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## FRENCH AND GERMAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: DIVERGENCE OR CONVERGENCE?

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This article assesses whether the strategic narratives of France and Germany regarding European defence cooperation are currently exhibiting divergence or convergence. Despite the previous differing approaches of the two countries towards European defence cooperation, the findings reveal that the current trend is moving towards more convergence. There are several catalysts for this convergence, but Russia's aggressive foreign policy coupled with China's perceived efforts to reshape the international order play substantial roles. The policy document analysis outlines the two governments' strategic narratives from 2016 to 2023 and investigates shifts in both German and French policy, in terms of changing priorities, changing strategic culture and a potential drive towards more European strategic autonomy.<sup>2</sup>


Key words: strategic narratives, national security, France, Germany, Russia, China

JEL: F50, F52

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Although the current literature on the topic of European defence cooperation looks at divergence and convergence in French and German defence policies, it does not sufficiently analyse the detailed features of the two countries' strategic narratives. These narratives map out policy objectives and characterise interpretations of national roles in the international environment.

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Strategic narratives are used by political actors to achieve objectives by communicating identities and a sequence of events, giving meaning to the past, present, and future, i.e. they involve a sense of time, with a beginning, middle and end. They integrate interests and goals, articulating desired end states and suggest how to reach them. They are a way to create a shared meaning of international politics in order to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors. Actors use strategic narratives about the state or the international system to extend their influence, manage expectations, and even change the discursive environment (Miskimmon et al. 2016).

While discourse and framing are part of narratives, it is the temporal aspect of movement that distinguishes narratives from the former two. The necessary requirements for a strategic narrative are an actor, an objective, an action, instruments to carry out actions, and a setting in which actions take place. These elements are connected by an incidence of causal transformation. In sum, they constitute the framework of the narrative (Miskimmon et al. 2016).

This article uses the ‘very thin rationalist’ end of the strategic narrative persuasion spectrum, as communication that signals intentions is the primary concern when looking at the two strategic narratives at face value and assessing whether divergence or convergence is evident. When determining the divergence or convergence of the strategic narratives over time, the signalling of intention is the most relevant aspect to help with the evaluation. Focus on the logic of intentional explanation is prioritised for this reason.

This research is practically relevant for two reasons. Firstly, Europe faces the risk of high-intensity war with Russia, and knowing how well coordinated French and German efforts to defend the continent might be is of existential importance. Secondly, if the USA is on a trajectory of decline, European states will have to eventually fill the gap that the USA leaves behind as main security guarantor for the continent.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Recent literature touching on aspects relevant to this topic can offer valuable insights. Schmitt’s work (2018) on the reception of Russian strategic narratives in France examines the political impact in the targeted community and how Russia has used tactics such as propaganda, disinformation, and subversion. The work also offers insight into Russia’s system narrative (which claims that US-centric unipolarity is detrimental to a multipolar order) and Russia’s identity narrative (which claims that the West has been humiliating Russia ever since the end of the Cold War).

Other work on strategic narratives has looked inside the European Union, with Chopin’s work (2017) on French narratives regarding European integration. Perceptions of EU crisis diplomacy strategic narratives in the European neighbourhood were investigated by (Chaban et al. 2019) and Germany’s eurozone crisis strategic narrative was explored by Hertner and Miskimmon (2015).

Studies using similar approaches have examined more diverse topics such as the use of NATO's strategic narratives for Afghanistan (Ringsmose & Børgesen 2011); legitimisation and grand strategy (Goddard & Krebs 2015); dominant narratives of national security in the Cold War (Krebs 2015); the use of framing theory and strategic narratives (Livingston & Nassetta 2018); the strategic use of narratives in security (Zaffran 2019); and the appropriation of China's Belt and Road Initiative strategic narratives by other states (Van Noort – Colley 2021).

### **3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

As this work is concerned with the production of strategic narratives, it takes the 'thin' rationalist model as its theoretical starting point, i.e. the research does not concern itself with the content of actors' desires and beliefs in a particularly introspective sense. Instead, it is focused on the logic of intentional. In this research, where identity plays a role, it is understood as one of the available tools employed within a strategic narrative to legitimise the choice of objectives.

The formation, projection and reception phases of the communication process all play a role in the assessment. The strategic objectives of both countries' are outlined in the formation section. In the projection section, the framing of issues and other elements in the narratives are examined in each strategic document, while the reception section interprets what the strategic narrative outcomes are domestically. However, it is the projection phase that receives the most scrutiny in this work, as the discourse and framing are manifested in that phase more than others. Regarding framing, the three types of narratives (system, identity, and issue narratives) provide indication of how the framing takes place.

The strategic narratives of France and Germany map out policy objectives and characterise interpretations of national roles in the international environment. Exogenous and endogenous factors have to be taken into account in order to understand the structural limitations in which these actors must operate. The exogenous factors include the current developing situation involving the resurgence of hostility between Russia and the West, and China's perceived systemic rivalry with the West. Endogenous factors include how governments can use the perceived identity of their nation (based on historical realities) as an asset in their strategic narratives or how governments find historical identities a hindrance to legitimising their strategic objectives.

Various primary sources are used to carry out the analysis, such as government white papers and strategic policy documents as well as EU documents and NATO documents. The focal points of the analysis are French and German defence and security policies concerning Russia, China, and multilateral defence cooperation. Key terms relevant to these focal points are sought out in the primary sources and their absence or presence, and frequency of use are measured to determine the level of intensity used in

the discourse to describe France or Germany (identity narrative), to criticise Russia or China (issue narrative) and to describe change in the world order (system narrative).

The results from the analysis of each major policy paper are compared with their French or German counterparts as well as compared with results from earlier or later policy documents from the same government. By this method, divergence or convergence over time between French and German strategic narratives can be assessed. The key terms are shown in Table 1. They are chosen not only because they are relevant to the selected focal points but also, after initial analysis of the policy documents, their presence was established in some, if not all, of the major policy documents.

Table 1: Key terms searched for in the frequency analysis.

autonomy	normative/norms
China/Chinese	nuclear
eastern flank/neighbourhood	Pacific Ocean
EU enlargement	resilience/resilient
European defence/security	(rules-based) international order
European Intervention Initiative	Russia/Russian
Germany/German	South China Sea
high-intensity	strategic autonomy
combat/conflict/operations/warfare	strategic culture
Indian Ocean	supply chain(s)
Indo-Pacific	systemic rival
morale	Taiwan (Strait)/Taiwanese
multipolarity/multipolar	Ukraine/Ukrainian
NATO/(transatlantic) alliance	war footing/war economy

Source: Based on French government and German government policy papers from 2016 to 2023.

Although Russia’s conflict with Ukraine started in 2014, the analytical starting point of 2016 is chosen, as the first major government strategic document since 2014 was published by the two target counties (in this case, Germany) in 2016. The analysis then investigates all major strategic documents from France and Germany until 2023. By analysing relevant government policy documents from both countries, this work intends to answer the question of whether the current European defence and security-related strategic narratives of France and Germany are exhibiting divergence or convergence. Accompanying the main research question is the secondary research question: ‘Is there any evidence of change in strategic narratives’ formation or projection components within the timeframe?’

#### **4 FORMATION OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES**

Regarding military capabilities, France's strategic reviews set out objectives which involve maintaining the following: a full spectrum armed forces model, a credible nuclear deterrent; operational autonomy, independent situation assessment capabilities, and a significant military presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Domestically, France's objectives involve strengthening cyber resilience, having an economy capable of switching to a war footing, ensuring industrial and technological autonomy, and fostering morale. Regarding objectives concerning the external environment, the priorities are the consolidation of France's role as a globally influential balancing power by 2030, promoting stability and development in the Indo-Pacific region, securing main shipping routes, and ensuring that power politics are regulated by the rule of law (French Government 2017, 2021, 2022).

The military capabilities referred to in the objectives laid out in German strategic documents from 2016 to 2023 include the following: bridging capability gaps in the Bundeswehr, ensuring the Bundeswehr has the equipment it needs, ensuring the Bundeswehr is operational and 'warfighting-capable', and playing a role in nuclear sharing through the provision of dual-capable aircraft. Domestic goals involved spending 2 percent of GDP on defence, improving the competitiveness of the defence industry, adopting a whole-of-society approach and whole-of-government approach to security, fostering civilian preparedness for war, and strengthening resilience by actively including the population and the private sector. Priorities related to the external environment included ensuring unhindered use of supply lines and trade routes, and securing raw materials and energy supplies (German Government 2016, 2023; Federal Ministry of Defence 2023).

#### **5 PROJECTION OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES**

This section summarises the essential details of the messaging in the projection phase of the main set of strategic narratives of France and Germany. There is a steady increase in the frequency of the key terms from Table 1 from 2016 to 2023 in the strategic documents from France and Germany. They are related to the following: an ongoing transition from unipolarity to multipolarity in the international system; Russia's increasingly aggressive actions; China's challenge to the rule of law in the international order, especially concerning issues related to the freedom of navigation on the seas.

The framing of the narrative is apparent from how the international order is described (system narrative), as both countries' narratives emphasise the transition to multipolarity in the international system. A sense of urgency is created by implying a high degree of unpredictability in this transition. Examples of the framing of issues (issue narrative), such as Russia's belligerence and disregard for international law, are numerous. Reference to China's actions and policies are also common and help support

both the issue and system narratives. Clear examples of each narrative type are included in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Types of narratives used in France

<i>Narrative type</i>	<i>France’s 2017 Defence and National Security Strategic Review</i>	<i>France’s 2021 Update</i>	<i>France’s 2022 National Strategic Review</i>
System narratives	‘The emerging multipolarity and newfound international rivalry challenge the rules and international institutions which have provided the legal framework and regulated the use of force since the Second World War.’	‘(Washington’s) overly exclusive focus on competition with Beijing, and the resulting temptation to restore a form of bipolarity based on the alignment of allies, could be inconsistent with a complex, resolutely multipolar world.’	‘Global and regional powers shedding any inhibitions about pursuing revisionist agendas and opportunistic military policies is combined with a growing trend towards isolationism or identity-based withdrawal.’
Identity narratives	<p>‘For France, as a European power with global responsibilities and interests, responding to all these security challenges requires strengthening its strategic autonomy as a matter of priority.’</p> <p>‘France is the only EU country (post-Brexit) that is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a nuclear power, a founding member of the European Union and NATO, and that retains a full-spectrum and engaged military.’</p>	‘As a European nuclear power with global interests, France cannot define its interests solely in terms of geographical proximity to the homeland: it must imperatively maintain a geostrategic reach in line with current developments and its ambitions, which are first and foremost to protect its citizens and territories, but also to preserve its influence and freedom of action.’	<p>‘France is and will remain a power with a robust and credible nuclear deterrent, a crucial asset for strategic dialogue and for the protection of our vital interests.’</p> <p>‘The growing strategic convergence between the PRC and Russia opens up the prospect of greater dispute within international bodies, directed against the expression of Western objectives and offering opportunities for political alignment against the West, and the United States in particular.’</p>

Issue narratives	<p>‘Islamic terrorism, which has hit our country, is spreading to new regions despite our military successes.’</p> <p>‘The annexation of Crimea by Russia violates the Helsinki Principles and undermines the security architecture of the continent.’</p> <p>‘In the past decade the European Union (EU) and its member states have faced growing instability in their neighbourhood (Georgia, Libya, Syria, Sahel, Ukraine, etc.)</p>	<p>‘... recurring tensions along the borders between NATO members and Russia, as the latter has pursued its military modernisation and disinformation campaigns.’</p>	<p>‘Russia is pursuing a strategy that seeks to undermine European security, of which the war against Ukraine, launched on 24 February 2022, is the most open and brutal manifestation.’</p> <p>‘In Africa, we face major security and humanitarian challenges. The terrorist threat remains high in the Sahel-Saharan strip and is spreading towards the Gulf of Guinea. Russian actors, including the private military company Wagner, are carrying out actions that are contrary to our interests...’</p> <p>‘The PRC has a stranglehold (in Africa) on infrastructure, the economy and debt, creating risks of not only of dependency for our partners, but also espionage and restrictions on our operating environment.’</p>
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Source: French Government (2017, 2021, 2022)

Table 3: Types of narratives used in Germany

<i>Narrative type</i>	<i>Germany’s White Paper 2016 on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr</i>	<i>Germany’s 2023 National Security Strategy</i>	<i>Germany’s 2023 Defence Policy Guidelines</i>
System narratives	<p>‘The international order, which was established after World War II and whose organisations and institutions still provide a framework for international politics, is undergoing profound changes. The drivers and effects of these changes are varied and numerous.’</p> <p>‘The stability of the international system is being jeopardised by the increasing role of the military in the ambitions of emerging powers in combination with ongoing territorial conflicts and struggles for regional hegemony. This is happening not only in and around Europe. Regional territorial disputes in connection with power projections are a source of concern in particular for the countries of Southeast and East Asia.’</p> <p>‘Politically, economically and militarily, the international system is</p>	<p>‘... the global order is changing: new centres of power are emerging, the world in the 21st century is multipolar.’</p> <p>‘Some countries are attempting to reshape the current international order, driven by their perception of systemic rivalry.’</p>	<p>‘(The Russian invasion of Ukraine) amounts to an attack on the European security architecture and the international rules-based order.’</p> <p>‘It (China) is trying to reshape the rules-based international order as it sees fit.’</p> <p>‘In a multipolar world, we must strengthen our focus on additional regions and challenges in which, or due to which, the international order is being challenged.’</p>



	moving towards a multipolar order.’		
Identity narratives	<p>‘Our identity and the way we see security is influenced by the lessons we have learned from our history. They form part of our national identity and are enshrined in our constitution.’</p> <p>‘Germany has a strong economy that benefits from a stable society, high-quality infrastructure, and a highly skilled workforce, which is augmented by immigration.’</p> <p>‘Germany is increasingly regarded as a key player in Europe. With this new reality come more options to exert influence but also increased responsibility.’</p>	<p>‘What is clear is that with its economic strength, its diplomatic clout and its history, Germany has a special responsibility.’</p> <p>‘We act in awareness of our history and of the guilt our country bears for unleashing the Second World War and for per-petrating the Shoah, that betrayal of all civilised values.’</p>	<p>‘Germany is an economic powerhouse at the heart of Europe and as such it is the backbone of collective defence in Europe.’</p> <p>‘... we will make fundamental changes in order to create the Bundeswehr of the future. This will affect everything from our structures and our armaments and procurement procedures to our common identity.’</p>
Issue narratives	<p>‘The crisis in and surrounding Ukraine is the concrete manifestation of long-term internal and external developments. Russia is rejecting a close partnership with the West and placing emphasis on strategic rivalry.’</p> <p>‘Transnational terrorism is a global challenge. It is not restricted to individual states or</p>	<p>‘Russia is for now the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.’</p>	<p>‘Crises, conflicts and regional tensions are affecting our immediate security environment in Africa, the Middle East, the Arctic and the Indo-Pacific region.’</p> <p>‘China is increasingly aggressive in its pursuit of regional supremacy...’</p> <p>‘For Germany as a trading nation with global economic ties,</p>

	regions and, on the whole, it is a phenomenon of growing relevance.’  ‘Securing maritime supply routes and ensuring freedom of the high seas is of significant importance for an exporting nation like Germany which is highly dependent on unimpeded maritime trade. Disruptions to our supply routes caused by piracy, terrorism and regional conflicts can have negative repercussions on our country’s prosperity.’		destabilisation in other regions of the world and threats to the security of sea lines of communication directly affect our security and prosperity’.
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Source: German Government (2016, 2023).

There are several elements that are shared in both countries’ strategic narratives and are consistent throughout the timeframe of 2016 to 2013. Focusing on the system narrative level first, the most important shared elements are concerned with the following: the transition of the international system from post-Cold War unipolarity into multipolarity; how the post-Second World War/post-Cold War institutional rules-based international system and its legal framework are being challenged; and the rivalry of global power politics, which characterises Russia and China as revisionist states, and also implies the potential for the USA to withdraw into isolationism and narrow self-interest.

Although these shared elements in the system narrative are consistent features throughout the timeframe of the strategic narratives, there is a clear intensification of how these perceived threats are communicated, as more dramatic and urgent phrasing is used. While France’s 2017 document describes how emerging multipolarity and international rivalry ‘challenge the rules’ of the international system, the 2021 Update describes the ‘deterioration of the strategic context’. However, in France’s 2022 document, the situation is described as the ‘fracturing of the world order’ (French Government 2017, 2021, 2022).

The German documents demonstrate convergence with this intensification of phrasing in their own interpretation of the system narrative. Germany’s 2016 document (see Table 3) states that ‘the international order *is undergoing profound changes*’.

However, Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy (see Table 3) accuses 'some countries' of 'are attempting to *reshape* the current international order'. This is followed by Germany's 2023 Defence Policy Guidelines (see Table 3), which states that 'the international order is being *attacked* in Europe and around the world' (German Government 2016, 2023; Federal Ministry of Defence 2023).

The contrast in phrasing in the German strategic documents from 2016 to 2023 reflects the change in the German government's foreign policy stance following Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (see Table 3). The subsequent speech Chancellor Scholz made in the same month described the invasion as a *zeitenwende*, i.e. the invasion represented a 'turning point' or a 'watershed moment'. In the speech, Chancellor Scholz also announced that a one-off special fund of 100 billion EUR would be used to increase spending for the Bundeswehr. The Bundestag approved the special fund just a few months later (German Government 2022).

The features of the issue narrative are consistent in both countries' strategic narrative timelines, e.g. the Ukraine crisis/war, jihadist terrorism, civil wars and other destabilising trends in the Africa and the Middle East, the security of shipping routes and the freedom of maritime navigation are all consistently featured issues. However, France's 2017 document seems to imply that jihadist terrorism and destabilising trends in Africa and the Middle East are the country's first security priority. These issues are subsequently downgraded as priorities in the subsequent documents and are replaced by threats involving Russia and China (French Government 2017, 2021, 2022).

A comparison of the identity narrative used by the two countries reveals more differences than is apparent in the issue or system narratives. France identifies itself as 'a European power with global responsibilities and interests' and as 'a balancing, united, globally influential power'. It also describes itself as 'the only EU country that is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a nuclear power, (and) a founding member of the European Union and NATO' (French Government 2017, 2021, 2022).

France's self-identification demonstrates more confidence than the identity Germany describes for itself in its documents. Germany explains that its guilt for beginning the Second World War and for committing genocide forms part of the basis for the country's need to take on more responsibility in the world to protect democracy and the rule of law. The more positive aspect of Germany's self-identification is the country's role as 'an economic powerhouse', being regarded as 'a key player in Europe' and being a country with a 'solid democracy' that 'benefits from a stable society, high-quality infrastructure, and a highly skilled workforce' (German Government 2016, 2023; Federal Ministry of Defence 2023).

## 6 RECEPTION OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

Regarding the reception of these strategic narratives, it is important to note that most of the general public are unlikely to choose to read government policy documents. Therefore, the role of the media environment should be considered when assessing the reception of strategic narratives. Any messaging from government strategic narratives that reaches the public is filtered through the media, i.e. newspapers and their online incarnations, other online news outlets, television, etc (Roselle et al. 2014). The reaction of experts, such as other policy makers, to the publication of government policy documents is another element of reception worthy of consideration.

Public opinion on issues connected to objectives and framing present in French and German strategic narratives was measured through a combination of results from polling conducted by various sources (Golubeva et al. 2023; Katsioulis et al. 2023; Eurobarometer 2023; Kantar Public 2022; Franke – Varma 2019) and reveals positive French and German public support for some of the sentiments and positions in the strategic narratives (see Table 4). It should be noted that the results from Franke and Varma's (2019) work are partly based on interviews with policymakers and analysts as well as results from opinion polls, which were conducted by a network of researchers around Europe.

Table 4: Public opinion in France and Germany on issues related to national strategic narratives.

<i><b>Statement/question</b></i>	<i><b>France</b></i>	<i><b>Germany</b></i>
Ukraine should join the EU when it is ready. <sup>1</sup>	56% agree	57% agree
Russia is a threat to peace and security in Europe. <sup>2</sup>	76% agree	76% agree
China is a threat to peace and security in Europe. <sup>2</sup>	46% agree	48% agree
In order to be on an equal footing with other great powers, the European Union must build up its own powerful European army. <sup>2</sup>	59% agree	53% agree
My country should pursue an active foreign policy and play a significant role in solving international problems, crises and conflicts. <sup>2</sup>	54% agree	60% agree
My country should take more international responsibility and help other states, even if there are no direct benefits for my country. <sup>2</sup>	44% agree	49% agree
My country should be committed to relieving tensions in international politics and the peaceful mitigation of conflicts. <sup>2</sup>	64% agree	80% agree
My country should take a clear stand in favour of one side or the other in the case of political conflicts abroad. <sup>2</sup>	46% agree	55% agree

I trust my country to take a leading role in EU security policy. <sup>2</sup>	55% agree	62% agree
By standing against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU is defending European values. <sup>3</sup>	72% agree	73% agree
Co-operation in defence matters at EU level should be increased. <sup>3</sup>	76% agree	81% agree
More money should be spent on defence in the EU. <sup>3</sup>	60% agree	68% agree
Member States' purchase of military equipment should be better coordinated. <sup>3</sup>	74% agree	81% agree
The EU needs to reinforce its capacity to produce military equipment. <sup>3</sup>	64% agree	71% agree
Granting candidate status as a potential Member of the EU to Ukraine (in favour of the step). <sup>3</sup>	54% agree	54% agree
Financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine (in favour of the step). <sup>3</sup>	55% agree	61% agree
How important is NATO for the national security of your country (total 'important')? <sup>4</sup>	72%	79%
How important is the European Union for the national security of your country (total 'important')? <sup>4</sup>	72%	75%
How important is the goal of European strategic autonomy to your country's foreign and defence policy? (range of options: 1. important, 2. somewhat important, 3. not important, contested) <sup>5</sup>	1	1
How does your country see US concerns about European strategic autonomy? (range of options: 1.dangerous, as the EU cannot afford to alienate the US; 2. serious, as EU decision-making in the area needs to account for US concerns more often; 3. economically motivated, as strategic autonomy would strengthen Europe's defence industrial base; 4. strange, as strategic autonomy is the best way to answer US calls for greater burden-sharing; 5. based on a misunderstanding that should be addressed through explanation) <sup>5</sup>	4	3
How does your country see European strategic autonomy in relation to NATO? (range of options: 1. perfectly compatible; 2. compatible if Europe avoids delinking, duplicating or discriminating between their activities; 3. problematic in delinking, duplicating or discriminating	1	1

between their activities; 4. unnecessary and damaging to NATO) <sup>5</sup>		
What is your country's approach to nuclear deterrence in relation to European strategic autonomy? (range of options: 1. strategic autonomy should include, and Europe needs, a nuclear capability; 2. strategic autonomy should include a nuclear capability but the British and French deterrent is sufficient; 3. nuclear deterrence is beyond the level of ambition the EU should have on strategic autonomy; 4. nuclear deterrence is problematic under any circumstances) <sup>5</sup>	3	2
Does China feature in your country's discussion of strategic autonomy? (range of options: 1. yes, due to China's inroads into Europe; 2. no) <sup>5</sup>	1	2

Source: Golubeva et al. (2023), Eurobarometer (2023), Kantar Public (2022), Franke – Varma (2019).

Table 5: Military expenditure of France and Germany, 2016 – 2023.

<b><i>Military expenditure as percentage of GDP</i></b>								
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
France	1.92%	1.91%	1.84%	1.84%	2.00%	1.92%	1.94%	1.90%*
Germany	1.15%	1.15%	1.17%	1.26%	1.37%	1.33%	1.39%	1.57%*
<b><i>Military expenditure in billions of EUR</i></b>								
France	42.8	43.8	43.5	44.7	46.2	47.9	50.9	-
Germany	36.0	37.6	39.3	43.8	46.7	47.7	53.0	-
<b><i>Military expenditure as percentage of general government spending</i></b>								
France	3.38%	3.38%	3.31%	3.32%	3.26%	3.22%	3.43%	-
Germany	2.60%	2.61%	2.64%	2.81%	2.73%	2.60%	2.75%	-

Source: SIPRI (2024), NATO (2023) \*– percentages are based on NATO estimates only.

Another element that can help measure the reception of strategic narratives is government spending. As both France and Germany are parliamentary democracies, proposals from the executive advocating for increases in defence spending must be voted on by members of the French National Assembly or Bundestag in the respective countries. For example, members of the French National Assembly in July 2023 approved President Macron's proposal of a new budget bill for 2024 to 2030, which included 413 billion EUR for military spending, intended for the purposes of modernising the nuclear arsenal, increasing intelligence spending by 60%, and the development of remote-controlled weapons. Despite the pressure some MPs might be under to vote in a certain way if their parties are part of the government, parliamentary approval of defence budget increases

may also signify that some MPs are persuaded by the strategic narrative. Table 5 shows spending increases from 2016 to 2023 (where data availability permits).

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

While the French 2017 ‘Defence and National Security Strategic Review’ addressed the seriousness of the Ukraine crisis with more urgency and more forceful language, there was still a marked preoccupation with Europe’s southern neighbourhood, and countering jihadist terrorism was still very high on the agenda. The 2017 review also advocates attempts to engage in dialogue with Russia in areas of common interest. This signifies a period of time when President Macron still held hopes of reaching a diplomatic solution with Russia. China’s expansion of its military was mentioned, as was the fact that France also inhabits the Indo-Pacific space, but strong direct criticism of China was absent.

The 2021 Update has a significant change of tone in terms of its framing of the situation in Ukraine. It also criticises China more openly, casting it as a ‘systemic rival’ and refers more to French efforts in cooperating with partners in the region to ensure the freedom of maritime and air navigation. More significantly, the 2022 ‘National Strategic Review’, published several months after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, puts more emphasis on strengthening France’s resilience and the country’s willingness to put the economy on a war footing.

This again indicates a progressively more serious appraisal of the situation on the eastern flank. The document also suggests France is moving away from its southern neighbourhood security focus, and more openly hints at the full pivot of France’s planning focus and reallocation of military assets. Regarding China, the review suggests that the country is trying to gather additional followers to its cause in opposing the West-oriented international order. The German 2016 ‘White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr’ set out objectives focused mainly on preventing conflicts and crises, while acknowledging the need to strengthen the Bundeswehr in light of the evolving situation in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Regarding China, criticism was relatively mild, often not referring to the country by name.

The German 2023 ‘National Security Strategy’ document and ‘Defence Policy Guidelines’ document reveal an even more noticeable change of tone towards the urgency of the situation. With the Merkel era over, Chancellor Scholz and particularly Defence Minister Pistorius use discourse of a much more forthright nature compared to that of the previous administration. The term ‘warfighting capability’ is mentioned for the first time and is an intensification in the urgency of the narrative’s framing. The explanation that members of the Bundeswehr must be prepared to risk injury or death, although an obvious possible scenario for members of any potential front-line unit, is rather surprising in the context of modern German discourse. Criticism of China is also surprisingly forthright in

the German context, with accusations of the country aggressively pursuing supremacy in the Indo-Pacific.

Addressing the main research question directly, the two strategic narratives are indeed exhibiting more convergence than before. They are now broadly in agreement regarding their objectives and their assessments of threats to the international order (especially the system narrative), the security of their countries and their interests. The objectives for both states evolved and converged to a considerable degree within the 2016 to 2023 period. Although the concept of European strategic autonomy was not mentioned word-for-word in the German documents, by the 2023 review, it is stated that Europe's ability to act on its own is a prerequisite for security. This is the closest expression of the notion of moving towards European strategic autonomy that has so far appeared in German strategic documents.

Another area of convergence in objectives was signified by President Macron, in his speech in Bratislava, on 31 May 2023, when he expressed willingness to allow Ukraine, Western Balkan countries and others to be considered for EU and potentially NATO membership. This is a major change to France's previous attitude to EU enlargement regarding these countries. It converges with the objective stated in the German 2023 'National Security Strategy'.

Convergence in objectives is also manifested by France's downgrading of the Sahel and other regions within Europe's southern neighbourhood, due to the extreme seriousness of the situation on NATO's eastern flank. This now more closely matches Germany's level of prioritisation regarding the southern neighbourhood issue. Neither country dismisses the region, but priorities have clearly changed, as Germany expressed in its 2023 'National Security Strategy'. The withdrawal of thousands of French troops from the Sahel in the last few years further indicates the change in stance towards the southern neighbourhood. Thus, these explanations of change or development of objectives also answer the secondary research question.

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