

From Security Shock to Defence Adaptation: A Neoclassical Realist Comparison of Denmark and Spain

Why do some EU member states adapt their defence and security preferences differently in response to external security shocks, and how can this variation be explained through neoclassical realism?



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Abstract

This thesis examines why some EU Member States adapt their security and defence differently in response to the same external shock. Utilising neoclassical realism as the theoretical framework, this study investigates how systemic pressures interact with domestic-level variables in shaping policy and defence adaptation. This thesis focuses on a comparative case study of Denmark and Spain; two EU Member States that responded differently to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Our findings suggest that while external security shocks create similar systemic pressures for EU Member States, domestic intervening variables play a significant role in shaping how states respond and adapt to these pressures. Especially, the domestic-level variables of strategic culture and state-society relations have shaped, by either enabling or constraining, their respective outcomes in defence adaptation.

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Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, beginning the first large-scale interstate war on the European continent since the end of the Second World War. The invasion put an end to a period of relative stability in which most European states assumed that the post-Cold War security order, built on interdependency, would continue. For more than two decades, European defence policy had been organised around expeditionary missions, crisis management abroad, and contributions to NATO operations outside Europe. Territorial defence and conventional military capability had received less political attention, leading most European NATO members to spend well below the alliance's target of 2% of GDP on defence. The 2022 invasion changed how European governments thought about defence and security, and many responded by announcing increases in defence spending, new commitments to NATO, and packages of military, economic, and humanitarian support to Ukraine. Germany's *Zeitenwende* resulted in record defence spending, breaking with decades of military restraint, while Poland began an expansion of its military aimed at making it the largest land force in Europe. Finland and Sweden ended decades of formal non-alignment and applied for NATO membership, and the alliance itself adopted a new Strategic Concept going forward. The EU launched new initiatives such as the European Defence Industrial Programme and the White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030, both aimed at strengthening the industrial and military readiness of Member States. The European Commission later introduced the ReArm Europe Plan in 2025, which provided Member States with more fiscal room to increase defence spending by allowing them to activate the national escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact. The debate on European strategic autonomy also gained new momentum, as it became clearer that Europe would need to take more responsibility for the security of its own continent.

Despite this shared external shock caused by the Russia-Ukraine War, the responses across the Union have not been the same. Some Member States have reacted by substantially increasing defence spending and advocating for closer defence integration within EU frameworks, while other Member States have reacted modestly with limited defence investments and caution regarding national sovereignty. This variation between Member States is worth examining because the EU's ability to develop a common defence policy requires understanding of why some states adapt decisively while others are more cautious. Denmark and Spain are interesting cases for examining this variation. The two states are similar in several

aspects. Both are NATO and EU Member States, both are constitutional parliamentary monarchies, and both have been governed by social democratic-led coalitions within this period. Yet, they have adapted to the post-2022 security environment in very different ways. Denmark has more than doubled its defence spending, abolished its EU defence opt-out by referendum, and used its 2025 Council Presidency to push the implementation of the European Defence Industrial Programme. Spain, by contrast, has moved in the same general direction but at a slower pace and with more political caution. Its defence spending has remained below the NATO target until late 2025, and its engagement with the most ambitious EU defence initiatives has been more measured.

This kind of comparison, between a small and a large EU Member State, has so far received limited attention in the existing research on European defence cooperation, where much of the research has focused on larger Member States or on the division between Eastern and Western Europe. Therefore, this thesis will attempt to fill the gap of research in why states, such as Denmark and Spain, have responded so differently to the same external shock. In doing so, we will utilise the methodological approach of comparative case study and the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism. Thus, our research question is ‘Why do some EU member states adapt their defence and security preferences differently in response to external security shocks, and how can this variation be explained through neoclassical realism?’.

In order to answer this problem formulation, we will begin by providing some general context on the European security and strategic autonomy debate through various scholars’ interpretation in our literature review. Then, we will establish our methodological and theoretical foundations for the direction of our analysis. Here, we will examine the two most relevant EU strategies, the White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030, and the European Defence Industrial Strategy to establish the context of the European security situation and the EU’s preference for defence cooperation. Then, we will analyse our two cases in relation to the domestic variables, namely strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. Finally, we will compare our findings within our discussion and establish which key events, actions, and circumstances have had the biggest influence in shaping their respective defence adaptations since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Literature review

Before the concept of European strategic autonomy became more prominent in EU security and defence debates, earlier scholars had already examined why Member States differ in how far they are willing to expand foreign and security cooperation. In this regard, Koenig-Archibugi (2004) provides an earlier account of this question, even if he does not address ESA directly. He argues that there is “considerable variation in the preferences of governments concerning foreign policy integration” and links this variation to relative power, collective identity, and domestic understandings of sovereignty (p. 139). Most notably, he finds that “the effect of ideas about the nature and locus of sovereignty, as reflected in the domestic constitution of each country, is particularly remarkable” (Koenig-Archibugi, 2004, p. 137). His findings place preference divergence in European security cooperation well before the recent ESA debate and point to a set of themes, especially power, identity, and sovereignty, that later reappear in the literature on strategic autonomy.

The general theme of ‘European strategic autonomy’ has been well-documented and well-studied in scholarly articles in recent years, tracking the history and context behind the concept and examining both catalysts and outcomes of the debate regarding strategic autonomy in Europe. According to Ewers-Peters (2025), “the concept of European strategic autonomy has been around since the inception of the EU’s foreign, security, and defence policy framework and henceforth it has been subject to contestation in the academic and policy dates” (p. 867). More specifically, she mentions that debates of the term of strategic autonomy have been around since “then end of the Cold War” and has revolved around the EU “taking greater responsibility on its own continent” (p. 865). In her paper, Ewers-Peters (2025) analyses the process and progress of European strategic autonomy. She “seeks to investigate the parallel developments of European strategic autonomy and the EU-NATO relationship and how they mutually implicate each other” (p. 865). In investigating this phenomenon and development, she utilises the theoretical approach of historical institutionalism, the methodology of process tracing, and she has conducted 11 “semi-structured interviews [...] with officials from the EU, NATO, and the US” (p. 866). In her conceptualisation of the concept of ESA, Ewers-Peters (2025) states that there are several different and complimentary definitions by scholars of what ESA entails. However, she also states that there is a “common narrative”, or consensus, which “is the focus on Europe’s ability to set its own goals, take decisions independently, and the possession of the means and capabilities to pursue and realise these goals, including military force if and where necessary” (p. 867). Nevertheless, Ewers-Peters (2025) utilises historical

institutionalism to analyse the transformation and development of strategic autonomy in the EU. She also utilises the methodological approach of process tracing in analysing the events that has contributed to ESA becoming widespread to reflect on EU-NATO relations (Ewers-Peters, 2025, pp 868-870). As the focus of her article is more on the development of strategic autonomy in Europe and EU-NATO relations, Ewers-Peters (2025) does not dive into a comparison of two cases with different approaches to ESA, nor does she cover preferences of states regarding security and defence cooperation, which contribute to a gap in the research that we try to fill. The main argument of Ewers-Peters' (2025) article is that ESA can, in fact, enhance the cooperation and relationship between the EU and NATO, although some contemporary arguments would include that ESA has evolved due to the tense relations between Europe and the US with the purpose of Europe being able to take care of itself in terms of both defence and industry.

Similarly to the article of Ewers-Peters (2025), Varma's (2024) focus is on the events that has led to the debates on ESA, also referred to as the drivers of strategic autonomy in Europe. Her article seeks "to understand what strategic autonomy means, both from an institutional and practical point of view" (Varma, 2024, p. 66). Varma's article can thereby be interpreted as being a more descriptive paper than an investigative, or inferential, one. Varma (2024) does not explicitly state the paper's methodology, but it can be argued, considering the comprehensive chronological tracing of events, that she utilises process tracing. One of Varma's (2024) main arguments is that "having relied on the United States for the better part of 75 years, [Europeans] must now build up the capabilities to become a power in their own right in order to become a better partner to the United States", and that "Joe Biden will likely be the last transatlanticist president" (p. 76). By this statement, it can be argued that Varma (2024) foreshadows the potential division of states' preferences; namely the split between Europeanist and Transatlanticist preferences. She also highlights the EU's impressive economic power and cooperation which has turned to be a powerful security tool due to global economic interdependency. However, considering contemporary debates on the issue of ESA and security preferences, Varma (2024) stands out because she states that "Europeans and Americans have the capacity to both be present in Europe, and both be security providers," and a "common [...] acceptance of this reality would bring about strategic autonomy" (p. 79). She, thereby, argues that states do not necessarily have to decide between being strictly Europeanist or Transatlanticist in their security preferences, but if Europe itself becomes stronger in terms of defence capabilities and industry, both Europe and the US can cooperate more equally.

On the other hand, Csernatononi (2022) has chosen a different narrative to focus on in the study of ESA, namely the discourse and rhetoric around the politics of the concept. In her article, she argues that there is a “sense of urgency” coming from the European Commission, particularly when it and other EU stakeholders also refer to ESA as “open strategic autonomy, strategic sovereignty, defence sovereignty, technological and digital sovereignty, cloud sovereignty, data sovereignty [...] [and] semiconductors sovereignty” (Csernatononi, 2022, p. 396). This indicates that strategic autonomy is a broad term not only used to refer to defence capabilities but also industrial strength and resilience. Regarding methodology, Csernatononi (2022) utilises “interpretive content analysis to highlight how hegemonically performed visions of [ESA] [...] “float” across fields of EU policy action and intervention (p. 398). While establishing that the EU attempts to increase its political hegemonies, Csernatononi’s (2022) main argument is that use of ambiguous concepts – such as strategic autonomy – is a calculated attempt from the EU’s side to “instil a sense of urgency, shape how security and technology are imagined within the EU governance toolbox [and] institutionalise a ‘high politics’ security logic within different [sectors]” (p. 409). Csernatononi (2022) has, therefore, chosen a more linguistic, discursive, and interpretative focus in her article to make meaning of the term of ESA and its ambiguities and what it means to European politics. Csernatononi’s article plays a more supportive than active role in this article due to its linguistic focus, while this article’s focus is on the actual, evident actions in policy and political engagement.

In Molnár’s (2024) paper, she highlights the historical background of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the context of ESA, similarly to the majority of the scholars included in this literature review. However, Molnár (2024) also discusses the theoretical background behind the CSDP, for instance, “differentiated integration, intergovernmentalism versus supranationalism, [...] strategic autonomy, and European sovereignty” (p. 36). In her paper, she also briefly mentions some of the security preferences of certain EU Member States and their positions toward European defence cooperation. Here, Molnár (2024) states that within the EU there are three different groupings regarding strategic autonomy and security preference with which Member States affiliate; namely, those that prioritise EU-SA, those that prioritise open strategic autonomy (OSA), and those that prioritise the NATO alliance – also referred to as the ‘Transatlanticists’ (p. 59). According to Molnár (2024), Poland belongs to the latter group and prefers the transatlantic alliance to any strategic autonomy (p. 55). This demonstrates that within security circles of the EU there is no consensus

on the matter of strategic autonomy, which could hinder the EU's efforts to become strategically autonomous.

In another article by Michaels & Sus (2024b), they describe European strategic autonomy as widely used but difficult to put into shared practice because Member States disagree on its meaning, purpose, and its relationship to NATO and the United States. They argue that the problem is not the absence of ESA initiatives, but disagreement about what ESA should lead to. They link this directly to “the lack of an EU wide permissive consensus about the direction and applicability of ESA” (Michaels & Sus, 2024b, p. 57). In their account, this lack of consensus comes from how governments attach different strategic meanings to ESA. In this way, agreement is easier when the concept stays broad, but harder when it starts to define concrete commitments. They further group these differing preferences into two main camps, stating that in the EU's security and defence context “two groups of national governments matter most: Atlanticists and Europeanists” (Michaels & Sus, 2024b, p. 69). What separates these positions is mainly how ESA is understood in relation to the United States and NATO. They cite Tonra's distinction that governments differ over whether ESA is “hedging against the prospect of US withdrawal, a necessary reinforcement [of the Western alliance] or even an emancipation from dependence upon a fickle United States” (Tonra, 2021, p. 11, as cited in Michaels & Sus, 2024b, p. 69). Furthermore, they state that the Europeanist group includes France and Italy, while the Atlanticists are Poland, Hungary, and Denmark (Michaels & Sus, 2024b). When explaining what shapes these security preferences, they point to “political orientation of national political elites, historical circumstances, characteristics of the defence industry, and the geopolitical environment” (p. 70). These factors influence how governments interpret what ESA should mean and how far they are willing to go. They also stress that these differences do not reflect a single regional split, since member state preferences vary for reasons that go beyond the usual East-West pattern (p. 70).

Within their study, they examine the above-mentioned countries placed in the Europeanist and Atlanticists groups and identify several preference patterns across these cases. One pattern is about alliance beliefs and reliance. For Poland, they note that Warsaw sees the US and NATO as its primary security guarantee and therefore supports EU security and defence efforts only when they fit within that framework (Michaels & Sus, 2024b). Denmark is highlighted as a similar preference pattern because it only engages in selected EU defence initiatives, while also remaining sceptical of ESA as an alternative since Copenhagen sees “no credible alternative to the US collective defence guarantee” (p. 71). A second pattern concerns

defence industrial interests. For France, they point out that the country's strong defence industry reduces reliance on US systems, and position France to benefit from deeper European industrial cooperation, whereas for Italy, they link support for ESA to an understanding of it as "transatlantically sustainable", and is shaped by both Italy's industrial capacity and national security priorities (Cristiani, 2021, as cited in Michaels & Sus, 2024b, p. 70). Here, industrial structure influences what states view as practical or advantageous within ESA and further EU security and defence cooperation. A third pattern involves political orientation and strategic tradition. For France, Michaels and Sus (2024b) mention that long rooted ideas in French strategic thinking, such as the Gaullist tradition, help explain why French leaders support greater EU security and defence cooperation and ESA as a response to doubts about US reliability (p. 70). In the case of Hungary, they describe a government that accepts the need to strengthen EU defence capabilities but still holds back from reforms that would move the Union closer to ESA. They link this to national level factors mentioned earlier, including political orientations among elites and domestic conditions that shape how far the government is willing to go (Varga, 2022, as cited in Michaels & Sus, 2024b). These patterns link back to the point they make in their conclusion, where they state that the slow progress on ESA comes from "national differences in political beliefs, perceptions and goals between Atlanticists and Europeanists" (Michaels & Sus, 2024b, p. 73). This could explain why some Member States can support certain security initiatives but still disagree on what autonomy should ultimately mean.

Martill & Gebhard (2023) also address the question of divergent preferences within European security and defence cooperation, though from a more institutional perspective than Michaels and Sus (2024b). Rather than focusing primarily on ESA as a contested concept, Martill and Gebhard (2023) examine how defence cooperation in Europe has primarily been shaped by persistent differences between member states. They argue that meaningful cooperation has long been constrained by "divergent strategic cultures", "domestic opposition to integration", and uncertainty about the preferences of key actors, and the existence of multiple and overlapping institutional frameworks (Martill & Gebhard, 2023, pp. 97-98). In this account, divergence is the main feature of European security and defence cooperation itself, and not just a barrier. Martill and Gebhard (2023) also argue that the development of the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) reflects attempts to organise security and defence cooperation in a way that accommodates persistent differences between Member States. They describe this as "combined differentiation", where several forms of selective cooperation are used within the same framework to "accommodate complexity in

strategic preferences” (Martill & Gebhard, 2023, p. 98). In practice, this means that cooperation is structured in a way that allows governments to participate on different terms, meaning that Member States do not approach European security and defence equally from the same strategic position. Debates about cooperation therefore tend to revolve around institutional design, participatory rules, and the scope of initiatives. They point to the “strategic divergence between France and Germany” over whether PESCO should take a more exclusive or inclusive form, a disagreement that ultimately produced solutions of compromise within the framework (p. 104). At the same time, concerns among more Atlanticist national governments led to assurances that new EU security and defence initiatives would not challenge NATO’s position in European security. In this way, the literature connects variation in defence cooperation to deeper differences in strategic culture, institutional preferences, and views on the relationship between EU initiatives and the transatlantic alliance.

This pattern of disagreement is also brought up in Fiott’s (2025) discussion of ESA. He approaches ESA as a concept that contains several competing strategic interpretations, distinguishing between three “images” of autonomy, “responsibility”, “hedging” and “independence”, which point to different “political motivations and norms” among European actors (Fiott, 2025, pp. 827-828). This matters because it shifts the discussion from whether states support strategic autonomy towards what they understand autonomy to mean. In that sense, Fiott (2025) presents ESA as a concept that already contains different strategic preferences within. Under responsibility, autonomy means stronger European capabilities without challenging “America’s privileged position in European security” (Fiott, 2025, p. 828). Hedging is tied to uncertainty about long term US reliability and treats autonomy as an “insurance policy” against future retrenchment (Fiott, 2025, pp. 830-831). Independence is the strongest version, where Europe seeks the “highest possible form of autonomy from the US and China” (Fiott, 2025, p. 832). This view of ESA is important in the literature because it helps explain why disagreement continues even when the term itself is widely accepted. States may endorse strategic autonomy at a general level, while favouring different versions of the concept in relation to NATO, the US, and Europe’s international role.

However, there are gaps in the research. Much of the research on ESA in relation to security and defence has been focusing on the events – or the context – that has led to the concept being so widely used in both policy debates and in academic circles. Additionally, some researchers, such as Csernaton (2022), has focused on both the discursive definitions and usage of the concept of strategic autonomy. In Michaels and Sus’ (2024a) article, they both support the notion of a research gap regarding ESA and attempt to reduce the gap. One of their

focus points is to “[unpack] the EU’s quest for strategic autonomy as a process of maturation since the late 1990s” (p. 383). They also mention that “attention to how smaller EU members [...] approach the concept in comparison to bigger ones” is much-needed (Michaels and Sus, 2024a, p. 387). They, therefore, explicitly mention that, in the study of ESA, there is an underexplored gap in the research; that comparative case studies of small and large EU Member States are largely absent from academic research. This statement by Michaels and Sus (2024a) supports our research, which indeed focuses on comparing two Member States that are different in both geographical size and population, namely Denmark and Spain.

Theory

Neoclassical Realism

From a structural realist perspective, a major security shock should produce a convergent response among states operating within the same alliance framework, as the deteriorating threat environment creates strong incentives to increase defence contributions. However, the empirical record among EU and European NATO Member States since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine shows considerable variation that structural realism alone struggles to account for. Drawing primarily on Ripsman et al. (2016), who argue that domestic intervening variables condition how states translate systemic pressures into actual defence policy responses. For this reason, understanding why some states adapt more decisively than others require looking beyond the international system to the domestic configurations that filter and shape how external stimuli are processed and acted upon. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to develop a theoretical argument that explains this variation and create a set of explanatory variables that the comparative case study can then operationalise and investigate.

Neoclassical realism emerged as a response to a limitation in structural realism, where scholars found it difficult accounting for the variation in foreign policy among states facing similar external conditions. The concept is usually associated with Gideon Rose (1998), who brought together realist principles that shared the view that systemic pressures matter, but do not by themselves determine state behaviour. More specifically, neoclassical realism builds on Waltz’ (1979) emphasis on the international system and the distribution of material capabilities, while arguing that these pressures must be understood through the various state mechanisms that affect foreign policy. Here, Ripsman et al.’s (2016) account offers a more systematic formulation of the approach than earlier contributions. Rather than treating neoclassical realism only as a way to explain anomalies, they present it as a multi-dimensional framework for analysing foreign policy, and how systemic pressures interact with domestic

intervening variables. Their main argument is that “to understand foreign policy, it becomes essential to study the unique processes of perception, decision making, and policy implementation in individual countries, which will lead them to enact different policy responses to similar challenges” (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 31-32). This is the theoretical logic that structures the analysis in our thesis: Denmark and Spain are both EU and NATO member states exposed to the same post-2022 European security environment, yet they have responded in quite different ways in terms of their defence efforts and contributions. Denmark has emerged as a frontrunner, dramatically increasing defence spending and abandoning its EU defence opt-out, while Spain has remained a relative laggard despite facing the same systemic pressure.

Ripsman et al. (2016) distinguish between three variants of neoclassical realism by what they aim to explain. Type I explains suboptimal responses to clear systemic signals in crisis decision-making. Type II accounts for grand strategy and longer-term adjustment, where the international system sets the range of viable policy options and domestic variables determine which option a state selects from that range. Type III treats neoclassical realism as a theory of international outcomes and structural change. This thesis falls within Type II, since Denmark and Spain are adjusting their grand-strategic postures over several years under a systemic shock that permits a range of responses, where domestic variables do not override or replace systemic causes. The argument is that within the options the systemic environment permits, Denmark and Spain have selected different responses for reasons originating in their domestic politics. To understand the reasons, it is necessary to first examine what the systemic level can and cannot explain about this divergence, before turning to the domestic variables that account for the remaining variation.

According to Ripsman et al. (2016), states construct their foreign and security policies “primarily with an eye to the threats and opportunities that arise in the international system, which shape each state’s range of policy options” (pp. 19-20), and anarchy is treated as “a permissive condition rather than an independent causal force” (p. 43). What matters causally is the relative distribution of capabilities and the trends within that distribution. When the distribution of power changes in a way that increases threat perception, realist theory expects states within the same alliance framework to respond by increasing their defence efforts (Walt, 1987). One question this thesis addresses is therefore why Denmark and Spain, both NATO and EU members operating within the same collective security frameworks, have responded to the same shock with such different degrees of defence adaptation. Ripsman et al. (2016) argue that the systemic level only provides a partial answer because structural realism

treats states as “functionally similar” units responding uniformly to external pressure, which is an assumption that ignores the domestic constraints preventing states from responding in the same way to the same signal (p. 24). The variation between Denmark and Spain therefore requires an explanation that goes beyond what the systemic level can provide. Beyond this structural core, the framework also introduces what Ripsman et al. (2016) call structural modifiers, which are material factors at the systemic or regional level that condition how individual states experience the security environment without being structural in the strict sense. These include “geography, the rate of technological diffusion, and the offence-defence balance in military technologies” (p. 40). Geography is particularly relevant here because “physical distance, strategic depth, and topographical barriers, or the lack thereof, can have an effect on the security environment in which states operate” (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 41-42). These differences provide a structural-level basis for expecting different threat perceptions across states, even before domestic variables are considered. Denmark’s position in the Baltic Sea region and its Arctic exposure through Greenland place it in considerably closer proximity to Russian military assets than Spain, whose strategic orientation is primarily directed toward the Mediterranean and the southern neighbourhood. This geographic asymmetry means that the systemic signal each state receives from the post-2022 environment differs in intensity, providing a partial structural explanation for the difference in defence adaptation. However, geography alone is insufficient as an explanation. If threat proximity were the determining variable, we would expect a consistent relationship between geographic exposure and degree of defence adaptation across European states. The empirical record since 2022 does not support this. Hungary and Slovakia are also both members of the EU and NATO, and geographically closer to the conflict than Spain, yet none of them has undertaken defence adaptations comparable to Denmark. The pattern of adaptation across Europe is too varied to be accounted for by geography alone, which suggests that something other than the structural level conditions how states translate external pressure into actual policy responses. Domestic variables are therefore necessary to complete the explanation.

The permissive and restrictive distinction constitutes a second systemic variable in the framework. A restrictive environment is one where threats are imminent and intense, leaving few viable response options, whereas a permissive environment involves more remote or less intense pressures that give domestic factors greater scope to shape outcomes. Ripsman et al. (2016) note that “more often, states face strategic environments with less intense threats and opportunities and more time for the foreign policy executive to select a policy response”, meaning that “unit-level intervening variables can play a greater role in shaping a state’s

response to systemic pressures” (p. 53). The post-2022 environment has moved both Denmark and Spain away from the fully permissive end of this spectrum, but neither faces a situation so restrictive that the range of viable responses narrows to a single option. Denmark’s environment is relatively more demanding given its geographic exposure, but Danish governments still retain meaningful choices about the pace, depth, and institutional framing of their defence adaptation. Spain faces a less acute signal and therefore operates in a more permissive environment, which means domestic variables are likely to carry more explanatory weight in accounting for its response.

Another structural dimension is state size. Many small states cannot provide for their own security independently and therefore depend on external alliance frameworks in ways that larger states do not, meaning that changes in the reliability of those frameworks matter considerably more to them (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). This creates stronger baseline incentives to bandwagon when the security environment worsens. For Denmark, this is particularly relevant. Denmark has historically leaned towards the United States and NATO as its security guarantors, and the Trump administration’s questioning of NATO’s collective defence commitment and threats against Greenland has put that relationship under pressure. As a response, Denmark’s military intelligence service included the United States as a negative factor in its threat assessment for the first time (Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, 2025). On the other hand, Spain has more material capacity and without the same degree of structural dependency on any single alliance partner, does not experience this kind of pressure in the same way. State size therefore functions in this thesis as a structural condition that helps explain why Denmark faces stronger baseline incentives to bandwagon than Spain.

The analytical focus of this thesis is therefore on identifying how domestic intervening variables can explain Denmark’s increased adaptation in defence posture in relation to Spain, given that both states share the same alliance obligations and institutional frameworks, even if the intensity of the systemic signal they receive differs. Ripsman et al. (2016) organise these domestic variables into four groups, namely leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions, and emphasise that they do not replace the systemic starting point but filter and condition how states respond to it. While policymakers construct policy to fit systemic stimuli, “policy selection is often influenced by domestic-level intervening variables” that affect perception, decision-making, and implementation capacity (p. 33). The four groups operate across different time horizons and reflect different levels of domestic influence. Leader images and perceptions are most consequential for short-term crisis decision-making, whereas strategic culture, state-society

relations, and domestic institutions “are likely to have more influence in the short- to medium- and medium- to long-term, when culture, society, and institutions shape and constrain the formulation of policy planning and grand strategy” (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 61). Since this thesis examines patterns of defence adaptation across a four-year period rather than specific crisis decisions, leader images are not a primary explanatory variable, and the analysis instead focuses on the three domestic variables as detailed below.

Of the four intervening variables, strategic culture is likely to be the most analytically consequential for the comparison between Denmark and Spain. Ripsman et al. (2016) highlight Kupchan’s (1994) definition of strategic culture as “deeply embedded conceptions and notions of national security” that develop within a society and that, through processes of socialisation and institutionalisation, “become deeply entrenched and constrain a state’s behaviour and freedom of action by defining what are acceptable and unacceptable strategic choices, even in an anarchic self-help environment” (p. 67). In this way, strategic culture can function as a domestic constraint on the range of policies that can be credibly proposed, legitimated domestically, and practically carried through. They argue that leaders tend to internalise national security norms through their own socialisation, that policies conflicting with dominant cultural expectations are likely to meet domestic resistance, and that openly defying shared security attitudes risks generating political opposition that can threaten the leader’s position (p. 92). For the comparison between Denmark and Spain, the theoretical expectation is that each state’s historically formed assumptions about the nature of external threats, the appropriate response to alliance obligations, and the domestic political costs of increased defence spending will condition how far and how fast each government has been willing to move since 2022. A state whose strategic culture has historically treated military engagement and alliance contribution as central to national security is likely to respond more decisively to a systemic shock than one whose strategic culture has emphasised other priorities, or where defence has been a politically marginal issue.

The second domestic variable, state-society relations, concerns the state’s capacity to extract, mobilise, and harness domestic resources despite distributional competition and organised societal resistance. Ripsman et al. (2016) define it as encompassing the degree of harmony between state and society, the extent to which societal actors defer to the state on security matters, and the degree of political and social cohesion within the state. The main question is whether the state can overcome organised resistance to implement its preferred policy, which is more than just measuring public opinion on defence spending. As Ripsman et al. (2016) note, grand strategy requires immense financial and material resources, and if

“societal groups, including organised interests and coalition parties competing over public resources, withhold them, the state’s ability to act is compromised” (p. 72). Drawing on Schweller’s (2006) formulation within the neoclassical realist framework, this variable is examined through three sub-dimensions: elite consensus and cohesion around the nature of the threat and the appropriate response, societal cohesion and the degree to which organised interests support or resist increased defence efforts, and the state’s extractive capacity against that resistance. The financial dimension of defence adaptation belongs within this variable because the competition over public resources is fundamentally a struggle between societal coalitions with competing claims on the state budget. In Spain, parts of the governing coalition have framed defence spending as a direct competitor to welfare and economic recovery, which is a distributional argument made by societal actors rather than a constraint imposed by the institutional rules governing how budgets are passed. States where elites are fragmented and societal coalitions compete over resources are, as Schweller (2006) argues, prone to underbalancing rather than responding to systemic imperatives.

The third domestic variable, domestic institutions, is analytically distinct from state-society relations, though the two interact. Where the state-society relations variable asks whether organised resistance exists and how fragmented domestic politics are, the domestic institutions variable asks whether the formal rules of the political system give that resistance the power to block the executive. As Ripsman et al. (2016) explain, formal institutions “set the broad parameters within which domestic competition over policy occurs” and “determine who can contribute to policy formation, at what stage of the policy process, and who can act as veto players” (p. 75). The relevant institutional features for this comparison are executive autonomy in defence and budgetary matters, the number and position of veto players within coalition arrangements, and the formal rules governing how budgets are approved. Ripsman et al. (2016) further note that the degree of structural autonomy of the foreign policy executive determines its independence from both legislative and popular opposition, such that strong executives can pursue their preferred policies even when confronting strong opposition, while weak executives will struggle to do so. In this way, institutions “often crystallize state-society relations”, meaning that formal rules determine whether societal resistance becomes an obstacle to executive action (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 75). For example, a coalition partner opposing defence spending is a societal actor with a political preference, but it is the institutional rules governing budget approval that determine whether that preference can block the executive. The case studies will therefore examine each state’s formal governance arrangements to detect

whether institutional rules have given domestic opposition the power to constrain executive action.

Drawing on the theoretical framework developed in this section, the comparative case study will investigate why Denmark has adapted its defence posture so much more than Spain in response to the post-2022 security environment, and how those domestic and structural variables account for that difference. The analysis proceeds from the assumption that the systemic level, while necessary, is insufficient on its own. Both states face the same alliance obligations and the same broad security shock, and while Denmark's geographical position means that the systemic signal it receives is more acute, geography alone does not explain the scale of the divergence. The domestic variables are therefore the primary explanatory focal points of our analysis.

The three primary domestic variables are examined as follows. Strategic culture is traced through each state's historically formed assumptions about alliance contribution, military engagement, and the domestic legitimacy of defence commitments, with the analysis examining whether those assumptions have enabled or constrained adaptation since 2022. State-society relations are examined through the degree of elite consensus around the threat and the appropriate response, the extent of organised societal resistance to increased defence efforts, and the state's capacity to extract the financial resources required against that resistance. Domestic institutions are examined through the degree of executive autonomy in defence and budgetary matters, the location of veto players within each state's coalition or parliamentary arrangements, and whether the formal rules have allowed governments to sustain defence commitments or given opponents the power to block them.

The theoretical expectation derived from this framework is that Denmark's decisive adaptation is expected to follow from a strategic culture oriented toward active alliance contribution, sufficient elite consensus and institutional flexibility to mobilise resources without prohibitive domestic costs, and the heightened bandwagoning incentives of a small state. Spain's more cautious response is expected to follow from a strategic culture where defence has historically received less political attention, distributional competition among societal coalitions that has constrained the state's extractive capacity, institutional rules that have given coalition partners, who are opposed to defence spending, formal leverage over budget outcomes. The comparative case study will assess the validity of these theoretical claims, or whether the evidence points in a different direction. Lastly, in our discussion, we will evaluate which domestic variables carry the most explanatory weight for the difference in defence adaptation.

Methodology

According to our research question “Why do some EU member states adapt their defence and security preferences differently in response to external security shocks, and how can this variation be explained through neoclassical realism?”, the aim of our research is to examine and analyse the defence adaptation and security preferences of Denmark and Spain in relation to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The goal of researching this aspect of international relations is to identify and analyse the dominant domestic variables involved in the difference of defence adaptation. To conduct our analysis, we will first – to establish context – begin by investigating the EU’s preference regarding security and defence, related to strategic autonomy, by examining and analysing the European Defence Industrial Strategy and the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030. Thereby we will examine and analyse two of the EU’s strategies for the future regarding both the aspect of physical security and the aspect of industrial defence. The second and third part of our analysis will follow the methodological framework of a comparative case study, utilising the most-similar systems design (MSSD). This part of the analysis will focus on the cases of Denmark and Spain in which we will utilise Ripsman et al.’s (2016) domestic variables within neoclassical realism to analyse the domestic reasons for their different defence adaptations. Additionally, in accordance with comparative case studies, we will compare our findings of differing, independent variables that influence the difference in outcome in the discussion section.

Comparative Case Study

There are several definitions of, and connotations attached to, the word ‘case’. Therefore, this paragraph is dedicated to clarifying the definition of a ‘case’ and how it relates to our case study research. Briefly summarised, Seha and Müller-Rommel (2016) define a ‘case’ as a “phenomenon, or an event, chosen, conceptualized and analyzed empirically as a manifestation of a broader class of phenomena or events” (p. 422). As the focus of our research is on the security and defence adaptations of Denmark and Spain, which corresponds to cases, our paper belongs to the methodological study of cases. In our research, the two cases – Denmark’s defence adaptation and Spain’s defence adaptation – can both be characterised as phenomena in both international relations and European defence and security.

This thesis consists of three analytical segments, two of which – namely, the security and defence adaptations of Denmark and Spain – are cases and will subsequently be compared in the discussion. Therefore, this section is dedicated to defining case study research and the comparative method. According to Seha and Müller-Rommel (2016), “[a] case study

is a research strategy based on the in-depth empirical investigation of one, or a small number, of phenomena in order to explore the configuration of each case” (p. 420). Additionally, “[regardless] of the number of cases studied, both small-N and large-N research designs seek to uncover key patterns of similarity and differences between empirical cases and explain them by means of theory” (p. 420). Our methodological roadmap is thus gathering, examining, and analysing relevant empirical data of the cases of Danish and Spanish security and defence adaptations with the purpose of finding the particularly intervening, explanatory variables that influence the difference in adaptation while utilising theory to explain the difference in outcome.

The aim of comparative case studies is to obtain comprehensive understandings of the cases in question and thereby “[draw] causal inferences” (Seha and Müller-Rommel, 2016, p. 424). When doing a comparative case study, in each case the “focus is on the dependent variable and the research question is consequently formulated in the sentence ‘What explains Y?’, indicating that the ambition is to ‘discover’ the relevant independent variable(s)” (Anckar, 2020, p. 35). Therefore, the aim of comparative case studies is to empirically examine and analyse cases in-depth with the purpose of highlighting the interacting variables and establishing the main independent variable(s), X, that cause the difference on the dependent/outcome variable, Y. Thus, the focus of this thesis is to analyse the cases of Denmark and Spain independently to discover the independent (domestic) variables that have led to the difference in outcome, considering both states are members of NATO and the EU, and participate in EU defence cooperation. Additionally, one must be careful when committing to doing comparative case studies. According to Lijphart (1971), one must “judiciously restrict [oneself] to the really key variables, omitting those of only marginal importance” (p. 690). From this statement, it is argued that comparative case studies should not include an overwhelming number of variables lest the paper becomes redundant. Therefore, this thesis will only focus on a select few, but relevant, explanatory variables that sufficiently explain the difference in outcome.

In order to better answer our research question and find the relevant explanatory variables in our comparative case study, we will utilise the methodological framework of the *most-similar systems design* (MSSD). Anckar (2020) stated that when doing MSSD research, “we choose, as objects of research, systems that are as similar as possible, except with regard to the research phenomenon of interest” (p. 34). This means that the cases being studied must be as similar on as many explanatory variables and factors (X) as possible but differing on the

outcome variable (Y). Anckar (2020) also related this to Lijphart's argument that "when the researcher chooses objects of research, the ambition should be to maximize variation on the independent variable and minimize variation on the control variables" (p. 34). This is done with the ambition of limiting and omitting unrelated variables while concentrating on the relevant variables. Regarding comparability Seha and Müller-Rommel (2016) argued that "researchers generally resort to selecting cases that share typological characteristics [...] or that belong to a 'family of countries'" (pp. 425-426). Indeed, Denmark and Spain share some typological characteristics, such as both countries are both members of the EU and NATO, both countries are of predominantly Christian faith and culture, and they both belong to the family of stable European, constitutional monarchies. Similarly, considering the timeframe of the analysis, the governments of Denmark and Spain both consist of centre-left parties, and the largest party in each government also belong to the social democratic ideology.

Structured, focused comparison method

To structure the within-case analysis, this thesis draws on George and Bennett's (2005) method of structured, focused comparison, an approach developed for theory-driven qualitative case study research in international relations and comparative foreign policy analysis. While MSSD provides the logic for case selection, structured, focused comparison decides how each case is analysed. As George and Bennett (2005) describe it, the method is "structured in that the researcher writes general questions that reflect the research objective and that these questions are asked of each case under study to guide and standardize data collection, thereby making systematic comparison and cumulation of the findings of the cases possible", and "focused in that it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined" (p. 67). Following this method, each case study is guided by four standardised questions. The first is more descriptive than explanatory by establishing the adaptation outcome that the subsequent analytical questions aim to explain. This is done by examining how each state has adapted its defence posture in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and to what degree that adaptation goes beyond the minimum required by its alliance obligations. The remaining three are explanatory; each corresponding to one of the domestic variables derived from the theoretical framework. The second question, concerning the strategic culture variable, asks how historically formed assumptions about security threats, military engagement, and the domestic legitimacy of defence commitments have either enabled or constrained adaptation. The third, concerning state-society relations, asks to what degree the state has been able build elite consensus around increased defence efforts, and whether distributional competition over public resources has

constrained its capacity to mobilise the financial and political resources required. The fourth, relating to domestic institutions, asks whether the formal rules governing defence and budgetary policy provide sufficient executive autonomy to sustain defence commitments, or whether veto players within coalition or parliamentary arrangements have given domestic opponents the formal power to block or delay adaptation. According to George and Bennett (2005), the shared operationalisation framework and these four questions ensure that both cases address the same analytical problems in a comparable way, making systematic comparison possible in the discussion section.

In our thesis, we have used a wide array of data in order to examine our research focus. For example, the EU documents, particularly the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS), and the White Paper on Defence Readiness 2030, are used to map the shared policy environment both states are responding to. The national documents, including defence strategies, government statements, and parliamentary material from Denmark and Spain, are used to examine how each state formulates its own priorities and commitments within that environment. These are not read as definitive statements of preference but as indicators of how governments frame their security choices domestically. Where relevant, Eurobarometer survey data is used to contextualise public attitudes toward defence spending and European security cooperation, particularly in relation to the state-society relations variable. What the documents reveal is then interpreted through the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, meaning the focus is not only on what each state says but on what the domestic intervening variables, identified in the theory section, can tell us about why each state frames its security choices the way it does. The documents are not treated as the only source of evidence, but as one part of the empirical base that the case studies supplement through additional primary and secondary sources.

Use of generative AI

In accordance with Aalborg University's guidelines on academic transparency, students must clearly state any use of generative AI in their written projects. Therefore, the following short section explains how these tools have supported our research and writing process.

Throughout the work on this project, we have used generative AI (such as Gemini and Copilot) in assisting brainstorming ideas and organising our work. For example, we used it early on for brainstorming different overall topics and how to narrow our focus. This was particularly useful when we were deciding how to approach the question of European defence adaptation and how to structure the comparison between Denmark and Spain. Later on, we

used AI to structure and sort the sources we had already collected. More specifically, for our own use, we compiled our references into a clearer overview that made it easier to identify which sources addressed which case and what types of arguments they put forward. Overall, generative AI has been helpful in certain areas, specifically in brainstorming and organising our material.

Analysis

Part one: EU strategies

In order to establish background information and context, we will, therefore, in this section of the analysis, examine and analyse two EU strategies. Namely, the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030. The purpose of analysing these documents is to establish a standard in terms of security and defence and what direction the EU seeks regarding its security and defence preference. In analysing each of these strategies, we are focusing on three standard focus points; (1) context and purpose of the strategy; (2) problematisations; and (3) solution and strategy.

EDIS

The European Defence Industrial Strategy, published in March 2024, is the EU's first comprehensive attempt to address the structural weaknesses of European defence industrial cooperation. The strategy sets out a vision for European defence industrial policy up to 2035, with the ambition of increasing collaborative investment in the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), while reducing member states' dependency on non-European suppliers. EDIS was published alongside a proposed regulation establishing the European Defence Industry Programme, or EDIP, which serves as the primary legislative instrument for translating the strategy's ambitions into concrete and binding policy. While EDIS itself is a non-binding political strategic document, EDIP is a regulation directly applicable in all Member States, introducing legal obligations, financial mechanisms, and governance structures to begin delivering on the vision EDIS sets out. The document is explicit that this ambition is not intended to be an alternative to NATO, stating that for Member States in the alliance "the Alliance remains the foundation of their collective defence", and that a stronger EU in defence "is complementary to NATO" (European Commission, 2024, p. 3). EDIS characterises this reliance on non-European suppliers as a major hurdle going forward, particularly the notion that European defence procurement has long been driven by national logic, with governments buying either from domestic industries or from American suppliers rather than pooling demand with partners. Despite agreeing back in 2007 to spend at least 35%

of equipment budgets on European collaborative procurement, Member States reached only 18% in 2022, less than half of the agreed benchmark (European Commission, 2024, p. 3). This has led to duplicated capabilities, missed economies of scale, and a defence industrial base too fragmented to respond effectively to the kind of demand that a high-intensity conflict creates. The financial consequences of this fragmented procurement approach are also significant, with studies estimating that greater collaboration could save between €24,5 billion and €75,5 billion annually (Clapp, 2024, p. 3). In the period following Russia's invasion, 78% of EU member state defence acquisitions came from outside the EU, with the United States accounting for 63% of that share (European Commission, 2024, p. 3). The strategy frames this as a problem of industrial sovereignty, arguing that European taxpayers are effectively subsidising jobs and technological development abroad. The strategy describes this as a cycle that undermines the long-term viability of European defence industry, and one that becomes harder to break the longer it continues (European Commission, 2024, p. 5). In that sense, EDIS is in many ways an attempt to understand why Member States have consistently fallen short of their own commitments, and to create conditions under which they might meet them.

To address these problems, EDIS sets out a series of targets for how Member States should procure and invest in defence going forward. By 2030, Member States are urged to ensure that at least 40% of their defence equipment is procured collaboratively, that at least 50% of their defence investments go to European suppliers, and that intra-EU defence trade reaches at least 35% of the total EU defence market, rising to 60% procurement from European suppliers by 2035 (European Commission, 2024, pp. 10, 14, 15). These targets are set out in EDIS and are non-binding, meaning Member States are invited rather than required to meet them. EDIP, as the implementing regulation, introduces binding legal provisions to support progress toward these targets, including financial incentives, the 'buy European' eligibility requirement, and a security of supply mechanism that gives the Commission new powers to coordinate arms production during a crisis (European Commission, 2024). However, even with EDIP in place, the Commission has no enforcement mechanism over defence procurement, and security and defence policy remains a national competency under the EU treaties. The strategy acknowledges that the increased investments it calls for "will achieve their purpose only through increased cooperation, as the precondition to overcoming persistent inefficiencies", while leaving it to Member States to decide how far they are willing to go (p. 15). The overall financial package to reach these targets are also modest, relative to the scale of the ambition, with the proposed EDIP budget set at €1,5 billion for 2025 to 2027, which the Commission itself describes as "a bridge, limited in scale, towards the next Multi-Annual Financial

Framework” (European Commission, 2024, p. 23). Whether Member States move toward the targets, and at what pace, is ultimately a political question that each government answers according to its own priorities and domestic constraints.

The main institutional mechanism EDIS introduces to encourage joint procurement is the Structure for European Armament Programme, or SEAP. The idea is to give Member States a standardised legal framework for managing cooperative defence programmes across the full equipment lifecycle, from development to maintenance (European Commission, 2024). Participation requires at least three Member States, and those who jointly own equipment through the SEAP can benefit from VAT exemptions and increased funding rates under EDIP. In practice, what the SEAP asks of participating governments is that they align their capability priorities with partners and agree to shared ownership over procurement decisions that have traditionally been treated as a matter of national sovereignty.

While the Commission presents EDIS as a necessary and achievable step toward European defence industrial readiness, the European Parliamentary Research Service has offered a more measured assessment of what the strategy can realistically deliver. In a briefing paper prepared for Members of the European Parliament, analyst Sebastian Clapp notes that the strategy’s success “hinges on securing adequate funding and achieving genuine Member State buy-in”, and experts doubt that either scenario is realistic (Clapp, 2024, p. 1). Furthermore, the proposed EDIP budget of €1,5 billion is seen as insufficient for a sector with an annual turnover of €70 billion, with analysts arguing that it will not “make a significant difference” in the near future (p. 5). The fact that the procurement targets are non-binding is also a recurring concern. The intergovernmental character of defence policy means the Commission has limited tools to enforce compliance, and experts note that it remains unclear how far the current EU treaties even allow the Commission to take a more active role in defence industrial planning (Clapp, 2024, p. 5). For certain Member States with large domestic defence industries, relinquishing control over procurement decisions to a supranational framework is politically sensitive, since it touches on questions of industrial policy, employment, export regulation, and ultimately who gets to decide which companies receive government contracts and on what terms (Clapp, 2024). Companies, regional employers, and industrial lobbies that depend on national procurement contracts have financial interests in keeping these decisions at the national level, and governments that rely on their support have reasons to be cautious.

That said, the briefing also argues that the EDIS has made some progress in certain areas. The adoption of EDIP as binding legislation in December 2025, with 457 votes in favour in the European Parliament, showed that there is political support for the direction of

the strategy, even if the funding remains limited (Clapp, 2024). The briefing also addresses the ‘buy European’ question, noting that the EU maintains what amounts to an addiction to American equipment, partly because it “comes with US security guarantees” (Clapp, 2024, p. 6). Procuring American platforms and systems ties Member States into training programmes, maintenance arrangements, and interoperability standards that have been built up over decades within the NATO framework. Moving procurement toward European suppliers therefore has implications for more than just the defence industrial sector. For governments whose security arrangements have historically been organised around the transatlantic relationship, reducing reliance on American equipment also means reconsidering how closely they want to align with Washington on defence. How individual governments answer that question is, in the end, a matter of domestic politics and strategic priorities as much as it is of industrial policy.

White Paper

Presented on 19 March 2025, the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030, henceforth the White Paper, introduces the current structural and geopolitical threats facing the Union and actively suggests political and industrial paths forward to strengthen both the EU’s security and defence and boosting cooperation in the area (European Commission, 2025). Therefore, contrary to EDIS whose primary objective is to strengthen the EU’s industrial capacity and industrial cooperation regarding defence, the White Paper’s primary objectives are, *inter alia*, security and defence cooperation towards the goal of increased investments into strengthened defence capabilities, mobility, and increased support for Ukraine (European Commission, 2025).

Firstly, examining and analysing the context and purpose behind the White Paper, it becomes evident in the introductory section of the White Paper, which sets the tone of the geopolitical situation, that the EU and its members face security threats and that the international order that we have spent more than half a century building is changing drastically. Several events have contributed to this rapid and drastic change in the international order and the internal security and defence framework. In the White Paper, the European Commission (2025) mention and explain four contributing events, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, the growing security threats at Europe’s borders including the Arctic and the Middle East, the fragility of the NATO defensive alliance considering the United States’ political shift, and the rise of authoritarian states like China (p. 2). This is the current security climate in which

European states and the EU must navigate, which the Commission, through the White Paper, seeks to mitigate with its suggestions and practical proposals.

Secondly, and closely related to the context, there are several problematisations embedded in the White Paper that the Commission seeks to mitigate. Therefore, this paragraph is dedicated to highlight the problematisations facing both the EU's security and defence posture and capabilities. The very first paragraph of the White Paper summarises the Commission's understanding of the situation and the problematisation quite well. The European Commission (2025) states that "Europe faces an acute and growing threat. The only way we can ensure peace is to have the readiness to deter those who would do us harm. [...]. But we are also starting from a position in which our defence readiness has been weakened by decades of under-investment" (p. 2). Therefore, according to the White Paper, two of the most pressing issues regarding the EU's security and defence is that that the EU is being threatened by foreign powers and that it is stuck in this under-developed and under-invested security regime. This is due to the fact that European countries have so-called 'harvested' the peace dividend, which means redirecting investments towards civilian and economic sectors, since the end of the Cold War, until now, due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only according to American officials but also European officials – through the White Paper – the EU and its Member States must do more to increase its security and defence capabilities. Thus, the statement in the first paragraph both sets the general tone, i.e. the critical situation in which the EU finds itself, and the paragraph explains the historical ties of the security problematisation. While elaborating upon the threatening situation in which the EU finds itself, the European Commission (2025) justifies the aims of the White Paper by arguing that the EU needs a comprehensive security and defence strategy, stating that "[if] we continue on the same path, however, we will end up diminished, divided and vulnerable" (p. 2). Considering that the current (or former) path has been a historic reliance on the US in the context of the NATO framework – combined with the lack of investments in defence – and considering the numerous hostile comments and political acts of the current American President, Donald Trump, the Commission believes it is time for change.

Therefore, considering the arguments from the Commission, the EU leadership wants to steer both the EU and the Member States towards a direction of strategic autonomy in relation to both industrial strength and security and defence. The main argument, regarding the problematisation, of the White Paper is that Europe needs to re-arm and strengthen defence capabilities to "credibly deter armed aggression and secure our own future" (European

Commission, 2025, p. 3). Furthermore, the Commission (2025) states that “[together] we must accelerate work on all strands to urgently ramp up European defence readiness to ensure that Europe has a strong and sufficient European defence posture by 2030 at the latest, thereby also increasing our contribution to Trans-Atlantic security” (p. 3). This statement is significant for four reasons. Firstly, the Commission stresses that there is a sense of urgency in rebuilding security and rearming its defences, partly due to European under-investment. Secondly, the Commission also stresses that Europe needs a strong ‘*European*’ defence posture which implies both that European militaries need to acquire European equipment and that Europe should be responsible for its *own* security and not rely on the US for support. Thirdly, the EU has set a specific deadline at which it and the Member States should have reached the requirements of the defence readiness strategy, namely 2030. Therefore, this deadline should encourage the Member States to adhere to the strategy and rearm at a faster pace, like Denmark has recently done with increasing its defence expenditure to 3,5% of its GDP. And fourthly, the Commission has reaffirmed Europe’s commitment to the transatlantic defence alliance which indicates that it is not the EU’s policy to sever ties with Washington D.C, regardless of President Trump’s rather belligerent and threatening discourse towards European states.

Another problematisation mentioned and elaborated upon in the White Paper is the apparent rise in geopolitical instability and conflict in the European neighbourhood. Specifically, and being a major factor in the White Paper, the Commission (2025) mentions the Russian aggression towards Ukraine, but it also mentions China’s rapid expansion and investments in “its military capabilities, including nuclear, space and cyber capabilities” as being a potential threat in the future, although China is a “key trading partner for the EU” (p. 5). Furthermore, the Commission (2025) mentions technological races, hybrid threats, and the situation in the Middle East – such as Iran’s regional proxies and friendly relationship with Russia – playing significant roles in the EU’s threat perception (p. 5). Therefore, the White Paper should be considered as a strategy for minimising Europe’s capacity to be threatened by strengthening the defence posture and security of the Member States.

Thirdly, the White Paper, being a security and defence strategy for EU Member States, recommends and works toward several strategic goals in strengthening Europe’s cooperation and ability to deter hostile, foreign actors. The first is to aid Member States in filling the “critical capability gaps” in their national security and defence through “facilitating greater cooperation and [efficiency]” (European Commission, 2025, pp. 6-7). The EU already supports Member States in some cooperative endeavours, but two overall areas stand out; the

strengthening of European military mobility (which entails overall defence infrastructure), and Eastern border protection (pp. 8-9). A significant part of the introductory chapter of the White Paper is dedicated to explaining the necessity of supporting Ukraine in its defensive war against Russia; this is elaborated upon in chapter five of the White Paper. Here, the Commission advocates for “increased military support for Ukraine” (p. 10), and advocates for both increasing military support, defence industrial cooperation, and including Ukraine in several EU initiatives normally limited to Member States (pp. 10-12). It is, thereby, evident that the EU is of the belief that the existential war that Ukraine is currently fighting is of the utmost importance for Europe, which was also highlighted in the introductory chapter of the White Paper. Thus, one of the EU’s strategies and solutions to its security problematisations is to increase the support for and cooperation with Ukraine. This is due to the fact that Europe also experiences consequences of the war, such as hybrid attacks on its infrastructure. Furthermore, one of the EU’s strategies for mitigating its security problematisations is to strengthen its partnerships with countries outside the borders of the Union. The Commission (2025) states that “[cooperation] with partners is also key to tackle the challenges of European defence and European defence industry, including for diversifying suppliers and reducing dependencies” (p. 18). Therefore, due to the frequent international implications that wars and conflicts bring about, the EU wishes to strengthen and expand its cooperation with both neighbouring countries and distant, but like-minded, countries. This also correlates with the EU’s perception of ESA that it entails managing dependencies in an interdependent world. However, this does not mean that the Commission is seeking to replace the US with another ally. On the contrary, the Commission (2025) argues that it is imperative for European security, stating that “[the] United States demands that Europe takes more responsibility for its own defence. These efforts shall continue to build on the deep and extensive transatlantic supply chain, which should be mutually beneficial” (p. 18). The EU, thus, reaffirms its commitment to the entire NATO alliance despite the belligerent attitude of President Trump and encourages further cooperation under the auspices of NATO. There is, however, one fundamental difference in the direction and discourse; namely that it is the EU’s policy that Europe should carry a larger responsibility for its own security, defence, and in matters of defence industry.

Briefly explained, the Commission’s (2025) White Paper for European Defence should be considered as a strategic framework consisting of shortcomings of European security and suggestions to correct them. When examining the purpose of the White Paper and its problematisations, it becomes evident that the EU is facing increasingly more frequent threats

towards its security – partly due to the Russo-Ukrainian War and the belligerence of the US – and that Europe’s defence is insufficient due to decades of under-investment. Therefore, the EU proposes several policies and areas of cooperation with which Europe can enhance its own security and defence independently and through strengthened partnerships with neighbouring and like-minded countries.

Part two: Case of Denmark

This section examines the case of Denmark through the four structured, focused comparison questions established in the methodology. It begins by establishing Denmark’s adaptation outcome as the dependent variable, before examining in turn the three domestic intervening variables derived from the theoretical framework, namely strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions, to partly explain why Denmark has responded to the decline in its security environment in the way that it has.

Denmark’s defence adaptation since 2022

Before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Denmark’s defence expenditure had remained well below the NATO 2% target that member states committed to at the Wales Summit in 2014. According to the Danish Ministry of Defence, spending as a percentage of GDP stood at 1,30% in 2019, 1,38% in 2020, and 1,37% in 2022, meaning that despite formal alliance obligations, Danish defence investments were stagnant for nearly a decade (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2024a). This changed in the period following the invasion. NATO estimates place Danish defence expenditure at 1,65% of GDP in 2023, rising to an estimated 2,37% in 2024, the first time Denmark had met or exceeded the 2% threshold since the Cold War (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2024a; NATO, 2025). These spending commitments are set out in the Defence Agreement 2024-2033, a ten-year cross-party agreement earmarking approximately 190 billion DKK for capability investments including the Danish Army’s first heavy Brigade, land-based air defence systems, anti-submarine warfare capacity, and an extension of conscription to eleven months with full gender equality from 2027 (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2024b). In February 2025, the Danish Government and the parties behind the defence agreement established an Acceleration Fund of 50 billion DKK (approximately €6,7 billion) for 2025 and 2026, directed towards investments in both defensive and offensive military capabilities, bringing allocated defence spending above 3% of GDP (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025a).

Alongside the reconstruction of its military, Denmark has also been a frontrunner in supporting Ukraine. In March 2023, the Danish Government and a broad parliamentary

majority established a dedicated Ukraine Fund for long-term military support, with a total allocation of 60,4 billion DKK, equivalent to approximately €8,1 billion, covering the period from 2023 to 2028 (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). This included the donation of its old F-16 fighter jets, which made Denmark the first country to transfer Western combat aircraft to Ukraine, as well as Caesar self-propelled howitzer systems, air defence equipment, and direct financing of weapons procurement from Ukrainian manufacturers through what became known as the Danish model (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2024c). Measured as a share of GDP, Denmark's total bilateral support to Ukraine has been the highest in the world, exceeding 3% of GDP by the end of 2025 (Ukrainian Embassy in Denmark, 2025).

Another aspect regarding Denmark's adaptation concerns its institutional relationship with EU defence cooperation. Since the Edinburgh Agreement of 1992, Denmark had held an opt-out from the Common Security and Defence Policy, excluding it from EU military operations, defence decision-making, and the European Defence Agency (Council of the European Union, 1992). The opt-out had survived two previous referendums in which Danish voters rejected further EU integration, voting against the euro in 2000 and against modifying the justice and home affairs opt-out in 2015 (Folketinget, n.d.a). In June 2022 however, a referendum on abolishing the defence opt-out produced a result of 66,9% in favour, and with effect July 2022 Denmark became a full participant in the CSDP (Council of the EU, 2025). This meant that Denmark gained full participation in EU military missions and operations, joined the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and became a member of the European Defence Agency. Furthermore, Denmark used its Council Presidency in the second half of 2025 to push the EDIP through to adoption, alongside participating in the negotiation of other EU defence industrial initiatives since gaining full CSDP membership (Danish EU Council Presidency Programme, 2025). Denmark has also actively supported EDIS and the White Paper. The Danish government endorsed EDIS in a formal position paper as "an important contribution in strengthening European collaboration and combined efforts" while underlining that defence procurement remains a national responsibility (Folketinget, 2024). On the White Paper, Denmark used its Presidency to push for implementation, with Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen calling for the EU to "quickly and effectively implement the ambitions and objectives of the White Paper" (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025b).

Denmark's defence adaptation since 2022 has therefore been extensive across many different domains. Spending has gone from well below the NATO threshold to above 3% of GDP, a long-term cross-party defence agreement has been concluded, bilateral military

support to Ukraine has been the highest in the world measured as a share of GDP, and Denmark has moved from institutional exclusion from EU defence cooperation to active participation and legislative leadership within it. Each of these developments goes beyond what Denmark's formal NATO obligations require. The following sections examine the domestic variables that help account for why Denmark has acted so decisively.

Strategic culture of Denmark

Denmark's modern strategic culture and fundamental security assumptions took shape in the years immediately following the Second World War and have influenced Danish security thinking ever since. When Denmark joined NATO as a founding member in 1949, it did so after a decade in which the experience of the German occupation discredited the pre-war policy of neutrality and non-alignment. As then Danish Foreign Minister Hækkerup summarised the post-war lesson in 1965, "isolation and neutrality do not offer security for Denmark and it is necessary to seek security where it can be found - this means basing our foreign policy and national security on expanded international cooperation and on the cohesion of the Western world" (Rasmussen, 2005, p. 74). In this way, the decision to join the alliance can be viewed as a cultural split with earlier foreign policy traditions and established a new baseline assumption that Danish security could only be guaranteed through alignment with a dominant external power rather than through autonomous means.

Throughout the Cold War, Denmark managed what Rasmussen (2005) calls "a middle course", meaning that they were formally committed to NATO but domestically faced resistance to its harder military implications (p. 69). The clearest example of this was the footnote policy of 1982 to 1988, in which a parliamentary majority attached formal reservations to NATO communiqués on nuclear policy and cruise missile deployment. Belukhin et al. (2023) note that Denmark had by this point become known within the alliance for defence expenditure that remained well below the NATO average, having "acquired the nickname Prügelknabe [whipping boy] within the alliance" (p. 7). While opposition parties pushed back against the obligations of NATO membership, the preference for close US alignment persisted, driven by the logic that Washington offered security guarantees no European alternative could match, and by a conviction that the US served as the primary guarantor of what Belukhin et al. (2023) describe as "the values of liberal world order and human rights" (p. 7). Mouritzen (2007) characterised this combination of constrained behaviour and underlying Atlanticist preference as "repressed Atlanticism", meaning that Denmark had an elite preference for closer alignment with the United States, but as a frontline nation along NATO's northern flank was advised by

Washington to follow a more neutral foreign policy to avoid escalating tensions with the Soviet Union.

With the end of the Cold War and the United States emerging as the uncontested global hegemon, the constraints on Denmark's Atlanticist preference subsided, and Danish strategic culture underwent a drastic reorientation towards "super Atlanticism" (Mouritzen, 2007, p. 7). The collapse of the Soviet threat freed Denmark from its frontline obligations and allowed it to pursue a more assertive alliance profile. Danish policymakers believed that the risk of diminishing influence within an increasingly Franco-German dominated Europe gave Denmark further incentives to distinguish itself in Washington's eyes (Mouritzen, 2007). Despite having a small population and limited resources compared to other European nations, the geographical importance of the Kingdom of Denmark - both as a gate between the Baltic and the North Sea and through its control over the foreign affairs of Greenland - had not gone unnoticed by US administrations. Establishing a partnership based on common interests was therefore mutually beneficial. Wivel (2020a) argues that this reorientation was made possible because the post-Cold War security environment collapsed the previous distinction between short-term security policy and long-term peace policy, by creating a space where Danish policymakers "viewed the protection of interests and the promotion of values as two sides of the same coin" (p. 13). The new defence strategy adhered to a more expeditionary doctrine; a change from passive membership toward active military contribution as the primary source of alliance credibility. Denmark participated in the Gulf War coalition in 1991, deployed forces to the Balkans throughout the 1990s, and subsequently contributed to controversial operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. According to Belukhin et al. (2023), Denmark exceeded minimum NATO membership requirements after the Cold War with "disproportionately high troop numbers, operational spending and casualties per capita in US-led and NATO operations", which was a deliberate choice to stand out as an ally (p. 8). After more than a decade of expeditionary doctrine, Rasmussen (2005, p. 82) argues that Denmark had simply "begun to think of armed intervention as a natural part of its foreign policy and organise its defence accordingly". In doing so, Denmark was defying conventional expectations for small states, which typically keep a low profile, prefer diplomatic instruments to military ones, and make foreign policy choices in response to external developments rather than through deliberate activist postures (Wivel, 2013). Denmark had gone from the alliance's whipping boy to one of its most operationally committed members in just over a decade.

This operational commitment did not, however, translate into defence budget increases. Strandsbjerg and Dahlberg (2024) describe this as a "merchant logic", whereby

successive Danish governments aimed to maintain the security guarantees of the alliance “as cheaply as possible” (p. 54). Belukhin et al. (2023) make the same point, arguing that Denmark used “unconditional and unrestricted participation in US- and NATO-led coalition operations as an ‘excuse’ for not increasing defence spending”, treating military personnel losses and operational support as a better contribution than strictly complying with the 2% target in defence spending (p. 24). Denmark’s spending had remained below the 2% threshold from the end of the Cold War until 2023, consistent with three decades of prioritising operational contribution over budgetary compliance. Then, the Russian invasion changed the meaning of active contribution. As territorial defence returned to the European security agenda, spending became the necessary expression of the same norm that had previously been satisfied through deployments. As a consequence, Denmark was “gradually adapting to the new rules of the game, realising that an essential characteristic of being a ‘good, exemplary ally’ includes meeting the required level of defence spending” (Belukhin et al., p. 24).

Denmark’s post-Cold War military activism was grounded in a set of assumptions about what Denmark, as a small state, believed it needed from the international system to survive and maintain its interests. The most fundamental of these was that Denmark could not provide for its own security independently and had to align itself with stronger powers to compensate for its structural limitations. For Denmark, this logic pointed toward aligning itself with the United States and NATO rather than toward European alternatives. Danish Atlanticism was partly driven by fear of proximate great power dominance if the United States were to reduce its presence in Europe, meaning that aligning with Washington was also a way of balancing Germany and France (Wivel, 2013, 2020b). This calculation made the EU an insufficient substitute in security terms, regardless of how valuable it was in other policy areas. For example, the opt-out of the ESDP (now called Common Security and Defence Policy), as argued by Wivel (2013), reflected the established view among Danish elites that the EU risked developing “into a great power in its own right with its own currency, defence forces and citizenship” (p. 315), which Danish voters and policymakers alike regarded with suspicion. Denmark had the required military capabilities of participating in EU defence cooperation but insisted on doing it through NATO and US-led coalitions rather than through EU institutional frameworks.

Other than hard security, Denmark had a structural interest in maintaining the rules-based international order. As a small, open, trade-dependent economy, Denmark’s economy depends on a predictable international system governed by law and multilateral institutions rather than by the relative power of states (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). Therefore, in a

world where stronger states could simply impose their preferences on weaker ones, Denmark would have little influence. As Wivel (2013) argues, the value dimension of Danish Atlanticism “was reinforced by a set of values shared with the United States: human rights, free trade and liberal democracy” (p. 312). While liberal-egalitarian values have influenced Danish foreign policy since the Cold War, the post-Cold War period allowed Denmark to be expressed more directly through security policy as the distinction between peace policy and defence policy collapsed. What had previously been kept in separate institutional compartments, defending Danish territory on one hand and promoting liberal values internationally on the other, could now be pursued through the same policy instrument in the form of active military contribution to US-led and NATO operations (Wivel, 2013). This dual logic, geopolitical shelter-seeking combined with normative commitment to the liberal order, explains why Danish activism was both more consistent and more extensive than that of comparable small states. For example, Denmark has “reacted to the transformed security order following the revolutions of Central and Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union more rapidly and radically than most of the other European states” (Wivel, 2013, p. 310). Norway and Sweden, which shared many of the same liberal values, did not follow the same path to the same degree, which could suggest that NATO membership and the specific Atlanticist orientation of Danish strategic culture were necessary conditions for the activist doctrine rather than shared Nordic values alone. Pedersen and Reykers (2020) argue more broadly that small state military activism in NATO-led operations is both a fear of abandonment but also positive status motivations, whereby active contribution is a means of securing prestige and recognition from the alliance hegemon. The combination of structural dependence on American power and ideological alignment with the US-led liberal order made Denmark willing to act as what Wivel (2013) describes as a junior partner – going to war “only as a junior partner to stronger states, the United States in particular” (p. 320). Each military operation reinforced this dependency, as participation deepened common practices and procurement ties with Washington, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which the alliance relationship became harder to reconsider (Wivel, 2020a). This junior partner status served Denmark well as long as the United States remained a predictable and committed ally, but it also meant that any fundamental change in American foreign policy would force a reconsideration of its security assumptions that mainly have been unquestioned since 1949.

The 2022 referendum on the EU defence opt-out was the first institutional signal that Danish strategic culture was beginning to adjust. For 30 years it had made sense within the Atlanticist framework, as security was understood as a NATO matter and formal exclusion

from EU military structures carried little cultural or practical cost. Migliorati (2024) argues that the result was historically significant because it broke a long-established pattern of Danish voters preferring to retain national control in sovereignty-sensitive domains, with previous referendums on EU integration consistently producing that outcome (Migliorati, 2024). What the referendum revealed was therefore not just a policy change but a domestic reassessment of what active alliance contribution required. The ‘yes campaign’, backed by a broad cross-party majority in parliament, framed abolishing the opt-out as a way of strengthening NATO’s European pillar rather than moving away from it (Migliorati, 2024). Prime Minister Frederiksen described the decision as “a value-based decision” (Henley, 2022, para. 5). This framing aligns with the historically formed assumption that Denmark must be an active and responsible contributor rather than a passive bystander, thus making the case for EU defence engagement. Therefore, the historic referendum result of 66,9% in favour shows that Danish strategic culture did not constrain adaptation when the security environment demanded it.

The dual-track posture Denmark has maintained since 2022, sustaining its NATO commitment while actively engaging with EU defence initiatives such as EDIS, EDIP, and the White Paper, grew out of the same Atlanticist assumption that had structured Danish security thinking for decades. Denmark did not choose between NATO and the EU; it expanded into EU defence frameworks while keeping the transatlantic relationship as its primary reference point. Recent developments such as Trump’s threats against Greenland, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service 2025 threat assessment listing the United States as a negative factor for the first time (Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, 2025), and the collapse in Danish public confidence toward the US are still developing. Therefore, it could be analytically relevant to examine whether Denmark, as a small state structurally dependent on alliance frameworks, kept accelerating its defence investment beyond what the Russian threat alone demanded in light of these developments. However, this topic is too contemporary to be accounted for as strategic culture is more concerned with the medium to long term evolution of strategic thinking.

Ripsman et al. (2016) define strategic culture as deeply embedded conceptions of national security that constrain state behaviour by defining what counts as an acceptable or unacceptable strategic choice. The Danish case shows this mechanism operating primarily as an enabling variable. Three assumptions have structured Danish strategic culture since the end of the Second World War: that external threats require alliance-based responses, that the United States and NATO are the primary security guarantors, and that active military contribution is the price of alliance credibility. These assumptions were primarily developed through the

German occupation, the 1949 NATO membership, the managed tensions of the Cold War middle course, and three decades of expeditionary doctrine that made Denmark one of NATO's most operationally committed members despite consistently low defence budgets. When Russia's invasion of Ukraine created new demands for alliance contribution, these assumptions meant that the political groundwork for meeting them was already in place. The broad cross-party support for Ukraine suggests the pragmatic activist norm had become sufficiently normalised at both elite and public level that the adaptation required little cultural justification. Strategic culture also shaped the form the adaptation took, which is the constraining dimension of the variable in the Danish case. The 'yes campaign' framed EU defence engagement as complementary to NATO rather than an alternative to it, suggesting the Atlanticist assumption still played a large part in determining what counted as legitimate security policy in Danish domestic politics. To answer the structured, focused comparison question: Danish strategic culture has enabled the post-2022 adaptation by making increased defence spending and military engagement culturally expected rather than contentious and has constrained it by determining the terms on which new institutional commitments could be publicly justified. The variable has functioned as Ripsman et al. (2016) describe, as mediating between the systemic shock and the policy response, but has done so primarily by lowering the domestic political cost of adaptation rather than raising it.

State-society relations of Denmark

Identifying a permissive strategic culture does not in itself explain how a state mobilises the parliamentary support and fiscal resources that defence adaptation requires. Ripsman et al. (2016) define state-society relations as the state's capacity to extract, mobilise, and harness domestic resources despite distributional competition and organised societal resistance. Therefore, the question that structures this section is whether the Danish state has been able to build elite consensus around increased defence efforts, and whether distributional competition over public resources has imposed meaningful constraints on its capacity to mobilise the financial and political resources required.

To examine whether there has been elite consensus around defence efforts, we will first look at the major defence agreements and establish whether the parties behind them remained committed as the financial demands of the adaptation increased. The 2024-2033 Defence Agreement was concluded between the governing coalition and the Socialist People's Party, the Denmark Democrats, Liberal Alliance, the Conservative Party, the Social Liberal Party, the Danish People's Party, and the New Right, with only Red-Green Alliance and the Alternative absent, covering ten of the twelve parties in the Danish Parliament (Danish

Ministry of Defence, 2024b). The initial cross-party commitment in March 2022 regarding the 2% NATO target followed the same inclusive template (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023), and the Acceleration Fund of February 2025 were reached on the same cross-party basis (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025a). The two political parties, Red-Green Alliance and Socialist People's Party, are analytically interesting when examining the elite consensus around defence adaptation. The Socialist People's Party had historically opposed NATO membership and associated itself with the peace and anti-nuclear movements of the 1970s and 1980s, which made it one of the parties furthest from the defence consensus that emerged after 2022. Despite this, it signed multiple defence agreements. The Red-Green Alliance, who also has historically opposed military rearmament, took a different course. The party voted against the major defence agreements and remained in opposition throughout the examined period. At its annual meeting in June 2025, however, the executive committee proposed its first ever defence policy supporting an "effective territorial defence" capable of enforcing Danish sovereignty and protecting the population, while formally rejecting rearmament to 3,5% or 5% of GDP (Enhedslisten, 2025, p. 1). The proposal passed with 72% in favour, indicating that some within the party resisted even this limited change (Neivelt, 2025). The party's position nonetheless no longer excluded all military investment. The fact that the Socialist People's Party, with its background in the peace movement and opposition to NATO, signed consecutive defence agreements, and that the Red-Green Alliance moved from blanket opposition to debating the terms of territorial defence, indicate an established elite consensus around at least increasing defence efforts. It should be noted that the defence agreements would have passed without either party, given the support from the centre-left to the far-right in the Danish Parliament. Even so, parties historically opposed to military spending came to accept that some level of defence investment had become necessary. The consensus on increasing defence spending also extends to business and industry organisations, such as the Danish Chamber of Commerce and the Confederation of Danish Industry, which have actively promoted the notion of rearmament, especially through domestic procurement (Dansk Erhverv, n.d.; Dansk Industri, 2024).

The Spring 2026 Eurobarometer extends this consensus to the public as well. 50% of Danish respondents tend to trust political parties, 59% tend to trust the Danish government, and 67% tend to trust the Danish Parliament, while 47%, 36%, and 30% respectively tend not to trust these institutions (European Commission, 2026, p. 69, p. 85, p. 87). Denmark is among the few EU Member States where popular trust in all three domestic institutions exceeds distrust. On the most important issues facing their country, 29% of Danish respondents identify the international situation, 28% security and defence, and 18% Russia's

invasion of Ukraine, while housing sits at 3% (pp. 41-44). On issues facing the EU, 32% name Russia's invasion of Ukraine and 26% security and defence (pp. 53-56). In the EU27 average, cost-of-living concerns rank the highest, with inflation at 36% and the international situation in third place at 14%. The Danish ranking is the opposite, with the international situation leading at 29% and inflation in fourth at 25%, which means defence-related concerns are competing successfully with the cost-of-living issues that usually top the issue rankings in EU Member States. The issues the Danish public treats as most pressing match the government's defence priorities, and no competing domestic issue registers at a level that could support organised resistance to defence spending.

However, while there is an overall wide consensus concerning increasing territorial defence spending, the financial funding of Danish rearmament has not been without controversy. Most notably, the government decided to abolish the public holiday *Store Bededag* (Great Prayer Day) to generate structural fiscal space for the defence budget. Despite running a fiscal surplus of 3,25% of GDP with public debt at approximately 30% of GDP (IMF, 2024), and modelling by Byrialsen (2026) confirming that an unfinanced increase to 3% of GDP would not have threatened Danish fiscal sustainability in the medium term, the government opted for structural financing rather than borrowing. In response, several trade unions objected to the measure, however it was more focused on the legislative method rather than the defence budget itself, arguing that it should be adopted through a referendum or through collective bargaining within the trade unions (Olsen, 2023). The coalition government along with the Danish Social Liberal Party nonetheless passed the abolition by 95 votes to 68 (Folketinget, 2023). As mentioned, distributional competition over public resources can constrain state capacity in different ways depending on what it targets. Resistance directed at the goal of defence adaptation would indicate the kind of societal opposition that makes resource mobilisation difficult. Resistance directed at the method of financing, as was the case here, challenged how resources were extracted rather than whether they should be extracted at all.

The state-society relations variable asks whether the Danish state could build elite consensus around defence efforts and whether distributional competition over public resources imposed meaningful constraints on its capacity to mobilise the required resources. The analysis shows that elite consensus formed around the security situation and persisted as costs increased, extending even to parties who historically would oppose rearmament. The trade unions that did push back contested the financing method rather than the defence budget itself, and business organisations actively supported the rearmament. Ripsman et al. (2016) argue that state

capacity is compromised when “societal groups, including organised interests and coalition parties competing over public resources, withhold them” (p. 72). None of the organised interests in Denmark withheld resources in this sense. Schweller (2006) links underbalancing against external threats to elite fragmentation and distributional competition that disables resource mobilisation. In this case, there was a strong elite cohesion across parties which suggests that the external security shock was enough to overcome a traditional distributional contest that typically characterises multi-party coalition politics. Therefore, it can be argued that Denmark is essentially a negative case of Schweller’s prediction, given its high cohesion, low fragmentation, and no significant underbalancing. However, Denmark’s fiscal position during this period also matters for interpreting the state-society variable. Running a surplus of 3,25% of GDP with public debt among the lowest in Europe, the state faced less acute distributional trade-offs between defence and welfare than a fiscally constrained government would have faced (IMF, 2024). Nevertheless, the adaptation Denmark pursued through 2025 remained within fiscal conditions that kept distributional competition manageable, and the state extracted the resources it needed without that competition becoming disabling. The state-society variable, across the period examined, therefore worked as an enabling rather than a constraining condition for Denmark’s defence adaptation.

Domestic institutions variable of Denmark

The third domestic intervening variable asks whether the formal rules of the Danish political system gave the opposition the power to veto executive action on defence. The state-society analysis established that organised resistance was limited and that the parliamentary consensus on rearmament was wide. The institutional question is analytically different. Even where opposition exists, it can only function as a constraint on the executive if formal rules give it veto power. This section therefore examines two features of the Danish system. The first is the general parliamentary rules governing how the executive forms and survives in office. The second is the specific rules governing defence appropriations and foreign policy decisions, including the constitutional role of the Foreign Policy Committee and the procedures for budget approval.

Denmark’s parliamentary system operates under negative parliamentarism, which means the government does not need a majority to take office or stay in office, only the absence of a majority voting against it. Since no single party has held a majority in the Danish Parliament for over a century, minority governments have become the standard arrangement rather than the exception (Green-Pedersen & Skjæveland, 2020). The Frederiksen government,

formed in December 2022, as a three-party coalition between the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party, and the Moderates, held 89 of 179 seats and could rely on supportive parties from Greenland and the Faroe Islands for working majorities (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023). This was the second largest support base any Danish government had held in decades, but the formal rules did not require a positive majority in any case. The specific rules on defence and foreign policy work the same way. Section 19 of the Danish Constitution allocates foreign policy authority to the government, while requiring parliamentary consent for binding international commitments (Folketinget, 2019, pp. 12-13). The Foreign Policy Committee, or Udenrigspolitisk Nævn, is the consultative body consisting of members appointed in proportion to the parties' representation in parliament. The government must consult the Committee before major foreign policy decisions of importance, but the Committee cannot legally block executive action (Folketinget, n.d.b). Its role is therefore consultative rather than authorising, and the government must hear its views but is not constrained by it. Defence appropriations are approved through the Finance Act and supplementary appropriations under simple majority rule, which the government had throughout the period under examination (Danish Ministry of Defence, n.d.).

Hansen (2020) argues “that government decision has moved even more towards a presidential style of decision-making with the prime minister making a growing number of decisions on his or her own”, and in particular within international affairs (p. 119). Alongside this concentration of decision-making, the institutional framework also gives Danish governments flexibility in how parliamentary support is created. For instance, Green-Pedersen and Skjæveland (2020) argue that Danish minority governments have proven stable and effective because the institutional framework allows them to assemble varying legislative coalitions across the two blocs. Christiansen (2022) similarly describes the Danish system as a consensus democracy in which compromise and bargaining drive legislative output, though consensus exists alongside party competition for policy influence. For the domestic institutions variable, the analytical question concerns whether any actor possessed a formal power to block executive defence decisions, distinct from whether opposition existed. Under the formal rules, no such veto player existed. However, Hansen (2020) notes that Danish support parties can acquire a veto role on the specific policy issues where the government has granted them concessions in exchange for legislative support. Veto players can therefore emerge in the Danish system, but they do so issue by issue and only where the government's parliamentary representation makes such dealmaking necessary.

The theoretical claim from Ripsman et al. (2016) is that institutions crystallise state-society relations by translating, or failing to translate, societal opposition into executive constraint. Negative parliamentarism, simple-majority budget approval, and the consultative role of the Foreign Policy Committee did not turn the societal opposition that emerged around the financing of rearmament into an obstacle to defence adaptation. The structural autonomy of Denmark's foreign policy executive was therefore high, and the cross-party support on defence further removed whatever veto potential opposition parties might have possessed. In Ripsman et al.'s (2016) terms, the Danish executive on defence in this period fits the description of a strong executive, able to pursue preferred policies without facing institutional constraints that would slow or obstruct adaptation.

Part three: Case of Spain

Spain's defence adaptation since 2022

Following George and Bennett's (2005) method of structured, focused comparison, the first question of our analysis is how Spain has adapted its defence posture in response to the external security shock, i.e. Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thus, in order to answer that question, first we have to examine and analyse Spain's preliminary diplomatic and defensive reactions. In line with all NATO allies and EU Member States, and a majority of the international community, Spain also strongly condemned Russia's aggression toward Ukraine and supported diplomatic resolutions and sanctions against Russia. Although it was not given that Spain would comment on Russia's invasion in February 2022, due to the pacifist ideology of most voters, "the Spanish government issued a forthright condemnation of the military invasion, stressing the importance of guaranteeing the coordination of EU partners and NATO allies to ensure 'a response that reflected the severity of the illegal action' of the Russian Federation" (Powell & Encina, 2023, The political response section, para. 3-4). Also considering the (at the time) apparent pacifist agenda of Spanish politics, combined with distance and Spain's defence spending being short of NATO's requirements, like many other European NATO members, it was contemplated whether Spain would commit to Ukraine's war effort. However, it ramped up its military presence. According to Powell and Encina (2023) from Elcano Royal Institute, shortly after the invasion, "the Spanish contribution to eFP in Latvia was reinforced, adding 250 troops to the 350 already deployed at the Ādaži base, alongside Leopard 2E tanks and Pizarro armoured personnel vehicles. Similarly, in June 2022, Spain provided a NASAMS air defence missile unit to the Lielvārde airbase (Latvia). In terms of the Spanish contribution to

BAP, in April 2022 eight F-18s were deployed [in Lithuania]” (The military response (and assistance) section, para. 4-5). Furthermore, “[during] the first six months of 2022, Spain provided 155-mm artillery projectiles [...], bombs, weapons of up to 20 mm, helmets, armour plating and 77,000 winter uniforms” (The military response (and assistance) section, para. 7). Thus, in the preliminary aftermath of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, Spain both increased its hard military presence on NATO’s eastern flank in the Baltics and Eastern Balkans, and it significantly supported Ukraine with both humanitarian aid and military assistance through both firepower and protective gear. These data and raw numbers of the first year of the war show that Spain was committed to both attempting to promote a peaceful resolution to the war and allowing Ukraine to defend itself against foreign aggression. Furthermore, it is concluded by Powell and Encina (2023) that “the responses of the Spanish authorities and the public at large have been highly satisfactory” (Spain’s responses: final remarks section, para. 3). This is due to their comparison of the neighbouring states of similar sizes (France, Italy, and the UK) which showed that in the initial stages of the war in Ukraine, Spain’s contribution to Ukraine was the highest “in relative terms” (para. 2). Similarly, their data suggested that “aid provided to Ukraine is largely correlated to countries’ geographic proximity to Russia, which determines both threat perceptions and the intake of refugees” (para. 3). Considering that the distance between Spain and Ukraine is significantly larger than the Baltic countries, Germany, and Poland are, Powell and Encina (2023) conclude that the efforts of Spain are adequate. Additionally, related to donations and aid contribution to Ukraine, evidence from the European Parliamentary Research Service (2025), who received the data from Kiel Institute, shows that from 2022-2025 Spain contributed approximately €6,21 billion, thus making Spain, as of April 2025, the eighth largest contributor in the EU. On the other hand, considering Spain’s GDP in 2025 of approximately \$1,9 trillion, according to data from the International Monetary Fund (Worldometer, n.d.), this puts Spain in the category of EU Member States that contributed 0,2-0,3% of their Gross National Incomes, alongside Portugal, Ireland, Hungary, Romania, and Greece (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). Considering that Spain is the eighth largest contributor, behind countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, it can be argued that geographic location is a noteworthy factor in explaining differing threat perceptions in terms of supporting Ukraine in its defensive war against Russia. Ripsman et al. (2016) note that while geography plays a part in states’ threat perception, geography alone is insufficient in explaining balancing measures.

In order to establish how Spain has adapted its defence posture and the degree to which it exceeds or meets the NATO alliance's obligations and requirements in terms of military spending, we first need to establish what Spain's defence spending previously was. According to Chislett (2025) of the Elcano Royal Institute, "Spain spent \$22,27 billion on defence in 2024, the 10th largest contribution in absolute terms among the 32 NATO allies, but in relative terms it was the lowest at 1,28% of GDP, according to preliminary figures" (para. 3). However, "Sánchez promises to reach the alliance's target of 2%, set in 2014, by 2029". This indicates that, like most European countries in NATO, Spain has 'harvested the peace dividend', meaning that the post-Cold War threat level was low which prompted many countries to downscale their defence budgets and military sizes. However, in 2014 NATO members agreed that it was required to reach a defence spending of 2% of GDP by 2029, which Spain did not seem too eager to reach, considering its defence spending of 1,28% of GDP in 2024 – two years into the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This can indicate two things; firstly, Spain's threat perception of Russia is lower than other EU and NATO countries; and secondly that considerable domestic-level explanatory variables could be factors in its inadequate defence spending.

According to NATO (2026), "[at] the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, Allies made a commitment to investing 5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually on core defence requirements and defence- and security-related spending by 2035. They will allocate at least 3,5% of GDP annually based on the agreed definition of NATO defence expenditure by 2035 [and another 1,5% to e.g. innovation]" (the 5% defence investment commitment section, para. 1). The general threat perception of NATO and its members has been sufficiently high enough that they have deemed it crucial to collectively commit to increasing defence spending from 2% by 2029 to 5% by 2035, thus requiring all allies to commit to reaching this target. However, Spain is an outlier in this regard. According to Folch (2025) from the Atlantic Council, "Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez secured a special exemption for Madrid, insisting Spain would cap its military budget at approximately 2.1 percent of GDP, a level he described as "sufficient and realistic"" (para. 1-2). This is a significant development in Spain's security and defence investment. There are different estimations of the exact number, but generally Spain's current defence spending is around/a little above the 2% benchmark, however that is a recent development which changed in relation to NATO's more ambitious commitment at 5%.

Thus, answering the question of how Spain has adapted its defence posture since 2022 and the degree to which this adaptation exceeds alliance obligations, Spain has been a

significant supporter of Ukraine in both humanitarian and military aid. However, as a percentage of GDP, Spain is at the lower end compared to its fellow EU Member States. Additionally, Spain has recently, in 2025, increased its defence spending to a little over 2% of its GDP, which is in line with the previous NATO commitment. However, this is currently insufficient compared to the new NATO commitment at 5% by 2035, to which Spain received an exemption due to domestic-level variables that will be further discussed in this analysis. Therefore, the following sections examine the domestic (explanatory) variables that help explain Spain's limited defence adaptation to the shock of 2022.

Strategic culture of Spain

Spain's modern strategic culture and general security and defence position are reflected by its interesting political development during both the 20th century, in which it managed to stay neutral during both World Wars, and the financial and political environment in the 21st century. Much of the first half of the 20th century was spent in conflict, for instance the Rif War (1921-1926) and ultimately the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) which transformed Spain from being a republic to a military dictatorship under the leadership of General Francisco Franco until his death in 1975. The brutality of the Spanish Civil War was immense. According to Viguera (2026), “[the] Nationalist zone saw the extensive use of terror against anyone suspected of being a “Red.” The number of people killed for political reasons is unclear, but even conservative estimates put the figure at 80,000 between the outbreak of the war and 1943” [...] “In contrast, the Nationalists consciously used terror as a policy, one that continued well after the war had ended” (The Civil War section, para. 7). A brutal and bloody period known as the White Terror began at the outbreak of the civil war and continued after General Franco's victory, and this would later translate into solidified political and military control under General Franco. Furthermore, Franco's first decade in power was characterised by a period of violence, militancy, and political oppression. According to Viguera (2026), “harsh repression by military tribunals, political purges, and economic hardship” was widespread in the first decade, and that “[economic] recovery was made difficult by the destruction during the Civil War” (Franco's Spain, 1939-75 section, para. 1). The political repression and mass violence of Franco's military dictatorship could be a factor in Spain's hesitancy towards increasing defence spending and considerably rearming its military; namely that historically formed assumptions and memories of the armed forces have shaped the Spanish strategic culture in way that it has constrained defence adaptation in response to the shock of 2022. This is supported by Remiro et al. (2024), who state that “[past] war experiences, number of casualties, ideological position,

religion, gender ... are factors that determine people's attitudes towards war, military affairs and defence" (p. 830). Additionally, as mentioned by Viguera (2026), post-civil war Spain experienced economic hardship, however, in the meantime, the military was well-funded. This can be argued to also being a factor for Spain's limited rearmament; the memory of military suppression whilst the economy suffered.

After a peaceful transition from Franco's military dictatorship after his death in 1975 to a parliamentary democracy (with a monarchy), Spanish governments also changed the way in which they invested in the country's security and defence. According to the World Bank Group (n.d.), Spain, during Franco's regime, consistently spent between 2% and 2,4% of GDP on defence. However, after the death of Franco, Spain increased the budget to upwards of 3% on defence. At the time of writing there is not much data that can explain this surge in security and defence spending but at this period in Spain's history, its defence policy was characterised by international isolation and neutrality, although it had base agreements with the US (Nikolaidou, 2008; Vigueara, 2026, The administration of Felipe Gonzáles, 1982-1996 section). Nevertheless, one of the more significant discoveries when examining the World Bank Group's (n.d.) graph of Spain's military expenditure is that from 1986 and onwards it drops dramatically until the year 2017 where the defence budget increases slightly each year. Two very interesting events took place in 1986, the year in which the defence budget would decline afterwards; namely that Spain was admitted into both the European Community (the predecessor of the EU) and the NATO alliance (Nikolaidou, 2008, p. 277). These events formally ended Spain's political, economic, and defensive neutrality and strengthened its ties to Western Europe and North America. It is therefore interesting that the year in which Spain joined NATO, its defence spending significantly started to decrease. It can be argued that Spain shifted its dependency and delegated its security to that of the major partners in NATO, such as the US, the United Kingdom, and France. Spain was no longer individual and neutral in terms of security and defence and thus pooled its capabilities and started downscaling its own territorial defence as it (arguably) was not a necessity. It can thus be argued that the Spanish strategic culture also was shaped by Spain's admittance to NATO since it was less inclined to spend more on defence given NATO's Article 5. Consequently, Spain's security and defence preference was clearly NATO and the security guarantee from the US. This is also supported by a quote from Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who said "I think the EU is a political project of soft power. We also have a duty nowadays with hard power. But it's very important to stress our assets of soft power" (Chislett, 2025, para. 2).

However, there are also economic explanations tied to Spain's domestic legitimacy of defence commitments that historically have constrained adaptation. As stated by Viguera (2026), during the first decade of Franco's regime Spain suffered "economic hardship" (Franco's Spain, 1939-75 section, para. 1), and according to Nikolaidou (2008), "[the] international isolation, autarky and stagnation that characterised Spain during the dictatorship dramatically changed after Spain acceded to the EC in 1986" (p. 277). In the paragraph above, we argued that, despite limited literature on the topic, the economic revival of Spain and gaining the protection of the NATO alliance could have prompted Spain to spend fewer percentages of its GDP on defence, i.e. lowering the budget on territorial defence while still participating in official NATO missions. This economic growth lasted up until the point of the Euro Crisis that took place after the 2008 international financial crisis, which ultimately crippled the Spanish economy. According to Viguera (2026), "[the] worldwide financial crisis that began later in 2008 contributed to the precipitous decline of Spain's already ailing economy in 2009. Of all the members of the European Union, Spain was one of the worst-affected by the recession; by early 2010 the unemployment rate had surpassed 20 percent" (Spain at the beginning of the 21st century section, para. 5). The financial crisis affected most of Europe's economies, but the PIGS countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain) were significantly more affected by the recession, of which, according to Viguera (2026), Spain was one of the worst cases. The recession continued to affect Southern European states for several years, and it ultimately made it impossible for Spain to increase its defence budget due to financial austerity measures and debt control. The financial crisis is still deeply ingrained in the Spanish psyche which is also apparent in the lack of both political and economic will to significantly increase defence spending. However, according to La Moncloa (2025a), Prime Minister Sánchez "has stressed that Spain will continue to be a key player in the Alliance without compromising its social model or its strategic autonomy" (para. 1). This means that Spain will not downscale its welfare and its financial investments to reach a certain percentage being spent on defence in addition to compromise on its self-determination in domestic and international affairs, which includes matters of security. However, as stated in the previous section, Spain made an agreement with NATO to allocate 2,1% of GDP to defence; a number which Spain believes to be sufficient and in accordance with its threat perception. According to Pedro Sánchez, ESA is not about spending more but "spending better, spending together" and that "[the] essential thing is to increase the interoperability of our Armed Forces. The fundamental thing is to establish common procurement mechanisms, to develop our own defence industry" (La Moncloa, 2025a, para. 4). According to this statement, it can be argued

that Pedro Sánchez interprets both EDIS and the White Paper as relating purely, or subscribes only, to the mechanisms of interoperability, such as joint procurement, industrial strength and cooperation, infrastructure, and mobility in the Union, but disregards the section of moderately increasing defence spending. It can thus be argued that the Spanish strategic culture is more cautious about the economic sustainability in terms of its rearmament rather than blindly procuring military capabilities without a clear objective. Since Spain might not share the same threat perception as other European states do, the government has a more permissive environment to carefully consider its ‘slow’ rearmament.

Additionally, relating to the strategic aspect of defence efforts, as Powell and Encina (2023) argued that the Spanish response regarding aid to Ukraine after the Russian invasion was satisfactory. This was due to both proximity to the conflict and comparison between the efforts of other larger European states; the same can be stated about Spain’s wish for another strategic focus on European security and defence. According to La Moncloa (2025b), other than advocating for “strengthening European defence and security capabilities and the European defence industry”, from which Spain would benefit, Pedro Sánchez also “emphasised the need to incorporate a 360° vision of European security, which reinforces the Eastern flank without neglecting the North or the South, allowing the continent to prepare itself for all types of threats” (para. 3-4). This can be interpreted as Spain – which has had immigration problems in and diplomatic issues with Morocco about the enclaves of Ceuta and Manilla – that does not want its own security problems to be neglected. However, the security issue is framed as the entirety of Europe’s flanks, not just one.

Thus, to answer the question of how the historically formed assumptions about both security threats, defence spending, and defence commitments have either enabled or constrained adaptation in response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, we need to consult the theory of neoclassical realism. According to Ripsman et al (2016), when examining a country’s strategic culture in the context of threat perception, one also specifically analyses the country’s “entrenched beliefs, worldviews, and shared expectations of a society as a whole” (p. 66). Therefore, the general Spanish assumption of the military has historically, during Franco’s regime, been viewed as an oppressive tool, which in contemporary times have been viewed more as a tool for keeping the image as a capable partner within NATO, while domestically increasing the budget on the social and financial element of the state to increase Spain’s GDP and purchasing power. Thus, Spanish strategic culture can be characterised as multilateral in nature and as a nation that would rather use its soft power to maintain its interests

than through military means. This can partly be credited to its historically formed assumptions about the necessity of the military given past experiences, alongside its priorities in maintaining its industrial competitiveness to build a sustainable military without pressuring public spending.

State-society relations of Spain

When analysing the state-society relations variable in Spain, we are examining the degree to which the state has been able to build both elite consensus and societal cohesion regarding increased defence efforts. Therefore, we are both examining the parliamentary structure and whether there is consensus or fragmentation across parties on the threat perception and need for increased defence. Additionally, regarding societal cohesion, we are examining public attitudes towards defence spending and threat assessments through the Spring 2026 Eurobarometer survey.

Firstly, to examine the elite consensus and cohesion regarding security and defence expenditure in Spain, we will first look at its state organisation and the general political landscape. Spain is a parliamentary monarchy with its king acting as Head of State. The Spanish Government, the executive power, proposes legislation and consists of the President, which is Prime Minister Sánchez, Vice-Presidents, and the Ministers. The Parliament is divided into two Houses; the Lower House whose 350 members are directly chosen by the people; and the Upper House whose 266 members are both publicly elected and chosen from each region. Additionally, all legislation must be passed by both Houses to be approved (La Moncloa, n.d.a). The current Government, with Pedro Sánchez as the leader, consists of a coalition of the PSOE/PSC (Spanish Socialist Worker's Party; Socialist Party of Catalonia) and the Plurinational Group Sumar and occupies a total of 152 seats, which makes it a minority government who depends on the support of several other parties (Fondation Robert Schuman, 2026). Given the plurality of political parties with their own agendas, which are sometimes strongly regional, it can be problematic relying on these for parliamentary legitimacy, especially for ideological reasons.

This leads to the Spanish political landscape and the Spanish Government's attempt to establish consensus and cohesion around defence efforts among the political elite. Folch (2025) summarises the political problem behind PSOE's attempt to increase defence spending quite accurately. He states that "[the] answer lies mainly in domestic politics and public opinion. Sánchez leads a fragile minority coalition dependent on left-wing and regional nationalist parties that are skeptical of increased military spending. His Socialist Party governs

in partnership with the far-left parties Unidas Podemos and Sumar, and it relies on small Basque and Catalan nationalist parties to maintain a parliamentary majority” (Domestic policies: the main barrier to higher spending section, para. 2-3). Due to the fact that Pedro Sánchez leads a minority government, he is forced to include small, and ideologically different, parties as his parliamentary base to continue as Prime Minister, which can lead to difficulties when Sánchez attempts to establish a new norm for Spain’s security and defence, considering the country’s historical pacifism and neutrality. According to Thykjaer (2025), in the beginning of June 2025, after Sánchez and the PSOE stated that they wanted to “increase defence spending in line with the demands of US President Donald Trump and European allies” which led to “a warning from Izquierda Unida that it “[questioned its] place in the coalition government” (para. 1-2). This signifies the fragility of the Spanish Government’s legitimacy domestically; namely that it is dependent on coalition partners and support from parties that do not share fundamental policies, such as security and defence. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the second largest, and arguably the most important coalition partner, Sumar group with 31 seats in the parliament also does not share the PSOE’s enthusiasm for increasing Spain’s defence spending to 2% of GDP, which highlights the fragility of the Government and the instability of Spain’s political landscape. This is supported by Cué (2025), who refers to an earlier corruption scandal within Sánchez’ Government and party which questioned the legitimacy of the government. During said corruption scandal, Pedro Sánchez relied heavily on both Sumar and the parliamentary support from the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), the Catalan pro-independence party Junts, the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), and the leftist Podemos (Cué, 2025, para. 4-6). It is only due to the fact that these parties did not withdraw their support from the PSOE that the Spanish Government still stands. However, when the instability of the political landscape and the fragility of the Government are transitioned into increased defence spending, which is a divisive topic in Spain, it becomes difficult to live up to international agreements, such as NATO’s 2%, now 5%, agreement. It is well-known that Spain has received external criticism, particularly by the US, for its insufficient investment into security and defence, and that Spain has also received internal criticism for its wish to increase investments into defence, especially from coalition partners and supporting parties. However, as stated by Silva (2025), “[the] opposition, made up of the Popular Party and the far-right party Vox, agrees on this necessity. In fact, it is one of the few issues on which they see eye to eye, given Spain’s highly polarized political climate” (para. 6). Additionally, in order to gain political support from its coalition partner, Sumar group, Pedro Sánchez and the PSOE have had to promise it “not to cut any budget allocations for social welfare” (para. 7). Thus, Prime

Minister Sánchez and the PSOE stood at a difficult position; it could either make budgetary promises and compromises, with far smaller but essential regional parties and thereby securing their support in increasing defence spending; or they could pass the law in cooperation with the right-leaning parties, the Popular Party and Vox, which potentially would weaken the legitimacy of the Government and alienate some of the PSOE's voting base. It is therefore evident that, due to the polarised political landscape and fragility of the Spanish Government, there has not been elite consensus or cohesion regarding defence spending. Although, the PSOE could have passed the bill in cooperation with the right-leaning parties, and thereby leaving out its parliamentary supporters, would have destabilised the government's position further, thus diminishing its parliamentary legitimacy.

On the other hand, there is evidence for broad elite consensus on the need for the industrial aspect of rearmament, which is what EDIP offers. According to HowTheyVote (2025), 17 of 20 members of the EP group S&D, of which the PSOE belongs, voted in favour of the EDIP framework, with only three abstaining. Additionally, 19 of 22 members of the EP group EPP, of which the Popular Party belongs, voted in favour of the EDIP framework, while three members abstained (HowTheyVote, 2025). The PSOE and PP are the largest political parties in the Spanish Parliament, and both parties have been in favour of the EDIP framework and increased defence spending, which suggests that a large portion of the Spanish Parliament support strengthening Spain's industrial capabilities and increasing defence spending. It can thus be argued that there is a form of consensus on the topic of rearmament among the large parties. However, the PSOE and PP differ in ideology, and their supporting parties also significantly differ ideologically due to the political fragmentation of both the Spanish left and right.

Secondly, to examine the Spanish Government's attempt to establish societal cohesion regarding security and defence expenditure in Spain, we will look at the Spring 2026 Eurobarometer from the European Commission. In the previous paragraph, it was highlighted that the political situation in Spain is and has been quite fragmented and polarised since the last election. Therefore, to support this argument it is significant to highlight the amount of trust Spaniards have in their institutions. According to the Eurobarometer, 85% of the Spanish respondents tend not to trust political parties, while 62% tend not to trust the Spanish Government, and 68% tend not to trust the Spanish Parliament (European Commission, 2026, p. 69, p. 85, p. 87). These numbers indicate that there is a general lack of popular support in the established political parties and the governing entities of the Spanish state. The numbers

indicate that there is significant distrust which could correlate with the amount of political polarisation in Spain which has ultimately made the Spanish Government fragile. Ripsman et al (2016) state that “[if] good relations between the FPE and key societal interests or the public at large are indicative of high levels of societal respect for and trust of the state, then that should serve to reinforce policy making consistently with the structural realist model, since the state will have a relatively free hand to enact policy as it sees fit” (p. 71). Thus, from this argument, the Spanish foreign policy executives (FPE’s), i.e. the government, cannot freely enact any policy it ‘sees fit’ because the Spanish people have such a high level of distrust in their own government, parliament, and political parties. These significant numbers of distrust, coupled with the fact that 63% of Spanish respondents have reported that “[things] are going in the wrong direction” in Spain (European Commission, 2026, p. 59), suggests that the government does not have the sufficient autonomy to enact meaningful defence policies. Due to the massive national debt that Spain has accumulated since the Euro Crisis and the fact that 39% of Spaniards believe ‘housing’ and 32% believe ‘inflation’ to be “the most important issues facing” Spain (pp. 41-44), it can be argued that Spanish citizens are more invested in the economic and financial sectors rather than geopolitical conflicts. This was also evident in the way in which Pedro Sánchez had to promise Sumar group and his parliamentary supporting parties that increasing defence spending would not have an impact on social welfare.

Furthermore, regarding the Spanish people’s views on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a survey conducted by the Royal Elcano Institute prior to the “invasion in February 2022 found that 34% of the Spanish public identified Russia as the biggest security threat facing the country, followed by Morocco (20%) and jihadist terrorism (14%)” (Powell & Encina, 2023, The political response, para. 9). It is then evident that Spaniards considered Russia to be a considerable threat to Spain and the EU, but threats from both the state of Morocco and Islamic terrorism combined are equally as big a threat to Spain’s security. However, according to the more recent 2026 Eurobarometer survey, only 4% of the Spanish respondents view the Russian invasion of Ukraine to be one of the most important issues facing Spain (European Commission, 2026, pp. 41-44), while 14% of the Spanish respondents view the invasion as being one of the most important issues facing the EU, which is an 11% decrease since Autumn 2025 (pp. 53-56). This considerable change from Russia being a threat to the EU at 34% to 14% of respondents stating that the invasion is one of the most important issues in merely four years indicates a form of popular weariness of the conflict, and that the threat perception is quite low. It can also be argued that the government’s call for increased defence spending has

translated into negative public opinion, i.e. low trust in government and parliament, and that there are bigger issues than increasing its international military presence, such as the economy.

Thus, to answer the question of the degree to which the Spanish state has been able to build elite consensus and societal cohesion around increased defence efforts, the Spanish Government has been quite constrained in its efforts. Firstly, there has been intra-governmental conflict, i.e. Sumar's opposing views, and risks to the government's existence due to the threats from regional separatist parties who conditionally support Prime Minister Sánchez. Similarly, the Spanish public, through the Eurobarometer survey, does not seem too enthusiastic about increasing the state's defence spending considering both the citizens' outright distrust of the political institutions and political parties, the decline in interest of the Russian invasion, and their focus on improving financial matters, such as inflation and cost of living.

Domestic institutions variable of Spain

The third explanatory variable that can help explain the outcome of Spain's security and defence adaptation is the domestic institutions variable, which asks whether formal rules of Spain's political system has provided the opposition with the power to block executive policies on defence. Whereas the analysis of Spain's state-society relations established that the government experienced a sense of fragility due to the fragmentation of Spanish politics and the need for smaller supporting parties, the institutional part examines the veto power of the opposition.

As stated in the previous analytical section, the Spanish state and legislative power are divided between the Government, the Congress, and the Senate. According to La Moncloa (n.d.a), the official website of the Spanish President, the President of the Government directs the general direction of the state, thereafter the "legislative initiative is carried out through the approval of draft laws in the Council of Ministers", which then must be approved by both houses of parliament (Powers of the Spanish State section). Furthermore, "[all] bills and proposed laws must first be examined by the Lower House of Parliament, with the Upper House of Parliament having the right to veto or amend the text drawn up by the Lower House of Parliament and reserving the final decision after further examination" (La Moncloa, n.d.a, Legislative power: General Courts section). This means that if a government does not have an absolute majority in Parliament, it cannot independently pass any law or budget it wants, however it has to cooperate with parties to support the policy in order to pass it. Thus, generally

when the government has a particular policy or budget, the action systematically passes down to both Houses of Parliament.

Regarding the area of defence, according to La Moncloa (n.d.b), “[the] President of the Government is responsible for directing defence policy and determining the main strategic objectives, for managing crisis situations that affect national defence and for the strategic management of military operations in the event of the use of force.” The defence policy is hereafter developed and implemented by the Minister for Defence (Aims and objectives section, para. 5-6). According to this passage, it is the current President of the Government, Pedro Sánchez, in collaboration with his ministers, that is at the forefront of general policymaking and decision-making. According to Arteaga (2020), Spain enacted the “Strategies and National Security Law [in] 2015 [which] set up a model of governance comprising councils, committees, and coordination procedures under the operational control of the Department of National Security [...] [which was] based on the coordination, but not the integration, of the various security and defence models and policies” (pp. 810-811). Furthermore, he stated that the accountability of the ministers and ministries in charge of the various policies was limited in practice due to the fact that they lacked necessary expertise to carry out control (p. 811), which is a considerable critique of the competence of elected officials. It is, nevertheless, significant that he stated that, two years prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there were several different councils and committees who partook in the security and defence of Spain but did not integrate their policies. Such actions can ultimately lead to miscommunication which will devalue their efforts in security and defence. Moreover, Arteaga (2020) stated that “[in] 2005 the Socialist Party administration [...] passed a legislation forcing governments to request the approval of parliament before deploying troops abroad (p. 808). This is a formal indication that Spanish governments cannot act completely autonomously in matters of defence, at least not internationally. Thus, considering the current fragility of the Spanish minority Government, the Parliament has the constitutional power to block or veto any budgetary policy, including the increase in defence spending, unless the government makes compromises with its supporting parties to secure a majority which could be costly and disadvantageous in other political areas.

Thus, it can be argued that the structural autonomy of Spain’s foreign policy executive was somewhat low due to the government’s fragile conditional support from its coalition partner and regional parties. Furthermore, as highlighted in the previous analytical section, the cross-party support on increased defence spending from the right-wing parties

could have unseated the current government structure. Therefore, both the opposition and coalition partners had veto potential on the policy of increased defence spending if no compromise was reached. In Ripsman et al.'s (2016) terms, the Spanish executive on defence adaptation does not accurately fit the description of a strong executive that is able to independently pursue preferred policies without facing institutional constraints, such as political compromise or parliamentary veto powers, even if the veto was not pursued.

Comparison and discussion

Dependent variable comparison

This discussion section compares Denmark and Spain on the outcome of their defence adaptation since 2022 and on the three domestic intervening variables that the theoretical framework introduced. The aim is to bring the case studies together and show how the variation between the two countries can be accounted for. The discussion begins by setting out the contrast in defence adaptation outcomes, before working through strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. Then, we address the structural conditions and the limitations of the study.

On the dependent variable, Denmark and Spain entered the post-2022 period in similar conditions. Defence spending in both countries sat around 1,3% of GDP, both governments had treated defence as politically uncontroversial territory for budget cuts, and both responded to the invasion in the same way during the first months, with public condemnation, additional NATO commitments on the eastern flank, and military and humanitarian support to Ukraine. From this point onward the two cases diverge in spending, in Ukraine support, and in their institutional decisions. Denmark has more than doubled its defence expenditure in three years and now sits at 3,5% of GDP due to several comprehensive cross-party defence agreements. Spanish defence spending in 2024 was at 1,28% of GDP, the lowest among NATO allies as a share of GDP, and Spain crossed the 2% threshold only after Sánchez negotiated an exemption from the new NATO 5% target and capped the budget at 2,1% of GDP. On Ukraine support, Danish bilateral commitments exceed 3% of GDP and are the highest in the world as a share of national income, with the Danish Ukraine Fund standing at 60,4 billion DKK. Spanish bilateral support totals €6,21 billion across the 2022 to 2025 period and sits at 0,2 to 0,3% of GNI, alongside Portugal, Ireland, and Hungary, even though the Spanish economy is larger than any of those three. However, both countries rotated forces through NATO's eastern flank, with Spanish troops deployed in Latvia and Lithuania alongside

F-18 fighter jets and artillery shipments, and Danish F-16 transfers and the Danish model of procurement directed at supporting Ukrainian arms production. On institutional decisions Denmark abolished its EU defence opt-out through a referendum, joined PESCO and the European Defence Agency, and used the 2025 Council Presidency to push EDIP through to adoption. Spain has not taken comparable institutional measures in the same period, and its engagement with the White Paper and EDIS implementation has been more cautious than the open strategic autonomy rhetoric of its 2023 Council Presidency would have indicated. Denmark's response has been both faster and larger and has changed its institutional position within European defence. Spain's response has been incremental and has kept its existing position within NATO and EU defence cooperation. This is the variation on the dependent variable that the next sections of the discussion will attempt to uncover.

Strategic culture comparison

Our analysis of Danish and Spanish strategic cultures showed substantial differences between them, with each culture formed through different historical experiences. Danish strategic culture is organised around active alliance membership as an obligation. The German occupation ended the previous culture of neutrality along with its NATO membership in 1949. After the Cold War, Denmark moved towards an Atlanticist preference in which being a good ally became part of its defence doctrine. Spanish strategic culture is organised around a different problem, where the civil war and the Franco dictatorship made the military an instrument of internal political repression, and the cultural legacy of that period has positioned defence as a question about the state's relationship with its own population, rather than as the basis of an outward-facing identity. In the post-Cold War period, Denmark's Atlanticist viewpoint evolved into more assertive activism, described by Mouritzen (2007) as a shift from repressed Atlanticism to 'super Atlanticism', with disproportionate deployments to US-led operations substituting for higher defence spending in what Strandsbjerg and Dahlberg (2024) call a 'merchant logic' of alliance contribution. Spain viewed the same period as the conclusion of its democratic transition and the start of economic catching-up, with defence spending declining and resources going toward welfare and EU-financed development. By 2022, these distinct experiences produced two different orientations, with Denmark's culture organised around active alliance contribution and Spain's around defence as a managed cost. These orientations conditioned what each government could politically afford to do in response to external pressure.

According to Ripsman et al. (2016), strategic culture works analytically by determining which preferences are politically viable, since it provides the set of assumptions a government can rely on without facing political backlash. The Danish norm of active alliance contribution provided the Danish government an enabling environment in terms of defence alignment. For example, when Prime Minister Frederiksen called for the abolition of the EU defence opt-out a value-based decision, she did not face pushback. What changed after 2022 was the method of Denmark's effective alliance contribution, from operational deployments to direct defence spending, in order to remain a good ally in the eyes of its partners. Sánchez has been working from a different cultural position than Frederiksen's. His public stance - that strategic autonomy comes from more efficient and coordinated spending rather than increased spending levels, and that Europe must keep a 360-degree view of its security - represents what Spanish strategic culture allows without significant political cost. The aftermath of the 2009 Euro Crisis also affected Spanish defence thinking to the point where any increases that would compromise their welfare model lie outside what is politically viable, as established in our state-society relations examination of Spain. The threat environment of both cases also shows their differences in defence planning. For instance, Danish strategic culture historically treating Russia as a security problem in a way that allows the 2022 shock to be assimilated into existing assumptions. Meanwhile, Spanish strategic culture has long treated security as multi-directional, with Morocco, the Maghreb, and Mediterranean migration competing with the eastern flank for political attention. Russian aggression therefore enters Spanish politics as one threat among several others, which limits the political case for major rearmament in Spain in a different way than in Denmark.

The asymmetry between the two cases is in what each strategic culture permits each executive to do without paying an unsustainable political cost. Frederiksen has been working with cultural resources that turn alliance contribution into security confirmation, so that higher spending and EU defence engagement express a cultural orientation already in place rather than a new direction requiring justification. Sánchez has been working with cultural resources in which defence spending is positioned against welfare in zero-sum terms and where the memory of military repression partly conditions what is politically acceptable. Therefore, what looks like a Spanish leadership failure is closer to the maximum adaptation Spain's cultural inheritance permits.

In terms of our focused comparison question, we have found that the Atlanticist alliance-contribution norm integrated into Denmark's strategic culture have enabled the Danish

government to pursue balancing measures against its external threats. Spain's strategic culture has constrained Spanish adaptation by leaving the executive with a culture in which defence is positioned against welfare, multi-directional threat perception, and the memory of military repression continues to limit what counts as politically acceptable defence policy. Strategic culture has therefore operated as a permissive variable in the Danish case and as a binding constraint in the Spanish case, and the variation on the dependent variable follows directly from two governments responding to the same external shock with culturally different resources available to them.

State-society relations comparison

Although both Denmark and Spain entered the post-2022 period on similar terms, the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has produced two different outcomes for the two states. When comparing the state-society relations of Denmark and Spain regarding elite consensus and societal cohesion, it is evident that the two cases differ in both variations. In general, the political process for increasing defence spending was more direct and simpler in Denmark than in Spain. In Denmark, most of the political parties in parliament reached a national compromise to increase defence spending and abolish Denmark's EU defence opt-out in 2022. Similarly, 10 out of 12 Danish parliamentary parties partook in signing the recent Defence Agreement 2024-2033 with only two minor parties not signing the agreement. Thus, in the period after Russia's invasion of Ukraine there has been elite consensus on the need for increasing defence spending in Denmark, which is revealed by the cross-party, multilateral agreements. This can, however, not be said about the case of Spain. From assessing the literature, we gained insight into how fragmented economic and value-based politics are in Spain. In the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there seemed to be elite consensus that Ukraine needed aid from Europe, however, there has not been consensus on the topic of increased defence spending. The Spanish Government is a minority government that is dependent on smaller, regional left-wing parties, of which some have separatist agendas, which forces the government to consult and discuss large political issues, such as defence, with these parties. The fragility of the Spanish government constellation was evident in June 2025 when one of the supporting parties questioned its place in the government after Pedro Sánchez expressed desire to increase the defence budget (Thykjaer, 2025). In order to gain the necessary support to increase spending to 2% of GDP from within the left bloc, Sánchez had to make budgetary promises in other political areas (Silva, 2025). Sánchez' Government could also have secured the support of the right-leaning parties PP and Vox, however, due to the widely discussed

political fragmentation in Spain, this would also have negatively affected the constellation and impacted his government's legitimacy. Thus, the external shock in 2022 overcame the distributional competition that usually characterises Danish coalition bargaining, meanwhile coalition bargaining in Spain was obligatory due to the political fragmentation and the fragility of the government.

Additionally, when comparing the rates of societal cohesion regarding security and defence in Denmark and Spain, it becomes evident that the topics of interest and public opinions among Danes and Spaniards differ. The Eurobarometer survey has shown that the level of trust that Danish and Spanish citizens have in their domestic institutions and political parties are quite unlike. According to the survey, 50% of Danish respondents tend to trust political parties, 59% tend to trust the Danish Government, and 67% tend to trust the Danish Parliament, while 47%, 36%, and 30% respectively tend not to trust these institutions. On the other hand, 85% of the Spanish respondents tend not to trust political parties, while 62% tend not to trust the Spanish Government, and 68% tend not to trust the Spanish Parliament (European Commission, 2026, p. 69, p. 85, p. 87). Generally, in Denmark, there is consensus and cohesion regarding the need to increase defence spending among both the elite and the public. Evidently, there has been popular push-back on the initiative by both the public and trade unions, however the discontent was not directed towards the defence budget itself but the financing method, i.e. the decision to abolish a national holiday. However, there is not a similar degree of consensus or cohesion among societal and elite groups in Spain which can be attributed to its political fragmentation. The Spanish respondents do not identify the Russian invasion of Ukraine to be one of the most important issues facing Spain (4%), but its impact on the EU is a bit larger at 14%, which is a further decrease from being 25% just six months earlier (European Commission, 2026, pp. 41-44). It can be argued that distance and economic strength are considerable factors in Spaniards' low threat perception compared to national economic interests, such as housing (39%), and inflation (32%). The issues, that the Danish public treats as most pressing, match the government's defence priorities, and no competing domestic issue registers at a level that could support organised resistance to defence spending. Meanwhile, considering the political fragmentation in Spain, the most pressing domestic issues to the public do not match the PSOE's defence priorities. Thus, there is a sufficient amount of both elite consensus and societal cohesion in line with the Danish Government's defence priorities, while consensus and cohesion among Spanish political parties and the public are insufficient, making significant political change difficult.

Domestic institutions comparison

When examining and comparing the domestic institutions of Denmark and Spain, it becomes evident that there are both similarities and institutional differences. One of the similarities is that both governments are formally minority governments; the Danish Government holding 89 of 179 seats in parliament; and the Spanish Government holding 152 of 350 seats in parliament (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023; Fondation Robert Schuman, 2026). However, the way in which the two governments formally function is different. For instance, Denmark's institutional setup operates within the confines of negative parliamentarism, which means that a government can function without a majority but cannot if there is a majority against it, meaning that parties can be neutral. On the other hand, Spain's government must have an explicit majority in support of it in order to be formally accepted, which is also known as positive parliamentarism. In terms of foreign policy and defence policy, the two systems are both similar and different. The similarity is that the general directions of said policies are under the authority of the governments with parliamentary consent in case of binding international commitments and the stationing of troops internationally (Arteaga, 2020). One difference regarding defence is the budget; the Danish governments can independently create a new defence budget which the Spanish governments cannot. Spanish governments draft a legislative budget and pass it to both Congress and the Senate which both must accept in order for the budget to be accepted. If the governing parties have a majority in both Houses, the legislation or budget most likely passes; if not, the government must bargain and compromise with supporting parties. However, one difference between Danish and Spanish decision-making in foreign affairs is that Danish governments consult, but is not constrained by, the Foreign Policy Committee prior to making defining foreign policies. Spanish governments, on the other hand, have the executive authority to make said policies autonomously but still in cooperation with its Council of Ministers and Ministries (Folketinget, n.d.; La Moncloa, n.d.b).

Hansen (2020) noted that Danish supporting parties can exercise veto on specific policy issues where the government needs legislative support and thus grants political concessions which is similar to Spanish politics. It was previously established that the current Spanish minority Government is dependent on regional parties on the far left for support, and that these were against increasing the budget for defence. In this instance, the Spanish Government, in order to gain legislative support, had to promise its supporting parties that increasing defence spending would not impact social welfare (Silva, 2025). Thus, depending on the governmental structure, veto players can emerge in both systems, but the emergence is also dependent on specific issues. Regarding the issue of defence in the studied period, no veto

emerged in Denmark due to the broad parliamentary defence agreement between 10 out of 12 parties. However, in Spain PSOE's supporting parties informally acquired a veto role due to the fact that they were not convinced of the need for increased defence spending, at least not at the expense of social welfare. Furthermore, Green-Pedersen and Skjæveland (2020) argued that, historically, Danish minority governments have proven stable and effective due to its institutional framework which allows them to assemble cooperative, legislative coalitions across the two blocs. On the other hand, the Spanish Government has not enjoyed the same stability as the Danish one. Cué (2025) and Silva (2025) have characterised the Spanish Government as being fragile and dependent on conditional support from its coalition partners and regional parties that have different political priorities than the PSOE. Thus, from the perspective of Ripsman et al. (2016), the Danish executive on defence fits the description of a strong executive able to pursue preferred policies without facing institutional constraints, while the Spanish executive on defence does not fit the description due to internal, governmental constraints that obstruct defence adaptation.

Summary and Limitations

The intervening domestic variables by Ripsman et al. (2016) within neoclassical realism have given us the analytical framework to distinguish the differences and similarities in how our cases have adapted in response to the same external shock. After having examined the cases of Denmark and Spain in relation to defence adaptation after 2022, we find that they are more different than first anticipated. We find that especially the variables of strategic culture and state-society relations have steered the respective countries toward a different path in terms of how to respond to a security threat. Denmark's Atlanticist approach combined with both elite and public consensus around defence have allowed the executive to act decisively, while Spain's positioning of defence against welfare and its political fragmentation have left Sánchez with less room to act. While the domestic institutions variable has had influence within the governance aspect of producing defence policies, we find that the institutional differences have not made a significant impact in enabling or constraining the autonomy of the foreign policy executive. However, we have found that the positive parliamentarism setting in Spain has intensified the constraining effect of the state-society relations variable. In this sense, small coalition partners have benefitted from the fragmented political landscape by providing them with the institutional ability to veto policies with which they do not agree, thereby gaining the upper hand in the bargaining process.

In terms of the limitations concerning this thesis, we acknowledge the contemporary nature of this topic. For instance, one limitation is that we have excluded the ongoing recent developments concerning President Trump's threats against both Denmark and Spain which also could have affected the recent defence adaptations. However, given the uncertainty of the situation and lack of academic data, we have deemed it too contemporary to be included in our analysis. As the situation with the US is continuously evolving, future developments could influence the relevance of the conclusions.

Another limitation is the theoretical uncertainty in determining the most prevalent causal explanation for defence adaptation. The structural modifiers of state size and geography also contribute to the explanation alongside the domestic-level variables. Ripsman et al. (2016) acknowledge that structural modifiers influence the nature of a country's strategic culture and state-society relations, but do not specify to what degree. State size in particular affects this picture, since Denmark's small size means alliance contribution is closer to a necessity than a choice, while Spain's larger size and more independent defence capacity allow alliance commitment to operate as one option among several. Some of the cultural orientation in each case may therefore have foundations in state size alongside the historical experiences we have identified. The analysis cannot, therefore, fully isolate the domestic intervening variables from these structural conditions. Despite these limits, the thesis has shown that the domestic variables do substantial analytical work in accounting for the variation between Denmark and Spain, and that neoclassical realism is a useful framework for examining how domestic factors translate external shocks into different policy outcomes. Future research could expand the case selection to include more EU member states with different combinations of size, geography, and cultural inheritance, which would help separate the explanatory effects of structural conditions from domestic intervening variables.

Conclusion

Our analysis of Denmark and Spain and their adaptation of defence and security preferences in response to external security shocks through the lens of neoclassical realism shows that the two cases differ in terms of the dependent variable. On 24 February 2022, their defence budgets were fairly similar as a percentage of GDP after several decades of downscaling. However, three years later the situation is quite different; Denmark has more than doubled its budget for defence and is at 3,5% of GDP, while Spain's budget for defence was 1,28% of GDP in the 2024 fiscal year. In 2025, Spain reached 2,1% of GDP through investments into its military

industrial sector and negotiated an exemption which caps the budget at 2,1% for the near future. Denmark has also been a frontrunner in terms of its support to Ukraine with its innovative Danish model of directly financing arms production at Ukraine defence factories. Measured as a share of GDP, Spain also falls into the mid-to-lower tier of European contributors to Ukraine, despite being one of the largest EU economies. Institutionally, Denmark abolished its EU defence opt-out through a referendum, which formally strengthened its ties with the EU and its European NATO partners, thereby joining both PESCO and the European Defence Agency, of which Spain was already a participating member. The main variation on the independent variable is the speed and type of response. Denmark's response has been considerably faster and greater (as a percentage) and has changed its institutional position within European defence cooperation, while Spain's response has been incremental and has kept its existing position within EU defence cooperation while increasing its military presence on the eastern flank.

In terms of strategic culture, our analysis has shown that their distinct historical experiences have produced two different orientations by 2022. Denmark's Atlanticist strategic culture was grounded in active alliance contribution to secure its own national security, expressed historically through a small but specialised expeditionary doctrine that placed it among the most operationally committed members in NATO. Spain's strategic culture has viewed defence spending as a managed cost in zero-sum competition with welfare spending due to economic and political reasons. On the political side, the civil war and the Franco dictatorship turned the military into an instrument of internal repression, whereby defence became a question about the state's relationship with its own population rather than an outward-facing identity. On the economic side, the democratic transition focused on economic development while defence spending decreased, with resources going to welfare and EU-financed development. Because Danish strategic culture was already organised around alliance contribution, the 2022 shock changed only the method and not the orientation, as the specialised expeditionary doctrine gave way to a territorial defence doctrine focused on strengthening European security. Spain's government did not have the same leverage, since Spanish strategic culture is centred around the notion that security comes from more coordinated spending rather than higher spending. Also, given that Spain has advocated for a more 360-degree strategic focus, the eastern flank counts as one direction among several. Therefore, their respective strategic cultures have had a significant impact on how each country has reacted to the deteriorating security environment.

Regarding the state-society relations, our analysis has shown that the levels of elite consensus and societal cohesion of Denmark and Spain were fundamentally different. This is evident in both the stability of the governments and public opinions. The external shock in 2022 had a greater impact on the cooperation between Danish parties which is evident in the national compromise that officially confirmed the need for a stronger defence posture. On the other hand, the fragility of the Spanish Government and the fragmentation of Spanish politics affected the government's ability to increase defence spending. The above-average level of trust in the Danish system, i.e. government, parliament, and parties, and the high amount of distrust in the Spanish system also played a factor in the governments' abilities to act. In short, our analysis has shown that there has been a sufficient amount of both elite consensus and societal cohesion that support the Danish Government's priorities, while both consensus and cohesion have been insufficient in Spain which has constrained the Spanish Government.

After having analysed the domestic institutions variable in each case, we have found that the type of parliamentarism each case operate within plays a factor. In theory, negative parliamentarism in Denmark has made it easier for governments to function and cooperate across parties, while positive parliamentarism in Spain has strengthened smaller parties and has made it easier for them to veto policies. Therefore, the Danish minority Government has been more likely to assemble a majority ruling in terms of defence, while the Spanish minority Government has been more likely to be constrained in its efforts regarding increased defence spending due to its dependency on far-left parties. Thus, from the perspective of Ripsman et al. (2016), the Danish Government fits the description of a strong executive due to its ability to collect support without facing institutional constraints, while the Spanish Government does not due to internal governmental constraints.

Thus, to answer our research question of why some EU Member States adapt their defence and security preferences differently in response to external shocks, it comes down to both the structural and domestic conditions of each country. In analysing each case, we have found that the structural-level explanatory variables, such as the difference in geographic proximity to the conflict and state size, plays a factor in the difference in outcome. However, geography alone does not account for the difference in defence adaptation. Here, neoclassical realism's domestic-level variables have explained the missing part of the variation by accounting for the domestic factors, both culturally, politically, and institutionally. Especially strategic culture – in terms of historically formed assumptions about security threats – and

state-society relations – in terms of elite consensus around increased defence efforts – have played significant roles in Denmark’s and Spain’s defence adaptations since 2022.

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