on strategic autonomy cannot be understood through discourse alone, because material power and capability gaps continue to structure the real limits of European defence action. His contribution matters because it introduces a clear materialist warning against equating political ambition with actual military autonomy . These studies explain why the EU has struggled to become a fully autonomous military actor, but they do not by themselves determine whether the post-2022 response should be interpreted as a move toward balancing, dependence, or some combination of both.

A third strand addresses the relationship between NATO and the EU more directly. Helferich (2025) describes NATO–CSDP relations as a "grey zone" characterised by overlap, ambiguity, and structural asymmetry. His key point is that the EU may gain security relevance without displacing NATO's military centrality. This is especially useful for the present thesis because it suggests that the post-Ukraine environment may not fit a simple replacement logic in which one institution rises only if the other declines . Still, Helferich's work is more focused on institutional coexistence and functional overlap than on testing the alliance-theoretical meaning of Europe's reaction to acute external threat.

A fourth strand revisits realism in light of the war in Ukraine. Driedger (2024) does not simply argue that the war proves realism correct. His central claim is methodological: realism should not be treated as a loose common-sense language of power politics, but as a properly specified theory whose claims must be clearly delimited and tested. This matters for the present thesis because it rules out vague conclusions such as saying that Europe's response "looks realist" without identifying the precise mechanism being examined . Călin (2025) approaches the conflict from a more classic realist angle and interprets Russia's behaviour in terms of threat perception, revisionist power politics, and the security implications of NATO expansion. Her contribution is useful because it reinforces the importance of strategic competition and sphere-of-influence reasoning in the background of the war . Cortés (2023), in turn, shows that Russian coercion against Ukraine before the full-scale invasion already involved hybrid tactics that combined pressure, destabilisation, and ambiguity. Her work matters because it places the 2022 invasion within a longer trajectory of Russian coercive behaviour rather than treating it as an entirely isolated rupture . However, these realist-oriented works mainly illuminate the return of hard-security politics and revisionist conflict. They do not directly explain how Europe's institutional response should be interpreted within the NATO–EU relationship.

This is where the main analytical gap becomes visible. We have scholarship explaining why NATO is resilient and strategically central. We have scholarship explaining why the EU has expanded its security role while remaining constrained. We also have scholarship showing that the war revived realist questions about power, deterrence, and coercion. What remains underdeveloped is a framework that connects these strands in a single explanation of Europe's response to the war. More specifically, the literature has not yet clarified with sufficient precision whether the European reaction to Russia's invasion should be understood as a movement toward greater autonomous security provision, as renewed dependence on NATO, or as a more complex pattern that exposes the limits of classical alliance categories.

The present thesis addresses this gap by integrating these literatures through realist alliance theory. Instead of treating NATO revitalisation, EU security activism, and realist interpretations of the war as separate conversations, the thesis analyses them together as part of one question: how should Europe's response to acute external threat be understood in alliance-theoretical terms? In that sense, the contribution of the thesis is not to show that NATO has become more central or that the EU has become more active, since both claims are already well established in the literature. Its contribution is to assess whether the post-2022 European response is better captured as balancing, bandwagoning, or as a hybrid pattern that reveals the conceptual limits of that dichotomy in the contemporary European security order.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methodology Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to answer the central research question of this thesis: whether Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reflects balancing or bandwagoning behaviour, and what this reveals about the limits of realist alliance theory. As the thesis seeks to provide an explanatory rather than merely descriptive account, the chapter sets out the research design used to examine patterns of European security behaviour after 2022 and to assess them against the theoretical expectations derived from realist alliance theory. More specifically, it explains why a qualitative, theory-driven approach is the most appropriate for the purposes of this study, how the empirical material has been selected, how the main analytical categories are operationalised, and what limitations shape the scope of the findings. In doing so, the chapter establishes the methodological foundations for a transparent and coherent analysis closely aligned with the problem formulation and theoretical framework developed in the previous chapters.

3.2 Research philosophy and analytical orientation

This thesis adopts a qualitative, theory-guided approach in order to examine how Europe responded to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and how that response can be interpreted through the concepts of balancing and bandwagoning. A qualitative design is the most appropriate choice because the purpose of the study is not to count policy outputs or to test broad causal relationships through large-N comparison, but to understand the strategic meaning of European behaviour in a context of acute external threat. More specifically, the thesis seeks to identify patterns of institutional and strategic behaviour, assess how these patterns relate to realist alliance expectations, and evaluate whether the developments observed after 2022 fit those expectations or instead reveal their limits.

In this sense, the study is both explanatory and interpretative. It is explanatory because it seeks to account for why Europe's response took the form that it did under severe geopolitical pressure. It is interpretative because answering that question requires more than description: it requires assessing what that behaviour means within a complex security architecture shaped by both NATO and the European Union. The aim is therefore not simply to describe what happened after 2022, but to evaluate the strategic significance of those developments through a theoretically informed reading of the case.

The thesis uses realist alliance theory as an analytical lens rather than as an unquestioned truth. This distinction is important. Driedger (2024) warns that realism is often used too loosely, as if it were simply another word for power politics. His point is that realism should not be treated as a vague label attached to any strategic behaviour after the fact. Instead, it should be used as a properly specified framework with clear concepts and expectations. That warning is especially relevant here, because the purpose of this thesis is not to assume in advance that Europe's response was "realist," but to examine whether and to what extent realist alliance theory actually helps explain it.

At the same time, Glaser (2003) argues that structural realism can still offer useful analytical insights even in a world that is more complex than the simplest realist models sometimes suggest. In other words, complexity does not automatically make realist analysis irrelevant. It means that realist concepts have to be applied carefully and with clear limits. This is the position adopted in the present study. Realist alliance theory is used here as a disciplined analytical tool to assess how far the empirical developments after 2022 support, complicate, or stretch its core expectations.

3.3 Use of generative AI and research transparency

Generative AI tools were used in a limited and strictly supportive capacity during the preparation of this thesis. More specifically, they were used for language revision, the reformulation of draft sentences, and the exploration of alternative structural formulations. They were not used to generate empirical findings, theoretical arguments, or substantive analytical claims. All decisions concerning the formulation of the research problem, the selection and interpretation of sources, the operationalisation of concepts, and the final analytical argument remained entirely the responsibility of the author. The purpose of using these tools was therefore not to replace academic judgement, but to assist the drafting process in a transparent and limited manner.

3.4 Research design: qualitative single-case study

This thesis is designed as a qualitative single-case study focused on Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The object of analysis is therefore not the war in Ukraine in general, nor the full range of its military, legal, or humanitarian consequences. Rather, the thesis concentrates on the European response to the 2022 shock, understood as the strategic and institutional reaction that followed the invasion within the broader European security architecture. The central concern is to examine how Europe responded when a severe external threat returned to the centre of European politics, and how that response can be interpreted through the realist alliance concepts of balancing and bandwagoning.

A single-case design is appropriate because the purpose of the thesis is not to compare different crises across time, but to analyse one critical moment in depth. The 2022 invasion is a strategically significant case because it created exactly the kind of environment in which realist expectations should become especially visible. Faced with an acute external threat, European actors had to respond under conditions of urgency, insecurity, and renewed dependence on credible security arrangements. If the concepts of balancing and bandwagoning are to explain alliance behaviour convincingly, they should be especially visible under conditions of severe external threat. Europe's response to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is therefore a particularly useful case, because it allows those concepts to be examined in a moment of acute strategic pressure.

This is one of the main reasons why the 2022 case is methodologically useful. Dawood, Diniz (2024) argue that the war in Ukraine has revived core realist questions about balancing dynamics, strategic calculation, and international change. Their contribution is directly relevant here because it supports the view that the invasion is not just another foreign policy episode, but a moment in which alliance behaviour and threat response become unusually clear. In other words, if realist alliance theory helps explain European behaviour, it should be particularly useful in a case where external danger is severe and strategic choices are difficult to avoid.

The choice of a single case is also consistent with the theoretical caution that guides the thesis. Driedger (2024) warns that realism is often used too loosely, as if any form of strategic behaviour could simply be labelled "realist" after the fact. His point is that realist theory should be applied through clearly specified concepts and then assessed against empirical developments. This thesis follows that logic. The 2022 invasion is not selected because it automatically proves realism correct. It is selected because it provides a strong setting in which to examine whether Europe's actual response fits the concepts of balancing and bandwagoning, or whether the case instead exposes their limits.

At the same time, this research design does not assume that complexity makes realist analysis impossible. Glaser (2003) argues that structural realism can still offer useful analytical insights in a more complex world, provided that its claims are applied carefully and within clear limits. This is important for the present study, because the European response to the invasion unfolded in a layered institutional setting shaped by both NATO and the European Union. A qualitative single-case study makes it possible to examine that complexity without losing sight of the central question: which security framework was prioritised when the pressure of external threat became most acute?

For that reason, a broader comparative design is not the most suitable choice here. Comparing multiple crises might have widened the scope of the project, but it would also have reduced the depth of analysis and shifted attention away from the main purpose of the thesis. The aim is not to show that all crises produce the same European reaction, nor to build a broad typology of crisis behaviour. The aim is to examine one particularly revealing conjuncture in depth and to assess whether realist alliance theory can explain the strategic meaning of Europe's response. Seen in this way, the 2022 invasion is not only an important empirical case. It is also a particularly strong case for testing the explanatory reach of balancing and bandwagoning under conditions of severe external threat.

3.5 Operationalisation of the theoretical framework

In order for realist alliance theory to be analytically useful, its central concepts must be translated into observable indicators that can guide the empirical analysis. This is especially important in a thesis such as this one, where the goal is not simply to describe Europe's response to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, but to assess whether that response is better captured by the concepts of balancing or bandwagoning, and whether the European case reveals limits in that dichotomy. As Driedger (2024) argues, realism should not be used as a vague label for any strategic behaviour that appears power-political after the fact. Rather, it must be applied through clearly specified concepts that can be assessed against concrete empirical developments. In the same vein, Glaser (2003) shows that realist analysis can remain useful in complex settings, but only if its claims are carefully delimited and connected to observable patterns rather than treated as self-evident truths.

For that reason, this thesis operationalises the theoretical framework through three analytical categories. The first concerns balancing, understood here as behaviour oriented towards strengthening Europe's own security capacity in ways that reduce dependence on the existing transatlantic security structure. The second concerns bandwagoning, understood as behaviour that reinforces reliance on NATO and, by extension, on the US-led strategic architecture as the most credible framework of protection under acute threat. The third category concerns indicators of theoretical limits. This final category is necessary because the literature on European security repeatedly suggests that the European case does not always fit neatly within a classical realist dichotomy. Authors such as Pohl (2013), Helferich (2025), Dani and Menéndez (2025), and Ewers-Peters (2025) all point, in different ways, to a more complex pattern in which NATO centrality and EU security activism can grow at the same time rather than cancel each other out. Operationalising this third category therefore allows the analysis not only to identify a dominant pattern, but also to assess whether the empirical case stretches the explanatory reach of realist alliance theory itself.

To distinguish empirically between balancing, bandwagoning, and a possible hybrid logic, this thesis uses a set of observable indicators derived from the theoretical debate rather than treating these concepts as vague labels attached retrospectively to strategic behaviour (Driedger, 2024). More specifically, balancing is identified where the empirical material points to a strengthening of Europe's own defence capabilities, greater institutional autonomy, attempts to reduce dependence on the United States or NATO, and the development of specifically European instruments of security provision (Dyson, 2013; Knutsen, 2022). Bandwagoning, by contrast, is identified where the material shows reinforced reliance on NATO as the central framework of deterrence and defence, acceptance of the US-led strategic architecture as indispensable, continued dependence on American military capabilities, and the prioritisation of Atlantic rather than autonomous European security structures (Cladi & Locatelli, 2012; Rynning, 2005). A hybrid logic is identified where the European Union expands its own instruments, capabilities, and security role, but does so within a broader security order in which NATO and US-backed hard-security guarantees remain structurally central (Pohl, 2013; Helferich, 2025). This distinction is essential because increased EU security activism does not automatically amount to balancing: it counts as balancing only where it is linked to a meaningful logic of autonomous capability-building rather than to a stronger European role within an unchanged NATO-centred order.

Analytical category	Observable empirical indicators
Balancing	Strengthening of European defence capabilities; greater institutional autonomy; attempts to reduce dependence on the United States or NATO; development of specifically European security and defence instruments.

Bandwagoning	Stronger alignment with NATO; acceptance of US strategic leadership as indispensable; continued dependence on American military capabilities; prioritisation of NATO as the central framework of deterrence and defence.
Hybrid logic	Expansion of EU capabilities, instruments, and security activism, but within a broader pattern of persistent dependence on NATO and the United States for hard-security guarantees and military credibility.

3.5.1 Balancing

Within the framework of this thesis, balancing refers to behaviour aimed at strengthening Europe's own capacity to provide security through European structures rather than through continued reliance on NATO as the primary strategic framework. In classical realist terms, balancing usually refers to efforts by states to build up their own capabilities or align with others in order to counter a dominant power or threatening actor. Applied to the European case, however, the concept must be used more carefully. The question is not whether the EU is balancing against Russia in a general sense, since both NATO and the EU clearly reacted against Russian aggression. The more precise analytical question is whether Europe's response to the invasion reflects a movement towards a more autonomous European pole of security provision, one that seeks to lessen strategic dependence on NATO and especially on the United States.

This understanding draws in part on Cladi and Locatelli (2012), whose argument is important precisely because they reject the common assumption that European defence cooperation necessarily constitutes balancing behaviour. Their contribution is relevant here because it clarifies what balancing would have to mean in the European context: not simply more European defence activity, but activity that carries a meaningful logic of strategic counterweight or reduced dependence. In a similar way, Dawood, Diniz and (2024) emphasise that balancing should be linked to strategic calculation under conditions of systemic change and external threat. Their analysis is useful because it reminds us that balancing is not a rhetorical posture, but a pattern of behaviour tied to capability, alignment, and strategic repositioning. Finally, Dyson (2013) is also relevant here, because he stresses that debates about European strategy cannot be detached from material capabilities. This means that balancing cannot be inferred from discourse alone. It has to be linked to attempts to create or strengthen actual security capacity outside or beyond reliance on the established transatlantic framework.

For the purposes of this thesis, balancing will therefore be identified through four main indicators. The first is the strengthening of European defence capabilities through a logic of strategic autonomy. This includes efforts to build up military, institutional, or industrial capacity at EU level in a way explicitly linked to the need for Europe to act more independently in security matters. The second is the promotion of initiatives intended to reduce dependence on the United States or NATO. Here the analytical focus is not on whether cooperation with NATO continues, but on whether the European response includes a clear attempt to shift the centre of gravity of security provision towards Europe itself. The third indicator is the reinforcement of EU military or defence instruments with the purpose of increasing Europe's autonomous capacity to act. This may include the expansion of defence cooperation tools, financial mechanisms, or planning instruments where the rationale is not only burden-sharing, but greater independent capability. The fourth indicator is political discourse presenting European security as something that should increasingly rest on European structures rather than primarily on Atlantic ones.

These indicators matter because they distinguish balancing from simple institutional activism. Hekimler and Cavlak (2024), for example, argue that Russia's aggression acted as a turning point in the transformation of the EU into a security actor. Their work is relevant here because it points to the kind of post-2022 developments that might be read as balancing if they are linked to a stronger, more autonomous European security role. Similarly, Dani and Menéndez (2025) show that defence has become a much more central part of EU political action after the invasion, but they also suggest that one must be careful not to equate increased activity with full strategic transformation. This is exactly why operationalisation is necessary. In this thesis, balancing is not coded merely because the EU became more visible or more active. It is coded only where that activism points towards a meaningful strengthening of Europe's own security capacity as an alternative or partial counterweight to continued dependence on NATO.

At the empirical level, this means that the analysis will treat balancing as present where the European response shows a clear move towards greater autonomous capability, reduced reliance on Atlantic structures, or a stronger claim that Europe should increasingly organise its security through European instruments. Put differently, more EU defence does not automatically equal balancing. It counts as balancing only when it is connected to a recognisable strategic logic of autonomy and capability-building beyond the established hierarchy of NATO-centred security.

3.5.2 Bandwagoning

In this thesis, bandwagoning refers to behaviour in which European actors respond to the Russian invasion primarily by reinforcing alignment with NATO and the wider US-led strategic order rather than by shifting security responsibility towards autonomous European structures. In classical realist debate, bandwagoning is usually understood as alignment with stronger power rather than resistance to it. In the European case, the concept must again be adapted carefully. The issue is not that Europe is bandwagoning with Russia, but that under conditions of acute threat, European actors may choose to rely more heavily on the dominant existing security framework, namely NATO, because it offers the most credible deterrence, command capacity, and military protection.

This usage is grounded above all in Cladi and Locatelli's (2012) argument that European security behaviour is better understood as bandwagoning with the United States under unipolar conditions than as balancing against it. Their relevance for this thesis is direct, because they provide the conceptual basis for treating strengthened European reliance on NATO not as a sign of passivity, but as a form of strategic alignment with the strongest and most credible security provider. Rynning (2005) is also central here. His argument is that NATO endures because of the continuing conjunction of power and purpose: the United States still supplies the capabilities that Europeans cannot replace, and the alliance still serves a shared strategic function. This matters for operationalisation because it helps define what bandwagoning would look like empirically in the European response to 2022. It would not simply mean rhetorical support for NATO, but behaviour that clearly treats NATO as the indispensable core of European security. Esitashvili and Martín (2020) reinforce this point by showing that NATO's endurance must be explained through continued strategic utility rather than historical inertia alone. Their work supports the use of bandwagoning as a category tied to credible gains from alliance reliance, not just institutional habit.

For the purposes of this thesis, bandwagoning will be identified through four principal indicators. The first is the explicit reinforcement of NATO as the central framework of European security. This includes statements, policies, or strategic choices that treat NATO as the primary institution for deterrence and defence in response to Russian aggression. The second is alignment with the US-led strategic architecture. This refers to behaviour that accepts, rather than seeks to displace, the leading role of American capabilities in European security. The third indicator is the prioritisation of deterrence, collective defence, and military coordination through NATO rather than through autonomous EU structures. The fourth is the practical recognition that the decisive response to the Russian threat depends above all on Atlantic capabilities, not on a European defence framework acting independently.

These indicators are strongly supported by recent scholarship on the post-2022 security environment. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) show that NATO's response to Russian aggression rapidly reasserted the centrality of the alliance as the key framework for collective defence. Their contribution is especially useful because it highlights that the war did not produce strategic uncertainty about which institution would matter most militarily. It pushed NATO back to the centre. Knutsen (2022) similarly argues that even where debates on European strategic autonomy have intensified, the transatlantic relationship continues to define the hard-security core of European defence cooperation. This matters because it supports the idea that stronger reliance on NATO is not simply institutional continuity, but a strategic response to capability asymmetry and deterrence needs. In addition, Miller (2009) helps reinforce the same logic from the perspective of alliance durability. NATO's persistence, in his account, is tied to deep strategic and political reasons, which makes renewed reliance on it during acute crisis analytically meaningful rather than conceptually trivial.

Operationally, the thesis will therefore code bandwagoning where the European response to the invasion reveals a clear prioritisation of NATO, a practical acceptance of US-led deterrence as indispensable, and a security logic centred on alliance reinforcement rather than autonomous European substitution. This category is particularly important because it allows the analysis to distinguish between mere coexistence with NATO and a stronger pattern in which Europe actively doubles down on the Atlantic framework in response to danger. If the empirical material shows that European actors turned first and foremost to NATO for credible defence, while EU security activity remained secondary or complementary, that will count as evidence of bandwagoning in the sense used here.

3.5.3 Indicators of theoretical limits

The third category is included because the European case may not fit fully within either balancing or bandwagoning when those concepts are applied in a strict classical sense. This is not a minor addition but a necessary analytical step. The literature on European security repeatedly suggests that post-2022 developments involve simultaneous reinforcement of NATO and expansion of the EU's role as a security actor. If that is the case, then the task of the analysis is not only to identify which pattern is stronger, but also to ask whether the balancing/bandwagoning dichotomy is itself sufficient for understanding the European response.

This concern is grounded most clearly in Pohl (2013), whose central claim is that Europe's security policy is neither adequately explained as balancing nor as bandwagoning. His contribution is highly relevant for this subsection because it provides the clearest warning against forcing the European case into a dichotomy that may be too rigid. Pohl's point is not that power and alliances do not matter, but that the EU's security behaviour often reflects a more complicated combination of institutional development, political preferences, and strategic dependence. That argument becomes even more relevant after 2022, when several authors point to a layered rather than binary development. Helferich (2025) describes NATO–CSDP relations as operating in a "grey zone", marked by overlap, asymmetry, and evolving European security governance. This is directly useful here because it helps conceptualise a pattern in which the EU gains security relevance without replacing NATO's military centrality. Dani and Menéndez (2025) also matter for this category, because they show that the EU's defence activism has increased significantly, yet not in a way that clearly displaces NATO as the main security provider. Finally, Ewers-Peters (2025) is relevant because she argues that strategic autonomy has not simply weakened EU–NATO cooperation, but has reshaped and reloaded it. That formulation is important for this thesis because it points towards adaptation within the alliance structure rather than a straightforward move away from it.

On that basis, four indicators of theoretical limits are used in the analysis. The first is the coexistence of stronger NATO centrality and expanded EU security activism. If both developments occur simultaneously, the case may resist a simple binary interpretation. The second is a functional division of labour between the EU and NATO, in which NATO remains the core provider of deterrence and collective defence while the EU expands in areas such as coordination, capability development, sanctions, military assistance instruments, or hybrid security. The third indicator is behaviour that does not fit fully into either balancing or bandwagoning. This includes cases where European actors strengthen the EU's role while still clearly accepting NATO primacy, or where they support strategic autonomy as a complement rather than an alternative. The fourth indicator is institutional overlap in which the EU gains prominence without displacing the Atlantic military centre of gravity.

These indicators are especially important because they allow the thesis to capture a hybrid pattern if the empirical material points in that direction. Cottey, Cladi and Ewers-Peters (2025) are relevant here because they describe the post-2022 environment as one in which both NATO and the EU were strengthened, though in different ways and for different functions. Their work helps justify the expectation that the European response may involve a dual movement rather than a single strategic shift. Ditrych and Laryš (2025) also reinforce this view by arguing that the war reopened broader questions about European security architecture rather than simply settling the hierarchy once and for all. In methodological terms, this means that the analysis should be open to a more differentiated result than either pure balancing or simple bandwagoning.

Operationally, this final category makes it possible for the thesis to reach a more precise conclusion. If the evidence shows stronger NATO centrality alongside expanded EU activism, then the European response should not be described as balancing in any pure sense. But neither should it be reduced to simple bandwagoning if the EU simultaneously acquires greater security relevance and seeks to expand its own strategic instruments. In that scenario, the most accurate conclusion would be that Europe's response reflects a hybrid pattern: Atlantic primacy remains intact, but it coexists with a more active, though still subordinate or complementary, EU security role. This is exactly the kind of result that can reveal not only the usefulness of realist alliance theory, but also the point at which its classic categories begin to lose precision when applied to the contemporary European security order.

3.6 Data selection: documents, institutional outputs and secondary academic literature

The empirical material used in this thesis is selected directly in relation to the research question and the theoretical framework established in the previous sections. Since the thesis asks whether Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reflects balancing or bandwagoning behaviour, the corpus must make it possible to analyse both the institutional response of NATO and the European Union and the scholarly interpretations that help explain its strategic meaning. For that reason, the material is organised into three groups: NATO-related material, EU-related material, and secondary analytical literature. The purpose is not to build an exhaustive archive of every statement or policy produced after February 2022, but to construct a focused corpus that can be used consistently in the analysis and that speaks directly to the concepts operationalised in the previous section.

This choice is also methodological. The thesis does not rely on academic literature alone, but neither does it claim to be based on a fully comprehensive standalone archive of primary sources. Instead, it combines selected institutional documents with scholarly analysis and interprets both through the lens of realist alliance theory. This is the most appropriate strategy for the present study because the aim is to explain the strategic meaning of Europe's response to the 2022 shock, not to reconstruct every legal, diplomatic, or military development in documentary detail. In practice, the corpus is designed to capture three questions: how NATO framed the threat and reasserted its military centrality, how the EU defined and expanded its own security role after 2022, and how academic literature helps interpret these developments in terms of balancing, bandwagoning, and the limits of that dichotomy.

3.6.1 NATO-related material

The first part of the corpus consists of NATO-related material used to assess whether the European response to the invasion primarily reinforced the Atlantic security framework. The two central documents here are the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept (NATO, 2022a) and the Madrid Summit Declaration (NATO, 2022b). These are indispensable because they show, in NATO's own terms, how the alliance interpreted the post-2022 security environment and what kind of response it considered necessary. The Strategic Concept identifies Russia as "the most significant and direct threat" to Allied security and states that NATO's key purpose is collective defence, with deterrence and defence as a core

task and the backbone of Article 5 commitments . The Madrid Summit Declaration then translates that strategic framing into concrete political decisions by reaffirming that NATO remains “the foundation of our collective defence” and by announcing a strengthened deterrence and defence posture, including additional robust forces on the eastern flank . Together, these documents are central for identifying indicators of bandwagoning, especially the renewed prioritisation of NATO as the indispensable framework of European security.

To complement these two documents, the corpus also includes the House of Commons briefing on NATO’s reinforcement of its eastern flank (Mills & Holland, 2025). This is not an official NATO doctrinal text, so it is not treated in the same way as the Strategic Concept or the Madrid Declaration. Its value lies elsewhere: it provides a structured account of how NATO’s military posture changed in practice after the invasion, including the activation of defence plans, the use of elements of the NATO Response Force, the expansion of battlegroups, and the adaptation of forward defence on the eastern flank . Methodologically, this makes it useful as contextual documentary material linking NATO’s strategic language to observable military measures.

These institutional texts are read together with a selected body of academic literature on NATO’s response and centrality. Rynning (2005) is included because he argues that NATO endures through the continuing conjunction of power and purpose, meaning that the alliance persists not by inertia alone but because the United States still provides the capabilities Europeans cannot replace and because NATO still serves a strategic function . Esitashvili and Martín (2020**)** are also relevant because they begin from the realist premise that alliances form in response to common external threats, while using NATO as a case that requires realist alliance theory to be refined rather than applied mechanically . Cottey, Cladi and Ewers-Peters (2025) are included because they present the 2022 invasion as a major disruption that pushed NATO, the EU and European states into a new phase of confrontation with Russia and into a re-making of the European security order . Finally, Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) are relevant because they show that Russia’s aggression forced NATO to rethink its force posture and return decisively to collective defence, even though they also argue that this response cannot be explained by material threat alone . Taken together, these works help interpret the NATO-related documents not simply as institutional declarations, but as evidence of a reinforced Atlantic hierarchy under acute threat.

3.6.2 EU-related material

The second part of the corpus focuses on the EU’s security and defence response after 2022. Here the purpose is to capture both the expansion of EU security activism and the question of whether that activism amounted to a meaningful shift toward autonomous European security provision. The most important institutional document in this group is the Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2024). This report is central because it shows how the EU itself presents the implementation of its post-2022 security agenda. It explicitly links Russia’s war of aggression to the acceleration of EU action, including military assistance to Ukraine, training of Ukrainian personnel, development of the Rapid Deployment Capacity, new defence industrial measures, and intensified NATO-EU cooperation .

This makes it highly relevant for identifying where the EU became more active and what kind of security role it claimed for itself.

The second key EU document is the European Peace Facility factsheet (European Commission, 2025). This is included because it provides concrete evidence of one of the Union's most important defence-related instruments after 2022. The EPF (European Commission, 2025) is presented as a mechanism that enables the EU to provide military and defence support, including equipment and infrastructure, to partner armed forces, and the document specifies the scale of assistance to Ukraine as well as the existence of a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund . Methodologically, this allows the thesis to move from general claims about EU activism to a specific instrument through which that activism was materially expressed.

The corpus also includes the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 (European Commission, 2025), but with a more limited and clearly defined function. This document is not treated as evidence of the immediate 2022 response. Instead, it is used to show how, by 2025, the EU was framing European defence in terms of rearmament, capability gaps, industrial mobilisation, and greater responsibility for its own security . For that reason, it is relevant as evidence of the medium-term direction of EU defence thinking rather than of the first institutional reaction to the invasion.

These documents are read alongside a selected group of academic works on the EU's evolving security role. Hekimler and Cavlak (2024) are included because they explicitly describe Russia's aggression as a turning point in the transformation of the EU into a security actor and emphasise that the invasion pushed the Union toward a more power-oriented and security-focused posture . Ewers-Peters (2025) is also central because she argues that strategic autonomy has not simply undermined NATO-EU cooperation; rather, the two have evolved in parallel, and strategic autonomy has become part of a recalibrated relationship rather than a clean break from Atlantic dependence . Helferich (2025) strengthens this point further by describing NATO-CSDP relations as existing in a "grey zone" of overlap, ambiguity and functional asymmetry, in which the EU can gain security relevance without displacing NATO's military centrality . Finally, Dyson (2013) remains important because he insists that European strategy cannot be understood through discourse alone and must be tied to material capabilities, which is crucial when assessing whether greater EU activity actually amounts to balancing behaviour . Together, these works justify the inclusion of EU institutional material while also providing the analytical caution needed to avoid equating activism with autonomy.

3.6.3 Secondary analytical literature

The third part of the corpus consists of secondary analytical literature used to interpret the case through realist alliance theory. This group is not included to provide institutional evidence of what NATO or the EU did. Its purpose is different: it provides the conceptual tools through which those developments are interpreted. The key texts in this group are Driedger (2024), Cladi and Locatelli (2012), Pohl (2013), and Dawood, Diniz (2024), supported where necessary by broader realist literature already discussed in the theoretical framework.

Driedger (2024) is included because he draws a clear distinction between realism used as theory and realism used as a loose heuristic. His argument is directly relevant to this thesis because it supports the need to work with specified concepts and expectations rather than with a vague vocabulary of power politics . Cladi and Locatelli (2012) are essential because they argue that Europe is better understood as bandwagoning with the United States than as balancing against it, and they explicitly reject the common assumption that European defence cooperation automatically constitutes balancing behaviour . Pohl (2013) is equally central because he argues that Europe's security policy is neither properly explained as balancing nor as bandwagoning, thereby providing the clearest support for including a third analytical category devoted to the limits of that dichotomy . Finally, Dawood,(Dawood, L. I. A., & Costa, E. P. L. D. (2024))are relevant because they frame the war in Ukraine as a context in which core realist questions about balancing dynamics, strategic calculation and international change return with unusual force, making the case particularly suitable for theory-led analysis .

Taken together, these three groups form a corpus that is selective but coherent. The thesis is therefore based on a combination of institutional documents from NATO and the EU, scholarly analyses of those institutional developments, and secondary analytical literature used to interpret the European response through realist alliance theory. This is sufficient for the purposes of the study because the aim is not to document every aspect of post-2022 European security policy, but to examine in a focused and theoretically disciplined way how Europe responded to a severe external threat and what that response reveals about the explanatory power and limits of balancing and bandwagoning

The validity of the analysis is further strengthened through triangulation between institutional documents and academic literature. The institutional material is used to identify how NATO and the European Union defined the post-2022 security environment, justified their responses, and positioned themselves within the broader European security order. The academic literature is then used to contextualise, interpret, and critically assess these institutional self-presentations in light of wider theoretical and empirical debates. This makes it possible to contrast official formulations with scholarly analysis rather than relying on policy discourse alone, and thereby to produce a more robust interpretation of Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

3.7 Analytical strategy: theory-guided qualitative document analysis

This thesis uses a theory-guided qualitative document analysis to examine Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This analytical strategy is the most appropriate because the purpose of the study is not to measure policy outputs quantitatively or to establish broad causal regularities across multiple cases, but to interpret the strategic meaning of institutional behaviour in a context of acute external threat. More specifically, the analysis focuses on how NATO and the European Union framed the post-2022 security environment, how they justified and developed their respective responses, and how these developments can be interpreted through the realist alliance concepts of balancing and bandwagoning.

This method is particularly appropriate because the thesis examines institutional responses, strategic framing, and official understandings of security rather than individual decision-making or measurable behavioural outputs alone. Since the research question focuses on how NATO and the European Union interpreted the post-2022 security environment, justified their actions, and positioned themselves within the European security order, documentary sources provide the most direct empirical access to those processes. Official texts such as strategic concepts, summit declarations, progress reports, and policy documents make it possible to trace how threat perceptions were formulated, which instruments were prioritised, and whether the overall response pointed towards reinforced Atlantic dependence, greater European autonomy, or a more complex hybrid pattern. For that reason, qualitative document analysis is not used here as a secondary descriptive tool, but as the most suitable method for assessing the strategic meaning of Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The analysis is guided by the categories developed in the previous section. This means that the material is not read as a neutral chronological record of events, nor approached in a purely descriptive way. Instead, the selected documents and academic texts are examined through prior analytical categories derived from realist alliance theory. The analysis is therefore structured around three categories: balancing, bandwagoning, and indicators of the limits of realist alliance theory. These categories provide the basis for assessing whether the post-2022 response points towards a stronger autonomous European security role, a renewed reliance on NATO as the central security framework, or a more complex pattern that does not fit neatly within either concept.

The analysis therefore uses the balancing/bandwagoning debate as the main theoretical bridge between the literature review, the operationalisation of concepts, and the empirical chapters. The selected NATO and EU documents are read in order to assess whether post-2022 European security behaviour shows evidence of autonomous capability-building, deeper alignment with NATO, or a hybrid pattern combining both dynamics. In this way, the empirical analysis does not simply describe institutional developments after the invasion, but evaluates them against the theoretical expectations established in the previous chapter.

The material is coded deductively on the basis of these pre-defined analytical categories. More specifically, the analysis identifies passages and recurring patterns that indicate balancing, bandwagoning, or indicators of theoretical limits, depending on whether the material points towards greater autonomous European capacity, reinforced reliance on NATO and the US-led security framework, or a hybrid configuration that does not fit fully within either category. In this way, coding serves as a structured analytical procedure for linking the empirical material to the theoretical expectations derived from realist alliance theory.

Within this strategy, the material is read for what it reveals about strategic priorities, institutional hierarchy, capability development, and the practical organisation of European security. The aim is not simply to note that both NATO and the EU became more active after 2022, but to determine the strategic meaning of that activity. For that reason, the analysis pays particular attention to whether NATO is presented and treated as the indispensable framework for deterrence and collective defence, whether EU initiatives point towards a meaningful reduction of dependence on NATO, and whether

the observed developments indicate a clearer tendency towards balancing, bandwagoning, or a hybrid pattern.

In order to answer the main research question, the analysis is structured around three analytical sub-questions.

The first is: **Which institutional framework became central in Europe's security response after 2022?** This question helps identify whether the war reinforced NATO's primacy or produced a more substantial redistribution of security responsibility towards European structures.

The second is: **Did the EU's post-2022 security initiatives reduce Europe's dependence on NATO, or did they remain complementary to it?** This question is necessary because greater EU activity does not automatically amount to strategic autonomy in a strong sense.

The third is: **Does the observed pattern fit balancing, bandwagoning, or a more complex hybrid logic?** This final question brings the analysis back to the main purpose of the thesis: not only to identify the dominant behavioural pattern, but also to assess whether the European case exposes the limits of applying classical realist alliance categories too rigidly.

This approach is also consistent with the theoretical caution adopted throughout the thesis. Driedger (2024) warns against using realism as a loose label attached retrospectively to strategic behaviour. His argument is that realist concepts should be treated as specified analytical tools whose explanatory value must be assessed against empirical material, rather than assumed in advance. This warning is especially relevant here. The present study does not begin from the assumption that Europe's response was necessarily an instance of balancing or bandwagoning. Instead, it uses those concepts to structure the reading of the material and to assess how far they help explain the relationship between NATO centrality, EU security activism, and the evolving European security order.

At the practical level, this means that the analysis proceeds by identifying recurring patterns across the selected corpus of institutional documents and academic literature. NATO-related material is examined primarily for evidence of deterrence, collective defence, force posture adaptation, and reaffirmed Atlantic centrality. EU-related material is examined for evidence of security activism, defence capability development, military assistance instruments, and claims about greater European responsibility in security and defence. The academic literature is then used to clarify the strategic meaning of these developments and to assess whether the overall pattern is better understood as balancing, bandwagoning, or a hybrid response in which NATO remains primary while the EU assumes a more active but still complementary role.

3.8 Limitations

Like any qualitative single-case study, this thesis has a number of limitations that should be made explicit. Recognising them is important not because they invalidate the research design, but because they help define the scope of the claims that can

reasonably be made. The study does not aim to offer a complete account of all dimensions of the war in Ukraine, nor does it seek to explain every aspect of European security transformation after 2022. Its purpose is narrower: to assess whether Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion is better understood through the concepts of balancing, bandwagoning, or through a more complex pattern that reveals the limits of realist alliance theory.

The first limitation is that the study focuses on a single crisis. This means that the findings are tied to one historically specific and strategically exceptional case. The 2022 invasion is analytically valuable precisely because it constitutes a severe external shock, but that also means the conclusions should not automatically be generalised to all European security crises or to all phases of EU-NATO relations. A different type of crisis, for example one involving terrorism, instability in the southern neighbourhood, or a lower-intensity geopolitical dispute, might produce a different configuration of European responses. The thesis therefore makes an analytically focused claim about one critical case rather than a universal claim about European alliance behaviour in all circumstances.

A second limitation is that the study does not measure military capabilities in a quantitative way. The analysis discusses deterrence, dependence, capability development, and institutional hierarchy, but it does not provide a systematic quantitative comparison of force levels, procurement volumes, defence-industrial output, or national military expenditure across all relevant actors. This matters because realist arguments often rest, at least in part, on capability differentials. In the present thesis, those issues are addressed qualitatively through institutional documents and academic analyses rather than through original quantitative measurement. As a result, the study is better understood as an interpretative analysis of strategic behaviour than as a capability assessment in the strict sense.

A third limitation concerns the nature of the source base. The analysis relies primarily on selected institutional documents and academic literature rather than on interviews, archival material, internal governmental records, or a large standalone corpus of primary national documents. This has both advantages and constraints. On the one hand, the chosen corpus is appropriate for identifying how NATO and the EU framed and justified their responses and how these have been interpreted in the literature. On the other hand, this means the thesis is less suited to reconstructing hidden bargaining processes, internal decision-making dynamics, or informal political negotiations behind the official response. The analysis therefore captures the strategic meaning of the response as expressed in institutional outputs and scholarly interpretation, rather than the full internal politics that produced every element of that response.

A fourth limitation is that the thesis does not analyse in depth the domestic politics of individual member states. This is an important constraint because the European response to the invasion was not produced by a single unified actor with a single set of preferences. National governments differed in threat perception, defence priorities, strategic culture, and levels of dependence on the United States. Those differences are acknowledged, but they are not examined systematically at the domestic level. The thesis instead focuses on the broader European response as it appeared through NATO, the EU, and the wider security architecture. This is a necessary simplification given the scope of the project, but it also means that the study cannot fully explain variation

between individual national positions within the broader response.

A further limitation is that the study focuses mainly on the institutional level of analysis. It is primarily concerned with how the response was structured through NATO and the EU and how that response can be interpreted through alliance theory. This means that other potentially relevant explanatory dimensions are not explored in equal depth. These include leadership psychology, public opinion, party politics, historical memory, and broader ideational or normative factors. Some of these may well matter for explaining why particular governments supported certain policies or why particular narratives gained prominence. However, including them systematically would have shifted the thesis away from its core purpose, which is to test the explanatory reach of realist alliance theory in relation to the strategic organisation of the European response.

Finally, there is a conceptual limitation built into the theoretical framework itself. The categories of balancing and bandwagoning are useful because they impose analytical discipline and make alliance behaviour easier to assess. At the same time, they simplify a reality that may be more institutionally layered and politically complex than those concepts can fully capture. In that sense, part of the thesis is explicitly designed to test the limits of its own analytical tools. This is not a weakness of the study, but it does mean that the conclusions must remain proportionate: the thesis can identify dominant tendencies and evaluate how far realist alliance theory helps explain them, but it cannot eliminate all ambiguity from a case that may itself resist neat categorisation.
These limitations do not undermine the value of the research design. On the contrary, once clearly acknowledged, they help clarify what the thesis is and is not trying to do. The chosen design remains well suited to the research question because it allows the study to identify general strategic patterns in Europe's response to a severe external threat, to assess the relative centrality of NATO and the EU, and to evaluate whether balancing, bandwagoning, or a hybrid logic best captures the case. Even without claiming exhaustive coverage of all national, domestic, or quantitative dimensions of the problem, the study still provides a sufficiently solid basis for answering the central question in a focused and theoretically disciplined way.

4. Analysis

4.1 Introduction to the analysis

This chapter analyses Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine through three interconnected dimensions: the reassertion of NATO as the central framework of European security, the expansion of the European Union's role as a security actor, and the assessment of the resulting strategic pattern through the concepts of balancing, bandwagoning, and indicators of theoretical limits as operationalised in the methodology chapter. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive chronological account of all developments since 2022, but to examine which security framework was effectively prioritised under conditions of acute external threat and what that reveals about the explanatory reach of realist alliance theory in the contemporary European security order. In that sense, the analysis remains theory-guided rather than merely descriptive, and treats realism not as a vague synonym for power politics, but as a framework with specific analytical expectations that must be assessed against the empirical pattern of European behaviour (Driedger, 2024).

4.2 NATO as the primary framework of European security after 2022

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reasserted NATO as the primary framework of European hard security. If the central expectation derived from realist alliance theory is that actors facing an acute external threat will prioritise the provider with the greatest military credibility, deterrent capacity, and strategic continuity, then the post-2022 European response fits that expectation closely. The key issue is not simply that both NATO and the European Union became more active after February 2022. The more important question is which framework was effectively prioritised once deterrence, territorial defence, and reassurance became urgent. The empirical record suggests a clear answer: when the threat became immediate and military, the centre of gravity of European security remained with NATO rather than shifting towards an autonomous European defence structure.

This hierarchy is visible first in NATO's own post-2022 strategic framing. The 2022 Strategic Concept identified Russia as "the most significant and direct threat" to Allied security and explicitly placed deterrence and defence at the centre of the Alliance's core tasks (NATO, 2022a). This was analytically significant because it showed that the post-invasion environment was no longer understood primarily through the logic of crisis management, stabilisation, or partnership diplomacy. Instead, it was defined as a direct military challenge to Allied security. Once the threat was framed in those terms, the institution most directly associated with collective defence and military response was NATO rather than the European Union.

The same logic was translated into concrete policy through the Madrid Summit Declaration (NATO, 2022b).

NATO reaffirmed that it remains “the foundation of our collective defence” and committed itself to a strengthened deterrence and defence posture, including additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on the eastern flank, credible rapidly available reinforcements, prepositioned equipment, and enhanced command and control (NATO, 2022b). This matters because it moves the analysis beyond rhetoric. The immediate institutional response to the return of large-scale interstate war in Europe was not the construction of a new autonomous military framework under EU control, but the reinforcement of an existing Atlantic defence structure. In other words, once the threat became territorial and urgent, the prioritised framework was the one already able to organise readiness, forward defence, and deterrent signalling at scale.

The clearest empirical illustration of this hierarchy can be seen on NATO’s eastern flank. The post-invasion reinforcement of the eastern member states, including the activation of elements of the NATO Response Force, the expansion of battlegroups, and the strengthening of forward defence, showed that the Alliance was not merely issuing political declarations, but translating threat perception into deployment and military reassurance through its own structures (House of Commons Library, 2025). This is important because it makes the hierarchy of response more visible. If the evidence consisted only of summit language, one might still argue that NATO and the EU responded in parallel without a decisive division of strategic labour. However, once posture adaptation, force presence, and deterrent deployment are taken into account, the picture becomes much clearer. The decisive response in the field of hard security was organised through NATO rather than through an autonomous EU defence framework.

At the empirical level, this renewed centrality is also highlighted by Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024), who argue that Russia’s war against Ukraine pushed NATO back towards collective defence after a long post-Cold War period in which expeditionary missions and crisis management had occupied much of the Alliance’s attention.. Gheciu and von Hlatky argue that Russia’s war against Ukraine pushed NATO back towards collective defence after a long post-Cold War period in which expeditionary missions and crisis management had occupied much of the Alliance’s attention (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). That interpretation is useful because it helps explain why NATO’s renewed centrality after 2022 was not incidental or merely symbolic. The invasion did not simply make NATO more visible. It re-oriented the Alliance decisively towards collective defence, deterrence, and territorial reassurance. Even if NATO’s response cannot be reduced to material threat alone, the empirical pattern still shows that under acute external danger European actors prioritised NATO as the decisive framework of hard security.

Rynning’s argument further explains why NATO could perform this role so rapidly and so decisively. For Rynning, NATO continuity rests on both power and purpose: the United States still provides the strategic capabilities that Europeans cannot reproduce independently, while the Alliance continues to serve a common security function that European actors still regard as indispensable (Rynning, 2005). This is highly relevant to the present case because it explains why the return of high-intensity war in Europe did not generate an immediate shift towards autonomous European military centrality. The war did not suddenly make NATO credible. Rather, it exposed the continuing relevance of an institution that already possessed the capabilities, infrastructure, and strategic function required under severe threat.

This interpretation is also consistent with Knutsen's argument that Europe continues to face a structural security deficit and that any meaningful development of strategic autonomy can only occur through close EU–NATO cooperation rather than outside it (Knutsen, 2022). The post-2022 pattern fits that reading rather closely. The invasion intensified the debate on strategic autonomy, yet the most decisive security functions remained concentrated in NATO. This suggests that the structural constraints identified by Knutsen did not weaken under the pressure of war. On the contrary, they became more visible. Europe could strengthen its security role, but it could not replace the Atlantic framework as the core guarantor of deterrence and territorial defence.

This point matters directly for the balancing versus bandwagoning distinction used in this thesis. In the present framework, bandwagoning does not mean passivity or simple political subordination. It refers to behaviour through which actors reinforce alignment with the dominant and most credible security provider under acute threat. The evidence examined in this section points strongly in that direction. The return of deterrence and defence to the centre of strategic planning, the reinforcement of the eastern flank, and the continued dependence on Atlantic military structures all suggest that the immediate response to the invasion was organised through the framework already associated with NATO primacy. That pattern is more consistent with bandwagoning around the existing Atlantic security order than with balancing through a new autonomous European military pole.

This does not mean that NATO's recentralisation should be interpreted in a crude or reductionist way. Gheciu and von Hlatky caution against treating NATO's response as a straightforward vindication of structural realism, since alliance identity, shared norms, and the logic of security community also shaped the reaction to Russian aggression (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). That warning is important, and it sets limits on how far a purely materialist explanation can go. Yet it does not undermine the central analytical finding of this section. Rather, it refines it. Even if NATO's response cannot be reduced to material threat alone, the empirical pattern still shows that under acute external danger the framework effectively prioritised by European actors was NATO.

The conclusion of this section is clear. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine re-established NATO as the operational core of European hard security. The Strategic Concept restored deterrence and defence to the centre of Allied strategy, the Madrid Summit strengthened forward defence and posture adaptation, and developments on the eastern flank confirmed that reassurance and deterrence were organised primarily through NATO structures. Taken together, these developments show that Europe turned first to the framework that offered the greatest credibility, capacity, and strategic continuity. The first major empirical pattern of Europe's post-2022 response therefore points more strongly towards bandwagoning than towards balancing.

4.3 The EU's expanded security role after the invasion

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not displace NATO as the core framework of European hard security, but it did significantly expand the European Union's role as a security actor. The key analytical question is therefore not whether the EU became more active after 2022. It clearly did. The more important issue is what kind of security role it developed, and whether that role amounted to autonomous military substitution or to a

broader but still complementary form of security activism within a NATO-centred order. The empirical record points strongly towards the latter interpretation.

The clearest evidence of this shift can be found in the EU's own post-2022 security documents. The Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2024) presents Russia's war of aggression as a catalyst for accelerating EU action, including military assistance to Ukraine, the training of Ukrainian personnel, the development of the Rapid Deployment Capacity, new defence-industrial measures, and intensified NATO–EU cooperation. This is analytically significant because it shows that the Union itself understood the invasion not only as an external crisis, but as a trigger for expanding its own security agenda. The same report also frames the EU's response as "united and unprecedented from the start," which reinforces the claim that the post-2022 shift was not merely rhetorical but institutionally expressed through concrete tools and commitments.

The breadth of this expansion is equally important. The Strategic Compass progress (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2024) report presents the EU as increasingly active across military training, cyber defence, hybrid resilience, maritime security, military mobility, crisis response preparedness, and defence-industrial support. Particularly relevant here are the operational role of the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine, the implementation of the Rapid Deployment Capacity, and the growing emphasis on joint procurement and industrial measures. These developments show that the Union was no longer confined to sanctions and diplomatic coordination. It had become more institutionally engaged and more operationally relevant in the broader organisation of European security.

The European Peace Facility further reinforces this conclusion. The EPF gave the EU a concrete mechanism through which to provide large-scale military and defence support, including equipment and infrastructure, to partner armed forces, with a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund. This was a major step because it moved the Union beyond symbolic solidarity and into a more materially consequential role in security policy. Yet the analytical meaning of the EPF (European Commission, 2025) must be stated carefully. Its significance lies less in proving autonomy than in demonstrating the type of role the EU was able to perform effectively after 2022: financing, enabling, equipping, and supporting. In other words, the EPF (European Commission, 2025) expanded the Union's practical relevance in security affairs, but it did not create an autonomous EU framework for collective territorial defence.

A similar point applies to the medium-term direction of EU defence policy. The White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 (European Commission, 2025) is useful not as evidence of the immediate 2022 response, but as evidence of how that response was subsequently institutionalised and politically framed. The document points towards rearmament, capability gaps, industrial mobilisation, and greater European responsibility for defence. This matters because it shows that the post-2022 shock was not treated as a temporary emergency only, but also as a trigger for longer-term adaptation. At the same time, the White Paper (European Commission, 2025) also reveals the continued existence of structural shortfalls and capability insufficiencies. A policy agenda built around readiness and rearmament does not indicate that full autonomy has already been achieved. It indicates that significant dependencies and vulnerabilities remain.

The same conclusion emerges from the Union's own assessment of defence development. The Strategic Compass report (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2024) highlights rising defence expenditure, new capability priorities, ammunition production, joint procurement, and support for the European defence technological and industrial base. Yet it also notes that defence expenditure remains uneven across member states, that collaborative investment is still limited, and that off-the-shelf procurement from outside the EU often continues to prevail over coordinated European development. This is analytically important because it shows that more activism and more spending do not automatically amount to autonomous strategic transformation. They indicate movement, but not full emancipation.

Read in this way, the institutional evidence strongly supports Hekimler and Cavlak's claim that Russia's aggression marked a turning point in the EU's transformation into a security actor. Their contribution is useful because it captures the qualitative nature of the shift: the post-2022 EU was not simply more vocal, but more explicitly geopolitical and more directly engaged in security and defence-related functions. The evidence reviewed in this section fits that interpretation well.

At the same time, the same documentary record supports the warning advanced by Dani and Menéndez. Their argument is not merely that defence discourse intensified, but that stronger defence talk and activism should not be confused with achieved strategic autonomy. This matters because it helps prevent a recurrent analytical mistake. More spending, more procurement measures, more military support instruments, and a stronger industrial agenda do not by themselves show that Europe shifted the military centre of gravity away from NATO. What the evidence shows more convincingly is a Union becoming stronger in complementary functions while remaining embedded in a security order whose hard-security core lies elsewhere.

This interpretation is also consistent with Knutsen's argument that Europe continues to face a structural security deficit and that any meaningful development of strategic autonomy can only occur through close EU–NATO cooperation rather than through rupture with the Alliance. The institutional record fits this reading quite closely. The Strategic Compass progress report (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2024) repeatedly frames NATO as an indispensable strategic partner for Euro-Atlantic security and presents a stronger EU as a stronger European pillar within NATO rather than as an alternative to it. This is analytically decisive because it shows how the Union itself situates its growing security role. Even while expanding its own tools, the EU does not frame its post-2022 evolution as a break from NATO. It frames it as a reinforcement of European responsibility within a broader Atlantic order.

This point is confirmed by the concrete pattern of measures adopted after 2022. The training of Ukrainian personnel through EUMAM, the use of the EPF (European Commission, 2025), the push for military mobility, the implementation of the Rapid Deployment Capacity, and the strengthening of the defence-industrial agenda all show a Union becoming more active in security and defence. But they also show that this activism is concentrated in functions that complement rather than replace NATO's role. Training, enabling, financing, mobility, procurement, industrial support, and resilience-building are strategically important. Yet they are not equivalent to being the primary provider of deterrence, territorial defence, and high-end warfighting capability.

The conclusion of this section can therefore be stated clearly. The post-2022 response significantly expanded the EU's role as a security actor, but it did so in a bounded and complementary form. The Union became more relevant in sanctions, coordination, financing, training, military assistance instruments, capability development, and defence-industrial policy. However, it did not emerge as a full military substitute for NATO. For the purposes of this thesis, that distinction is crucial. On its own, stronger EU activism should not yet be coded as balancing. At this stage, the evidence establishes expansion, not substitution. The Union's response shows that Europe did not remain passive within a NATO-led order, but it also shows that the new activism unfolded largely within a complementary register rather than through an autonomous replacement of the Atlantic framework.

4.4 Balancing or bandwagoning? Assessing Europe's strategic behaviour

4.4.1 Evidence of bandwagoning

If Europe had responded to Russia's full-scale invasion through balancing behaviour, the empirical pattern should point towards a deliberate effort to reduce dependence on NATO and to build an autonomous European pole of military power. Instead, the post-2022 record points in the opposite direction. Europe did expand its own security role, but it did so while reaffirming the Atlantic framework as the central provider of deterrence and territorial defence. This matters because the issue is not whether the EU became more active, but whether that activism displaced NATO's strategic primacy. The evidence suggests that it did not.

Cladi and Locatelli's argument is the clearest starting point for interpreting this pattern. They reject the idea that European defence cooperation should automatically be read as balancing against the United States. Their core claim is that Europe's capability-building efforts have often strengthened rather than weakened the transatlantic relationship, because they make European states more useful to the dominant ally without changing the overall hierarchy of power. Applied to the post-2022 context, this argument is highly relevant. The EU did expand its role through financing, training, procurement support, and defence coordination, but these developments did not produce a rival military centre to NATO. On the contrary, they increased Europe's contribution within an Atlantic order whose hard-security core remained unchanged. In that sense, the post-invasion response fits Cladi and Locatelli's logic of bandwagoning more closely than any balancing interpretation, because capability development reinforced the alliance instead of replacing it (Cladi & Locatelli, 2012).

Rynning helps explain why this outcome was so likely once large-scale war returned to Europe. His argument is that NATO endures because it combines power and purpose: the United States still provides the capabilities necessary to sustain the alliance, and the alliance still serves a shared strategic function for Europeans. This is directly relevant to the Ukraine case. Once the war re-centred European security around deterrence, force posture, readiness, intelligence, and escalation management, the institution best equipped to perform those functions was not the EU but NATO. Europe's reaction therefore did not reveal a continent moving beyond the Atlantic framework. It revealed

a continent rediscovering why NATO remained indispensable when the security environment shifted back toward high-intensity conflict. From Rynning's perspective, the war did not create NATO's centrality. It exposed the enduring strategic value of an alliance whose material and organisational advantages Europe still could not reproduce on its own (Rynning, 2005).

Knutsen's contribution strengthens this reading by focusing on Europe's security deficit. His central claim is that European strategic autonomy remains constrained by the continued dependence of European states on US-backed security guarantees and by the insufficiency of European military capabilities in the field of hard defence. For Knutsen, this means that any realistic development of European autonomy can only take place through close EU–NATO cooperation rather than through separation from the alliance. This is exactly what the post-2022 record shows. The EU expanded its defence-related instruments, but those steps unfolded within a strategic environment in which NATO remained the indispensable framework for territorial defence and deterrence. Knutsen's argument is therefore important because it helps distinguish between more EU activity and genuine strategic substitution. The war accelerated the first, but not the second. Europe responded by strengthening itself around NATO, not by building a credible military alternative to it (Knutsen, 2022).

Gheciu and von Hlatky add an important nuance, but one that still supports the broader conclusion. Their argument is that the war in Ukraine led to a clear recentralisation of NATO, as the alliance returned decisively to collective defence and adapted its posture to a much more dangerous security environment. At the same time, they warn against treating this development as a simple confirmation of structural realism, because NATO's response was also shaped by alliance identity, norms, and the logic of security community. This nuance is analytically useful. It means that NATO's post-2022 centrality should not be reduced to military capability alone. Even so, the empirical implication remains clear: under the pressure of war, NATO regained unquestioned strategic centrality inside the European security order. That matters for the present thesis because it shows that the immediate response to danger was organised through the Atlantic alliance rather than through an autonomous European framework. In other words, even a more nuanced reading of NATO's revival still points toward reinforced Atlantic alignment rather than toward balancing away from it (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024).

Cottey and his co-authors are especially valuable because they place the invasion within the wider remaking of the European security order. Their argument is that Russia's war against Ukraine acted as a systemic shock that restructured European security around renewed confrontation with Russia and strengthened NATO as the key military framework in that process. The importance of this contribution is that it moves beyond isolated policy measures and focuses on the broader architecture of response. What emerged after 2022 was not a transfer of strategic authority from NATO to the EU. Instead, NATO was reinforced as the primary framework for deterrence and defence, while the EU expanded its role in adjacent domains such as sanctions, assistance, training, and industrial coordination. This interpretation is highly relevant to the present argument because it captures the overall direction of change. Europe did not respond to the shock by loosening the Atlantic bond. It responded by tightening it, while using the EU to support and supplement that re-centred security order (Cottey et al., 2025).

Taken together, these authors point to the same conclusion from different angles. Cladi

and Locatelli show why greater European defence activity does not automatically amount to balancing. Rynning explains why NATO remained the only institution capable of performing the central military tasks required by the crisis. Knutsen clarifies why greater European activism could still coexist with continued strategic dependence. Gheciu and von Hlatky demonstrate that the war returned NATO to the centre of European security, even if that centrality cannot be explained by material power alone. Cottey and his co-authors show that this was not a temporary adjustment, but part of a broader reordering of the European security architecture. For the purposes of this thesis, the cumulative implication is clear: the post-2022 evidence supports a reading of Europe's strategic behaviour as closer to bandwagoning than balancing, because the response reinforced NATO and accepted the continuing centrality of the United States in the provision of credible hard security.

4.4.2 Evidence of autonomy-seeking dynamics short of full balancing

Although the post-2022 European response does contain elements that point towards a stronger European security role, the evidence does not support a claim of balancing in a strong classical realist sense. If balancing is understood, as in the methodological framework of this thesis, as behaviour aimed at reducing dependence on NATO and shifting the centre of gravity of security provision towards autonomous European structures, then the empirical record after Russia's full-scale invasion points only partially in that direction. What the evidence shows more clearly is the emergence of autonomy-seeking dynamics within a security order that remained fundamentally Atlantic in its hard-security core (Hekimler & Cavlak, 2024; Dani & Menéndez, 2025).

A useful starting point is Hekimler and Cavlak's argument that Russia's aggression marked a turning point in the transformation of the European Union into a security actor. Their contribution is important because it captures a genuine shift in the EU's post-2022 posture. The Union did not merely react diplomatically or rhetorically. It adopted a more geopolitical and security-oriented approach, increasingly presenting itself as an actor with responsibilities in defence, resilience, and military support. In that sense, the war did generate incentives for Europe to strengthen its own role within the broader security architecture, and this should not be dismissed as politically insignificant (Hekimler & Cavlak, 2024).

The implementation of the Strategic Compass offers the clearest institutional evidence of this development. The Annual Progress Report (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2024) explicitly frames Russia's war of aggression as a catalyst for making the EU a "stronger and more credible security and defence actor." It points to a series of concrete developments, including the implementation of the Rapid Deployment Capacity, stronger cyber and hybrid tools, greater military mobility, defence-industrial initiatives, and the operational role of the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine. These developments matter because they show that the EU sought to expand specifically European instruments of security action rather than limiting itself to political declarations. They therefore reveal an important autonomy-seeking tendency within the European response (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2024).

The European Peace Facility reinforces this conclusion, but also helps define its limits. The EPF (European Commission, 2025) gave the Union an unprecedented capacity to finance military assistance, equipment, and support for partner armed forces, above all

in the case of Ukraine. This was a major step in practical terms, because it allowed the EU to become materially relevant in the security field in a way that went beyond sanctions or diplomatic coordination alone. Yet analytically, the EPF (European Commission, 2025) should be interpreted with caution. It expanded the EU's capacity to enable and support security action, but it did not create an autonomous European framework for collective territorial defence. Its significance lies in demonstrating that the Union became more operationally relevant, not that it replaced NATO as the principal military provider of security (European Peace Facility Factsheet, 2024).

A similar point applies to EUMAM and the broader expansion of EU-level defence initiatives. Training Ukrainian forces on EU territory, supporting mobility and logistics, and increasing the scope of defence-industrial coordination all point to a Union that is more directly engaged in security provision than before 2022. These are meaningful developments and should be recognised as such. However, they still fall short of demonstrating balancing in the full sense used in realist alliance theory. They increase Europe's capacity to act, but they do not fundamentally relocate the hard-security centre of gravity away from NATO and the US-backed deterrence framework (Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, 2024; Knutsen, 2022).

The White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 (European Commission, 2025) supports the same interpretation from a medium-term perspective. It is relevant because it shows how the post-2022 shock was translated into a longer-term agenda centred on capability gaps, industrial readiness, rearmament, and greater European responsibility for defence. This clearly reflects a stronger aspiration to build European capacity and reduce vulnerability. At the same time, the very existence of such a readiness agenda also reveals that those capacities remain insufficient and that significant structural shortfalls persist. In other words, the White Paper is best read as evidence of an autonomy-seeking trajectory rather than as proof that Europe has already moved into a balancing position vis-à-vis the existing Atlantic order (White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030, 2025).

This is precisely where Dani and Menéndez provide a necessary analytical correction. Their argument is not that post-2022 EU activism is illusory, but that it should not be confused with the achievement of real strategic autonomy. The war accelerated the discourse and policy agenda of European rearmament and defence responsibility, yet this took place alongside continued dependence on NATO and on the broader American strategic and industrial framework. Their contribution is therefore particularly useful here because it allows the analysis to distinguish between evidence of a stronger European defence role and evidence of balancing proper. The former is clearly present. The latter remains much more limited (Dani & Menéndez, 2025).

Knutsen reaches a similar conclusion from the perspective of Europe's security deficit. His central claim is that strategic autonomy, if pursued seriously, can only develop through close EU–NATO cooperation rather than through a rupture with the Alliance. This is highly relevant because it sets the outer boundary of the balancing argument. The post-2022 response certainly included a greater effort to strengthen Europe's own instruments and capabilities, but these developments remained embedded in a security architecture whose hard-security core still rested on NATO. Thus, even where the EU became stronger, it did so within a condition of continued structural dependence rather than through genuine strategic substitution (Knutsen, 2022).

For the purposes of this thesis, the conclusion should therefore be stated carefully. The European response after 2022 does contain meaningful evidence of autonomy-seeking dynamics: the strengthening of EU instruments, the expansion of defence-industrial ambition, the use of the EPF (European Commission, 2025), the operationalisation of EUMAM, and the broader implementation of the Strategic Compass all point in that direction. However, these developments do not amount to balancing in a full classical sense, because they did not displace NATO as the principal framework of deterrence and territorial defence. The most defensible interpretation is therefore that the post-2022 response generated a stronger European security role and a clearer aspiration to reduce vulnerability, but not a decisive shift towards autonomous balancing. What emerged was a limited and bounded movement toward greater European capacity inside a still NATO-centred security order (Hekimler & Cavlak, 2024; Dani & Menéndez, 2025; Knutsen, 2022).

4.4.3 Why neither category is fully sufficient

If the balancing/bandwagoning dichotomy were fully adequate for explaining Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the empirical record should point clearly in one direction. A balancing outcome would require a substantial shift of strategic responsibility towards autonomous European structures and a corresponding weakening of NATO's centrality. A bandwagoning outcome, by contrast, would imply a much clearer consolidation around the Atlantic framework, with little meaningful expansion of specifically European security agency. The difficulty of the present case is that the evidence does not fit either expectation in a pure form. The response clearly leaned more strongly toward NATO, but it did not do so through passivity or institutional stagnation on the European side. Instead, the post-2022 pattern combined reinforced Atlantic primacy with a more active, more capable, and more security-oriented European Union.

Pohl's argument is fundamental for understanding why this creates a conceptual problem. His central claim is that the European case does not map neatly onto either balancing or bandwagoning. What makes his contribution especially important is that he does not deny the relevance of power, alliances, or institutional hierarchy. Rather, he argues that EU security behaviour is shaped by a more complex interaction of institutional development, political preferences, and strategic dependence than the classical dichotomy can comfortably capture. In the context of the present thesis, this matters because the post-2022 response reproduces exactly that type of ambiguity. Europe did not balance against the United States by constructing a rival military pole, but neither did it merely align in a passive way while leaving its own security role unchanged. Pohl therefore provides the key analytical starting point for this subsection: the European case may reveal not just a dominant tendency, but also the limits of the concepts used to interpret it (Pohl, 2013).

The strongest evidence in favour of bandwagoning remains clear. NATO was reaffirmed as the principal framework of deterrence and territorial defence, and the United States remained the indispensable strategic anchor of that framework. As the previous section demonstrated, the return of deterrence and defence to the centre of the European security agenda was channelled above all through NATO. In strict comparative terms, that means the response was closer to bandwagoning than to balancing. Yet that conclusion becomes insufficient if it is pushed too far. A pure bandwagoning reading would suggest that Europe responded mainly by tightening alignment with the dominant

provider of security, without significantly expanding its own institutional and operational role. That is not what happened. The EU did not remain static. It expanded its role through sanctions, military assistance instruments, financing, training, capability support, and defence-industrial initiatives. For that reason, the post-2022 pattern cannot be reduced to pure bandwagoning, even if bandwagoning remains the stronger pole of the two.

Helferich helps conceptualise this mixed outcome particularly well through the idea of a "grey zone" in NATO–CSDP relations. His argument is that NATO and the EU operate in a space marked by overlap, structural asymmetry, and functional ambiguity. This is directly useful for the present chapter because it explains how one institution can remain militarily dominant while the other simultaneously gains security relevance. In Helferich's reading, the EU may expand its role without displacing NATO's centrality, because the two are not identical organisations competing for exactly the same function under the same conditions. NATO remains the primary structure for collective defence and high-end deterrence, whereas the EU can broaden its role in adjoining fields of security governance, capability support, and institutional coordination. This interpretation fits the post-2022 case very closely. The war did not eliminate NATO's primacy, but neither did it freeze the EU in its earlier position. It produced a more active European security role within a still asymmetrical architecture (Helferich, 2025).

Cottey and his co-authors reinforce this point by framing the post-2022 environment as one of dual strengthening. Their key argument is that Russia's invasion did not simply revitalise NATO or simply empower the EU. It did both, although in different ways and in different functional domains. This is highly relevant because it captures the structural shape of the response more accurately than either pure balancing or pure bandwagoning. NATO was strengthened as the primary framework of deterrence and defence, while the EU was strengthened in sanctions, military assistance, training, defence coordination, and capability support. In other words, the crisis did not produce institutional substitution. It produced a layered reconfiguration of European security in which both organisations became more important, but not on equal terms and not in the same functions. That matters because a dual strengthening pattern is difficult to fit comfortably into a binary alliance-theoretical model. It points instead to a differentiated response in which hierarchy remained intact while institutional activism broadened on the European side (Cottey et al., 2025).

Dani and Menéndez provide a useful correction that helps define the boundaries of this hybrid pattern. Their argument is that the post-2022 rise in EU defence discourse and activism should not be mistaken for the achievement of real strategic autonomy. This matters because it prevents the analysis from sliding too far toward balancing simply because European defence instruments expanded. In their reading, the EU's stronger role coexists with continued Atlantic dependence and with the persistence of NATO as the central hard-security framework. For the present subsection, the analytical importance of this is very clear. It supports the claim that the EU's post-2022 activism was real, but also bounded. The Union became more relevant, but not sovereign in the strong military sense. This means that the balancing dimension of the response exists, but it remains incomplete and structurally constrained. Dani and Menéndez therefore help explain why the case cannot be read as pure bandwagoning, while also showing why it still falls short of full balancing (Dani & Menéndez, 2025).

Gheciu and von Hlatky complicate the picture in a different but equally important way.

Their warning is that even NATO's own recentralisation should not be read through an overly simple materialist lens. They argue that the Alliance's response was shaped not only by capability and threat, but also by identity, norms, and the logic of security community. This matters for the present subsection because it shows that the limits of the balancing/bandwagoning dichotomy are not only institutional. They are also theoretical. Even the part of the response that most strongly supports bandwagoning—namely NATO's renewed centrality—cannot be reduced to a crude alliance reflex. The Atlantic framework was reinforced not only because it was militarily credible, but also because it was politically meaningful to the actors involved. This reinforces the broader conclusion that the European response after 2022 cannot be fully captured by a simple binary opposition between balancing and bandwagoning. The case is structured by hierarchy, but mediated by institutions, identities, and overlapping functions (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024).

At this point, the analytical assessment becomes clearer. The evidence does not support balancing in a pure or classical sense, because NATO remained the indispensable framework of deterrence and territorial defence, and the EU did not emerge as a full military substitute. At the same time, the evidence also does not support pure bandwagoning, because European actors did not respond merely by deepening dependence on the Atlantic framework while leaving their own structures unchanged. Instead, they developed autonomy-seeking dynamics through the expansion of EU security instruments, defence-industrial ambition, military assistance mechanisms, and a broader willingness to act through European structures.

The post-2022 response is therefore best understood as closer to bandwagoning than to balancing, but not reducible to either category in a clean way. Realist alliance theory helps identify the hierarchy of the response: under acute external threat, Europe still turned first to NATO as the only credible provider of hard security. Yet it captures less well the simultaneous expansion of the EU's security role within that same order. What emerges instead is a hybrid pattern: NATO primacy remained intact, but EU security activism widened in parallel rather than disappearing beneath Atlantic dominance. In that sense, the post-2022 response confirms the importance of realist alliance logic, but it also shows that the institutional complexity of contemporary European security cannot be fully exhausted by classical realist categories alone.

Europe's response to Russia's invasion was therefore clearly closer to bandwagoning than to balancing, because the military centre of gravity remained NATO and the Atlantic framework was treated as indispensable under acute threat. However, the response was not reducible to pure or passive bandwagoning, because the European Union simultaneously expanded its role as a security actor through sanctions, training, financing, defence-industrial policy, capability support, and other autonomy-seeking initiatives short of full strategic substitution. The coexistence of NATO primacy and bounded European security activism therefore exposes the limits of treating balancing and bandwagoning as mutually exclusive and fully exhaustive categories. That is the central analytical insight of this chapter, and it prepares the ground for the next section, which addresses more directly what this hybrid pattern reveals about the limits of realist alliance theory in the European case.

4.5 The limits of realist alliance theory in the European case

The second part of the research question asks what Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reveals about the limits of realist alliance theory. The key issue is not only whether the response leaned more towards balancing or bandwagoning, but whether those concepts are sufficient to explain the case as a whole. The analysis suggests a differentiated answer: realist alliance theory explains the hierarchy of hard security well, but it is less effective at capturing the institutional layering and political complexity of the wider European security order.

At the level of hard security, the case strongly supports realist alliance theory. Once the invasion turned European security into an immediate question of deterrence, territorial defence, and military reassurance, NATO remained the operational centre of gravity. Europe did not construct an autonomous military framework capable of substituting for the Alliance, but instead reinforced reliance on the existing Atlantic structure. This supports Rynning's argument that NATO endures through the conjunction of power and purpose, and Knutsen's claim that Europe's security deficit continues to constrain strategic autonomy (Rynning, 2005; Knutsen, 2022). In this sense, the post-2022 response was closer to bandwagoning than to balancing, which also aligns with Cladi and Locatelli's view that European security behaviour is better understood as bandwagoning with the United States than as balancing against it (Cladi & Locatelli, 2012).

At the same time, the case also reveals clear limits in realist alliance theory. The balancing/bandwagoning dichotomy is too rigid to capture a response in which NATO retained military primacy while the EU simultaneously expanded its role through sanctions, training, military assistance, defence-industrial initiatives, and broader coordination. The EU did not become an autonomous military pole, but neither did it remain passive. This supports Pohl's argument that Europe's security policy is neither adequately explained as balancing nor as bandwagoning (Pohl, 2013). Helferich's description of NATO–CSDP relations as a "grey zone" is equally relevant, as it helps explain how NATO can remain primary while the EU becomes more important in complementary functions (Helferich, 2025).

The case also shows that post-2022 European security cannot be understood as a zero-sum shift from NATO to the EU. Rather, it reflects a layered pattern in which NATO remained the core framework of deterrence and defence while the EU gained relevance in adjacent fields. This dual movement is captured well by Cottey, Cladi, and Ewers-Peters, who describe the invasion as strengthening both NATO and the EU in different but complementary ways (Cottey et al., 2025). Dani and Menéndez likewise show that stronger EU defence activism should not be confused with achieved strategic autonomy, since it still unfolds under conditions of structural dependence (Dani & Menéndez, 2025).

A final limit concerns the level of explanation itself. Although the case supports a realist account of hierarchy, NATO's renewed centrality cannot be reduced to material capability alone. Gheciu and von Hlatky argue that alliance identity, norms, and the logic of security community also shaped the response to Russian aggression (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). Realist alliance theory therefore explains why NATO remained primary under acute threat, but it is less capable of accounting for the political meanings and institutional complexity of the wider European response.

Overall, the European case does not invalidate realist alliance theory, but it defines its limits more clearly. The theory is highly effective in explaining strategic hierarchy under severe external threat, but less sufficient for explaining how that hierarchy coexists with complementary EU activism, institutional overlap, and broader political meaning. Europe's post-2022 response therefore confirms the strength of realist alliance theory in explaining hard-security hierarchy, while also revealing its weaker grip on the layered complexity of the contemporary European security order.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Answer to the research question

This thesis asked whether Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reflects balancing or bandwagoning behaviour, and what this reveals about the limits of realist alliance theory. The central conclusion is that Europe's response was more convincingly explained by bandwagoning than by balancing, although the case does not fit either category in a pure classical sense. As Rynning (2005) argues, NATO endures because it combines power and purpose: the United States continues to provide capabilities that European states cannot reproduce independently, while the alliance still serves a shared strategic function. The post-2022 response strongly confirms that logic. When deterrence, territorial defence, and military credibility became urgent, European actors did not shift the hard-security centre of gravity towards an autonomous European structure. They relied on NATO as the only framework already equipped to organise a credible response.

This conclusion is reinforced by Knutsen's (2022) argument that Europe continues to face a structural security deficit. Knutsen does not deny the importance of European strategic autonomy as a political ambition, but he insists that such autonomy remains constrained by dependence on the United States and can only develop through close EU–NATO cooperation rather than outside it. The findings of this thesis support that interpretation. The war intensified debate on strategic autonomy, but it did not produce a transfer of military primacy away from NATO. Instead, the crisis made Europe's continued reliance on Atlantic deterrence even more visible.

At the same time, the thesis also confirms that the European Union did not remain unchanged after 2022. Hekimler and Cavlak (2024) describe Russia's aggression as a turning point in the EU's transformation into a security actor, and that insight is supported by the empirical record examined here. The EU expanded its role through sanctions, training missions, military assistance instruments, defence-industrial initiatives, and broader security coordination. Yet, as Dani and Menéndez (2025) argue, the growth of EU defence discourse and activism should not be confused with the achievement of real strategic autonomy. The Union became more active, but it did not become the primary provider of hard security in Europe.

The answer to the research question is therefore twofold. First, the European response after 2022 was closer to bandwagoning because NATO remained the indispensable military core of the response and because the United States retained the decisive strategic role within European defence. Second, the case also shows that the balancing/bandwagoning dichotomy is too rigid to capture the full institutional complexity of contemporary European security. Pohl (2013) makes precisely this point

when he argues that European security behaviour does not fit neatly into either category. The present thesis reaches a similar conclusion: Europe did not balance against the United States through autonomous military substitution, but neither did it respond through passive dependence alone. It reinforced Atlantic security while also widening EU security activism inside that same order.

5.2 Main empirical findings

The first main empirical finding is that NATO was reasserted as the primary framework of European security once Russia's invasion transformed the security environment into an immediate question of deterrence and territorial defence. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) argue that the war pushed NATO back towards its classical role of collective defence after a long period in which expeditionary missions and crisis management had often dominated the alliance's agenda. The analysis in this thesis supports that interpretation. NATO's post-2022 response was not merely rhetorical. It involved force posture adaptation, reinforcement of the eastern flank, and the restoration of deterrence and defence to the centre of European security politics. This is why the response was more consistent with bandwagoning than balancing: under acute threat, Europe turned first to the framework that already possessed military credibility at scale.

The second empirical finding is that the European Union nevertheless became significantly more active as a security actor. Hekimler and Cavlak (2024) argue that the invasion accelerated the EU's move towards a more geopolitical and security-oriented posture. That claim is borne out by the evidence examined in the previous chapter. The implementation of the Strategic Compass, the use of the European Peace Facility, the training of Ukrainian personnel, and the expansion of defence-industrial initiatives all show that the EU widened its role in security and defence in ways that were operational as well as political. The Union did not simply issue statements of solidarity. It mobilised instruments that increased its practical relevance within the broader European response.

The third empirical finding is that this expansion of EU security activism did not amount to balancing in a strong realist sense. Cladi and Locatelli (2012) argue that European defence cooperation has often been misread as balancing against the United States, when it is better understood as bandwagoning with the dominant ally under conditions of structural dependence. Their argument is especially useful here because it clarifies that greater European capability development does not automatically imply a move away from NATO. The post-2022 record fits that logic. EU initiatives strengthened Europe's role within the security architecture, but they did not create a rival military pole capable of replacing the Atlantic alliance.

A fourth empirical finding is that the post-2022 response is best understood as a layered rather than substitutional reconfiguration of European security. Cottey et al. (2025) describe the invasion as a systemic shock that strengthened both NATO and the EU, although in different ways and in different functional domains. That is precisely what the present study has shown. NATO was reinforced as the primary framework for deterrence and defence, while the EU expanded its importance in sanctions, military assistance, training, financing, defence coordination, and industrial policy. The crisis therefore did not produce a zero-sum institutional shift. It produced dual strengthening under conditions of continued hierarchy.

5.3 Theoretical implications

The first theoretical implication of the thesis is that realist alliance theory remains highly persuasive when the object of explanation is the hierarchy of hard security under severe external threat. Rynning (2005) argues that NATO continuity rests on the conjunction of American power and enduring strategic purpose. The findings of this thesis support that claim directly. When the threat became immediate, Europe did not privilege the institution with the strongest discourse of autonomy. It privileged the one that could provide deterrence, command integration, force posture adaptation, and credible territorial defence. In this respect, realist alliance theory explains the central hierarchy of the response very well.

The thesis also confirms Knutsen's (2022) claim that Europe's security deficit continues to limit the practical reach of strategic autonomy. Knutsen's contribution is theoretically important because it links dependence to capability asymmetry rather than to institutional habit alone. The post-2022 pattern fits that expectation closely. Europe could expand its own tools, but it could not replace the alliance that remained backed by American strategic power. This means that realism continues to offer strong explanatory leverage when the central question is why NATO retained primacy despite years of debate on European strategic autonomy.

A further implication concerns the interpretation of bandwagoning. Cladi and Locatelli (2012) explicitly reject the assumption that European defence cooperation necessarily signals balancing against US predominance. Instead, they argue that European efforts to develop stronger defence capacities have often reinforced the Atlantic order rather than challenged it. The present thesis supports that reading. The EU did become more active after 2022, but this activism did not undermine NATO's military centrality. On the contrary, it largely strengthened Europe's role within a security order whose strategic core remained Atlantic. Bandwagoning, in the European case, therefore does not mean passivity. It means strengthening one's position inside an alliance framework that remains dominated by the most credible provider of protection.

At the same time, the thesis also shows that realist alliance theory is not sufficient on its own to explain the full institutional complexity of the European case. Pohl (2013) argues that European security policy cannot be adequately captured through a simple balancing versus bandwagoning dichotomy, because EU behaviour reflects a more complicated interaction of strategic dependence, institutional development, and member-state preferences. The findings of this thesis support that criticism. Europe's response after 2022 was not pure balancing, but neither was it pure or passive bandwagoning. The classical dichotomy helps identify the dominant direction of behaviour, but it does not exhaust the layered character of the response.

Helferich (2025) helps explain why this is so. He describes NATO–CSDP relations as a "grey zone" marked by overlap, structural asymmetry, and functional ambiguity. That formulation is particularly useful because it captures how two partially overlapping organisations can both gain relevance without one replacing the other. The post-2022 response fits that pattern closely. NATO remained the primary structure for collective defence and deterrence, while the EU widened its role in adjacent fields of security governance and capability support. Realist alliance theory identifies the hierarchy well, but it is less precise in explaining a security order organised through coexistence and functional differentiation rather than institutional replacement.

A final theoretical implication concerns the limits of purely materialist explanation. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) argue that NATO's response to the war cannot be understood solely through threat and capability, because alliance identity, norms, and the political meaning attributed to the threat also shaped the response. This matters because it shows that even the part of the case most favourable to realism cannot be reduced entirely to material power alone. NATO was central because it was militarily credible, but also because it was politically meaningful as the embodiment of the transatlantic security community. Realist alliance theory therefore remains powerful, but its explanatory reach is strongest at the level of hierarchy and weaker when institutional meaning becomes central to the analysis.

5.4 Limitations of the study

This thesis has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single critical case, which makes the findings analytically strong but limits their broader generalisability. A different type of crisis might produce a different balance between NATO-centred security and EU-level activism. The argument should therefore be understood as a focused explanation of one severe external shock rather than a universal claim about all European security crises.

Second, the thesis relies mainly on institutional documents and academic literature rather than on interviews or internal governmental material. This strengthens analytical consistency, but it also limits the study's ability to reconstruct informal negotiations, hidden bargaining, and internal decision-making processes behind the official European response.

Third, the study does not systematically examine national variation among member states. It focuses on the broader European response as organised through NATO, the EU, and the wider security architecture, but does not fully explain differences between France, Germany, Eastern European states, and other actors. As a result, the argument is strongest at the level of overall strategic pattern rather than national variation.

5.5 Future research

These limitations point to several directions for future research. First, scholars could compare Europe's response across different types of crisis to assess whether NATO retains the same primacy in less severe threat environments. Second, future research could examine national variation more systematically, particularly in cases such as France, Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states, in order to clarify how strategic cultures and threat perceptions shape the wider European response. Third, further work could explore how autonomy-seeking initiatives affect the internal balance of a still Atlantic-centred security order over time.

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that Europe's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is best understood as reinforcing, rather than replacing, the Atlantic order. Realist alliance theory explains well why NATO retained primacy in hard security, but it is less effective at capturing the layered institutional complexity of the contemporary European security order. Europe's response was therefore closer to bandwagoning than to balancing, while also revealing the limits of a rigid dichotomy between the two.

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