EU's Security Response to Trump's Neo-Mercantilist Foreign Policy: An Empirical Approach to Digital Diplomacy and Strategic Autonomy

Trump'ın Neo-Merkantalist Dış Politikası Karşısında Avrupa Birliği'nin Güvenlik Yanıtı: Dijital Diplomasi ve Stratejik Özerkliğe Ampirik Bir Yaklaşım

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Abstract

The foreign policy approach adopted in the Donald Trump era has been shaped by the understanding of weakening multilateral structures based on international cooperation and conducting foreign relations mostly through unilateral strategic moves. In this direction, a neo-mercantilist perspective has been adopted; this line, which is based on economic protectionism and the absolute priority of national interests, has had significant effects not only on the foreign policy behavior of the United States, but also on the functioning of the established order at the global level. Trump's orientation has brought the need for a more independent defense structure within the European Union (EU) to the agenda and strengthened the discourse of strategic autonomy. However, the transformation of this discourse into a permanent and holistic structure has not been possible due to the ongoing differences in security priorities among member states. This study asks how Donald Trump's neo-mercantilist foreign policy has affected the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy and how the internal differences of the member states limit the transformation of this orientation into a common defense policy. This argument is supported by extracting the discourses of the leaders on platform X through data scraping technique and subjecting them to frequency analysis.

Keywords: Neo-mercantilism, Strategic Autonomy, EU Foreign Policy, Trump Era Foreign Policy, Digital Diplomacy, Discourse and Frequency Analysis.

Öz

Donald Trump döneminde benimsenen dış politika yaklaşımı, uluslararası iş birliğine dayalı çok taraflı yapıların zayıflatılması ve dış ilişkilerin daha çok tek taraflı stratejik hamlelerle yürütülmesi anlayışıyla şekillenmiştir. Bu doğrultuda neo-merkantalist bir perspektif benimsenmiş; ekonomik korumacılığı ve ulusal çıkarların mutlak önceliğini esas alan bu çizgi, yalnızca ABD'nin dış politika davranışlarında değil, aynı zamanda küresel düzeyde yerleşik düzenin işleyişinde de belirgin etkiler yaratmıştır. Trump'ın bu yönelimi, Avrupa Birliği (AB) içinde savunma alanında daha bağımsız bir yapılanma ihtiyacını gündeme taşımış ve stratejik özerklik (SA) söylemini güçlendirmiştir. Ancak bu söylemin kalıcı ve bütüncül bir yapıya dönüşmesi, üye devletler arasında süregelen güvenlik önceliği farklılıkları nedeniyle mümkün olmamıştır. Bu çalışma, Donald Trump'ın neo-merkantalist dış politikasının AB'nin SA arayışını nasıl etkilediğini ve bu yönelimin ortak bir savunma politikasına dönüşmesini üye devletlerin içsel farklılıklarının nasıl sınırladığını sorgulamaktadır. Bu sav veri kazıma tekniğiyle X platformu üzerinden liderlerin söylemlerinin çıkarılması ve frekans analizine tabi tutulması ile desteklenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Neo-Merkantalizm, Stratejik Özerklik, AB Dış Politikası, Trump Dönemi Dış Politikası, Dijital Diplomasi, Söylem ve Frekans Analizi.

Introduction

Donald Trump's foreign policy during his presidency is not limited to a classic neo-mercantilist tendency; it also constitutes a comprehensive and transformative strategic orientation toward the normative and institutional foundations of the international order. Shaped by Trump's "America First" and "Make America Great Again" doctrines, this approach has shown a tendency to move away from multilateral institutional structures and redefine alliance relations on the basis of economic benefit. With the goal of constructing a security architecture centered on national interests, it has signaled a new paradigm shift not only in American foreign policy but also at the global level (Uyğun & Kanat, 2024). In this context, the study aims to reveal the extent to which the Trump administration's criticisms of the transatlantic security architecture and its foreign policy practices have been decisive in shaping the institutional and discursive form of the EU's SA orientation.

The first section of the study examines US foreign policy during the Trump era in a neo-mercantilist context. The second section focuses on the crisis of confidence in the transatlantic security system caused by Trump's criticism of international institutions and norms, and how this crisis shaped the discourse on SA in Europe. The third section draws a parallel between the post-Cold War atmosphere and the Trump era, examining the EU's historical capacity to transform external crises into opportunities for structural leaps. The fourth and final chapter provides a detailed assessment of the differing positions of EU member states on SA, comparing the security approaches of France, Germany, and Poland with the support of an empirical discourse analysis. In this context, a frequency analysis of the social media discourse of Trump, Macron, Scholz, and Tusk reveals clear traces of discursive divisions and strategic priorities within the EU regarding SA. Within this structural framework, the study analyzes how the security-focused fractures created by the Trump administration on the transatlantic plane have encouraged new strategic orientations that challenge Europe's normative actor boundaries. However, due to structural and strategic priority differences within the EU, this orientation has not been able to transcend the intergovernmental level, limiting the transformation of the common defense vision into institutional integration.

1. At the Limits of Liberal Order: Power, Interest, and Neo-Mercantilist Transformation in Trump's Foreign Policy

In the post-Cold War era, globalization took precedence over nationalism and protectionism; however, since 2010, influential leaders in global politics have developed a new direction in foreign policy with populist rhetoric such as "strong leader" and "great nation." Examples such as Putin's "rebuilding of the Russian world," Xi Jinping's emphasis on sovereignty, and Modi's Hindu nationalism have signaled the first signs of this transformation. The most prominent reflection of this trend has been Donald Trump, who came to power with the slogans "America First" and "Make America Great Again." Trump is not only a representative of the global nationalist wave, but also draws attention with his vision of the US's position in the international system; he has adopted an anti-globalist foreign policy inspired by the "America First" movement of the 1930s, the anti-communist line of the 1950s, and the Asia-Pacific competition of the 1980s. Rather than universalizing American values, Trump has positioned American identity in a divisive manner, developing a new foreign policy paradigm on the global stage.(Kimmage, 2025).

Trump's national security strategy, which took shape particularly during his second term, openly opposes the post-Cold War multilateral, normative order. This approach replaces idealistic diplomacy with interest-driven, transactional relationships, defining the US's global leadership not as the "champion of a rules-based order" but as an actor that prioritizes the use of power in line with its interests. This foreign policy strategy is based on a foreign policy architecture that conditions security guarantees, reshapes alliances on the basis of measurable gains, and links military aid to concrete benefits such as trade and access to resources. In this context, the US's position in the international system is no longer based on the figure of a benevolent hegemon, but on a power-centered and rule-setting superior actor. The Trump administration is reshaping its global engagement by reducing its priority on the Western Hemisphere, deepening economic and technological decoupling from China, and strengthening military modernization. With this strategy, states are faced with the choice of either integrating into the US's interest-driven security framework or risking marginalization. This approach, which is not isolationist but rather a vision of designed dominance, indicates that "Pax Americana" has come to an end and a new paradigm, which could be called "Pact Americana," has been preferred (Matisek & Farwell, 2025). Trump's anti-globalization stance is based on a neo-mercantilist approach to foreign policy. This set of policies, known as "Trumponomics," aims to promote domestic production, strengthen the labor market, and bring American capital back home. (Losev, 2018). This approach has been shaped by protectionist measures and a zero-sum trade mindset,

replacing liberal values, and has adopted a line that focuses foreign policy decisions entirely on national interests. Trump's economic promises in his 2024 election campaign are also based on neo-mercantilist principles such as export orientation, import restrictions, trade tariffs, and subsidization of domestic production, reflecting a foreign policy vision that prioritizes economic competition even against US allies (Kurt, 2021; Losev, 2018).

Trump's policies go beyond neo-mercantilism and are even more closely associated with practices referred to in the literature as aggressive neo-mercantilism. Aggressive neo-mercantilism refers to an intensified form of traditional neo-mercantilist policies, in which a nation aggressively uses economic strategies to prioritize its own interests at the expense of global trade norms and partnerships (Bhala, 2025; Wigell, 2016). Indeed, Trump also prioritizes national interests over global norms and cooperation. Aggressive neo-mercantilism challenges the stability of the global economic order by prioritizing national gains over international cooperation. Many examples support this view, such as the additional tariffs imposed on the EU in 2018 (Abramson, 2018), import restrictions on EU-made electric vehicles in 2025 (The White House, 2025), and import restrictions on Chinese technology products in the same year (Lockett, 2025). Trump's statements at the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly also support this view. In his speech, Trump mentioned the tariffs he imposed on China, talked about the damage the trade deficit caused to the US economy, and emphasized the view that one country's gain is another country's loss (TrumpWhiteHouse, 2019). The Trump administration has frequently voiced its criticism of multilateral institutions both during the election campaign and during his presidency. These criticisms are based on the perception that these institutions impose a financial burden on the US and increase the trade deficit. Trump has argued that these institutions do not serve the economic interests of the US and limit the country's sovereignty. This approach has called into question the US's leadership role in the international arena and caused tension in its relations with its allies. In addition, the Trump administration has stated that allied countries have become overly dependent on the US for their own security and economic prosperity, and that this situation is unsustainable. These policies demonstrate that the Trump administration has adopted a more nationalist and unilateral approach to international relations. Criticism of multilateral institutions and alliances has led to a departure from traditional US foreign policy and a redefinition of its global leadership role,

while also clearly reflecting its aggressive neo-mercantilist views (Murray, 2018).

According to Losev (2018), the belief that American-style globalization has reached its natural limits, while China and Asia have become the primary beneficiaries—is gaining strength. In this context, Trump's neo-mercantilist foreign policy and his erosion of liberal norms reflect not only a continuation of U.S. dominance but also a reproduction of the global capitalist order. Drawing on Cox's critical theory, the growing prominence of countries like China, India, Iran, and Russia challenges the legitimacy of Western hegemony, indicating a profound crisis in the liberal international order. As Cox (1983) argues, international organizations are essential tools for spreading global hegemony. Yet, rival forces have emerged both within these organizations and across the international system. Trump's withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and his transactional approach to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) signal a shift from a consent-based order toward one grounded in direct economic and political coercion, intensifying the ongoing hegemonic crisis.

According to Bull (2012), the formation of an international community depends on states aligning around shared norms, rules, and institutions through voluntary cooperation. However, the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and its coercive stance toward Tehran highlight a shift from multilateral, normative mechanisms to unilateral and force-based approaches. Bull (2012) emphasizes that such a community only exists when states commit to common rules and institutions. Trump's reluctance to engage in frameworks not serving U.S. interests exemplifies a detachment from the liberal international community, traditionally led by the U.S. and Europe. His alignment with leaders like Putin, Modi, and Xi suggests the rise of an alternative global order (Bull, 1980). Actions such as military build-up, expansionist ambitions in Greenland and the Panama Canal, and sidelining multilateral institutions like the UN and OSCE for advisor-led diplomacy (Kimmage, 2025) further illustrate Trump's intention to redefine U.S. global engagement outside the existing international community

At this point, it can be said that Trump's stance on US foreign policy corresponds to Habermas's discourse on strategic action. According to Habermas (2003), international legitimacy is shaped around communicative rationality and normative values/normative consensus.

However, Trump's aggressive neo-mercantilist foreign policy corresponds to the approach that Habermas defends as strategic action. From the perspective of strategic action, Trump's foreign policy seeks to shape the behavior of other states through threats and rewards, pushing normative values aside and attempting to obtain legitimacy through coercion. The interpretation of NATO's normative Western values and international institutional structure as a customer relationship, and the declaration that the US's commitment to NATO will diminish if other countries do not make NATO payments (Hunnicutt & Brunnstrom, 2025) are examples of this approach. Additionally, Trump's withdrawal from institutions and agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement, JCPOA, and WHO, and his imposition of unilateral sanctions on countries, can be interpreted as strategic action replacing communicative action.

Furthermore, Trump's goal has been more than just protecting the US economically under a protectionist umbrella, as seen in the published decrees. This aggressive neo-mercantilism, epitomized by the slogan *"Buy American, Hire American"* also serves Trump's goal of changing the playing field for countries competing with the US for hegemony. The Trump administration has stated that priority should be given to strengthening national defense, trade, and immigration policies before establishing an institutional framework for international cooperation. In this regard, it has been emphasized that once the United States reestablishes its position as a global leader, a new international order more suited to national interests can be built (Kurt, 2021). Indeed, Trump clearly laid out the ideological basis for this approach in his speech at the 74th session of the UN General Assembly, stating that *"the future belongs not to the globalists, but to the patriots."* (TrumpWhiteHouse, 2019). At this point, it is understandable that Trump, unable to establish his legitimacy as a hegemonic power, seeks to create legitimacy through strategic action, hardening his stance, and eroding and re-creating the norms that constitute the international community.

2. A New Security Paradigm? Europe's Fragile Transatlantic Ties and Strategic Autonomy

Parallel to the aggressive neo-mercantilist approach adopted during the Trump era, the US's withdrawal from certain international organizations or reduction of its influence in these structures has created a power vacuum at the global level, which other international actors have sought to fill. In particular, regional powers such as China and Russia have risen to a more visible and influential position in the international system during this process. In this context, the US withdrawal from international economic agreements, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, has been interpreted by some Southeast Asian countries as a sign of Washington's declining interest in the region and a shift in strategic superiority toward China. This situation highlights how the vacuum left by the US has provided other actors with significant room for maneuver (Murray, 2018). It can be said that reform and integration initiatives, particularly within the EU, tend to gain momentum during such periods of crisis. (Becker et.al., 2016; Schimmelfennig, 2018).

Europe's search for SA is not limited to the US insecurity during the Trump era – although the term first appeared in the 1990s – but can be traced back to the emergence of European integration and French foreign policy under Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s (Uyğun, 2022; Vu et.al., 2024). The concept essentially represents a layered and dynamic understanding that expresses the EU's multidimensional strategic capacity, ranging from security and defense policies to digitalization and trade (Fiott, 2018; Helwig, 2020). In other words, SA is assessed in terms of military capacity as well as sub-dimensions such as institutional/operational, industrial/material, and political autonomy, providing a comprehensive framework for the EU's self-governance capabilities(Drent, 2018; Zandee et.al., 2020). The concept was debated in the wake of the Cold War, with the US withdrawing from continental Europe and a power vacuum emerging. The EU sought to develop its defense capabilities by establishing the CFSP with the 1993 Maastricht Treaty (Gürkaynak, 2004; Gürsoy, 2024) In the following period, the tasks of the Western European Union (WEU) were expanded within the framework of the ESDP, military structures were established at the 1998 St. Malo and Nice Summits, and the concept of ESDP was institutionalized with the 2003 European Security Strategy and the Lisbon Treaty (Joint Declaration on European Defence, 1998; Nováky, 2018; Ülger, 2002). SA, which entered the official EU discourse in 2013, has been linked to hard power capabilities and the need for a strong defense industry in the 2016 EU Global Strategy(Vu et.al., 2024). Efforts have been made to establish an autonomous security structure while maintaining a symbiotic relationship with NATO (Gürkaynak, 2008).

At this point, it is possible to draw parallels between US-EU relations in the 1990s and those after 2022. When comparing the two periods, in the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the elimination of a direct security threat led

to a reduction in US military and diplomatic engagement in Europe. This situation allowed European countries to focus more on their own security and integration agendas. The Donald Trump era, on the other hand, was a period in which this trend took on a much harsher rhetoric and the foundations of transatlantic relations were called into question. Trump described NATO as an "obsolete" structure and heavily criticized European allies, particularly Germany, for not increasing their defense spending. This rhetoric undermined trust in the US in Europe and paved the way for a strengthening of SA efforts. (Howorth, 2019).

Europe's search for SA is not limited to concerns about breaking away from the US, which have increased during Donald Trump's presidency; the origins of this search date back to NATO's original goals and Europe's ability to ensure its own security. NATO's founders designed the US presence in Europe as temporary support and argued that Europeans should eventually take on their own defense responsibilities. However, the US's permanent military presence during the Cold War institutionalized Europe's strategic dependence, and this situation was rarely questioned, especially outside France. Since the 1990s, the unsustainability of this dependence has been increasingly voiced, and various steps have been taken toward SA, particularly through initiatives such as OGSP and PESCO. However, these efforts have remained limited in scope and effectiveness, with strategic and structural differences between key countries such as France and Germany proving decisive in the direction of the projects. As in the case of PESCO, broad participation has led to ineffectiveness, and a balance could not be struck between France's demand for selectivity and Germany's desire for inclusivity. Additionally, Macron's EI2 initiative, unlike PESCO, offered a more ambitious orientation toward SA and envisioned a multilateral military structure outside of NATO (Howorth, 2019).

Recent developments such as the weakening of the liberal international order, the rise of China, Brexit, democratic setbacks during the Trump era, and COVID-19 have significantly broadened the scope of the EU's understanding of strategic autonomy (SA). The pandemic has exposed the EU's dependence on external factors, particularly in critical sectors, and given rise to the concept of "open strategic autonomy." This concept reflects the EU's efforts to balance its competitiveness goals with geopolitical and normative concerns. The Ukraine-Russia War, which began in 2022, has strongly added a security dimension to the SA discourse, leading to the evolution of this approach into a comprehensive strategy that responds not only to economic but also to military and geopolitical imperatives(Van den Abeele, 2021; Vu et.al., 2024).

The fundamental aim of strategic autonomy is to strike a balance between the EU's normative power and its strategic action capacity (Palm, 2021; Tocci, 2021). However, increasing geopolitical tensions have brought to the fore the inadequacy of soft power alone; actors such as Hyde-Price (2006) and Borrell (2020, 2022) have emphasized that the EU must also develop hard power elements in order to become a global actor. With the outbreak of the Ukraine War in 2022, Von der Leyen and the European Parliament stated that the EU must strengthen its defense capabilities with tools such as the European Sovereignty Fund to ensure its security. Trump's criticism of NATO and his "America First" doctrine accelerated the search for SA, particularly strengthening France's demands for autonomy(Haavik, 2024).

The divergent policies observed between the two periods were significantly shaped by their respective contextual differences. During the 1990s, the United States adopted a more constructive and supportive approach toward European integration, maintaining a relatively low-profile stance. While it encouraged NATO's eastward expansion, it did not directly oppose the EU's efforts to enhance its own defence capacities. In contrast, the Trump administration marked a more confrontational and skeptical shift in transatlantic relations. The U.S. not only disengaged from its traditional commitments but also adopted a coercive and divisive diplomatic posture toward its allies. This stance triggered a rupture within Europe, prompting a reevaluation of dependency on U.S. security guarantees. Statements such as *Europe must take care of its own security…* voiced by leaders in Germany and France, epitomize this discursive transformation. Furthermore, the Trump era reflected a broader paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy, prioritizing the Asia-Pacific region and defining China as a "strategic competitor." The cooperative policy of "constructive engagement" that characterized the 1990s gave way to more assertive strategic moves aimed at containing China's rise. Trade wars, sanctions on Chinese tech firms, support for Taiwan, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy exemplified this shift. As a result, Europe's salience within U.S. foreign policy diminished, contributing to the relative decline of the transatlantic relationship (Polyakova & Haddad, 2019; Van den Abeele, 2021; Vu et.al., 2024).

Arguably the most significant distinction lies in the fact that the Trump administration marked a

profound rupture in the United States' traditional approach to NATO, challenging the legitimacy of the transatlantic security architecture built in the aftermath of World War II in an unprecedentedly explicit manner. As a founding member and long-time principal financial contributor, the U.S. had historically assumed a leadership role within NATO, viewing Europe's security as a cornerstone of the global order during and after the Cold War. Although debates over financial burden-sharing and Europe's military contributions occasionally surfaced in the 1990s and beyond, no U.S. president prior to Trump had openly questioned NATO's necessity for American national interests. On the contrary, administrations led by George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush continued to frame NATO as a strategic instrument for both Eastern European integration and global crisis response. Under Trump, however, these long-standing assumptions were fundamentally shaken. Trump openly described NATO as "obsolete" and suggested that the U.S. might reconsider its security guarantees if other member states failed to increase their defense spending. This rhetoric went beyond conventional criticism of burden-sharing and introduced a deeper question— whether NATO still served U.S. strategic interests. In this sense, the Trump administration approached the alliance not as a historical or ideological security community, but as a contract-like arrangement subject to cost-benefit calculations. This stance fostered profound distrust in European capitals and brought the prospect of a potential U.S. withdrawal from NATO into serious consideration for the first time. Thus, Trump's position on NATO did not merely reflect a shift in tone but constituted a systemic challenge to the normative foundations of the transatlantic alliance—one unparalleled in the post-Cold War era(Howorth, 2019; Polyakova & Haddad, 2019).

The EU has often achieved structural progress during times of crisis and systemic transformation, even when such advancements did not satisfy all member states. For instance, the post-Cold War context contributed to deeper political integration within the EU, eventually culminating in initiatives such as PESCO. Similarly, during Donald Trump's presidency, the resurgence of discussions on a European army and the notion that European security should be ensured by Europeans themselves— particularly in the wake of the Ukraine crisis— was closely tied to Trump's overtly critical stance on NATO (Juncos & and Pomorska, 2021). In this light, the transatlantic dynamics of the Trump era and the 1990's produced parallel outcomes, albeit rooted in different underlying factors. While the 1990s witnessed a strategic vacuum following the end of the Cold War and a gradual U.S. disengagement, prompting the EU to pursue defense institutionalization from the Maastricht Treaty to PESCO, the Trump era saw a more explicit crisis of trust. The "America First" doctrine and repeated criticisms of NATO led Europe to reevaluate its dependence on the U.S., revitalizing the strategic autonomy (SA) agenda. In both periods—one driven by systemic transformation, the other by leadership-driven disruption—the EU was compelled to enhance its defense capabilities and construct a more autonomous security architecture. As such, critical junctures have functioned as catalysts for EU integration, and the SA narrative, though rooted in varying motivations across time, has consistently reflected the Union's aspiration to build institutional capacity in foreign and security policy.

3. Shared Insecurity, Fragmented Responses: Divergences in EU Security Preferences

The European Union has historically taken various institutional steps toward establishing a common defense policy, yet these efforts have often resulted in limited progress (Uyğun, 2022). While the Maastricht Treaty laid the foundation for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and subsequent treaties further institutionalized this domain, the EU's military capabilities have remained insufficient. The 2011 Libya intervention highlighted this shortfall. Following Brexit, initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) emerged as key pillars supporting strategic autonomy. However, their voluntary nature has hindered effective implementation. The Trump administration's skepticism toward multilateralism and NATO acted as a catalyst, prompting the EU to take more independent steps in the field of security and defense (Donath, 2009).

Donald Trump's potential return to the U.S. presidency has confronted the EU and its member states with a pivotal moment of strategic reckoning. While his first term (2017–2021) was marked by rhetorical criticisms toward allies that seldom materialized into concrete policies, a second term is expected to differ significantly, largely due to the growing determination within his team to implement his preferences (ICG, 2025; Péter, 2025). Central to Trump's approach is a desire to free the U.S. from what he views as outdated and costly alliances, favoring instead a transactional model of international engagement that aligns with the "America First" and "Make

America Great Again" doctrines. This shift has significantly reshaped the transatlantic security architecture. Trump's open skepticism toward NATO and his labeling of the EU as a "foe" have raised alarms, yet many Europeans remain reluctant to acknowledge the vulnerability of U.S. security guarantees (Péter, 2025). His persistent criticism over defense spending and initial hesitation to reaffirm NATO's Article 5 commitment have undermined confidence among allies. In response, EU states have increasingly recognized the need to enhance their own defense capabilities. Initiatives like PESCO and the EDF, which gained momentum during Trump's presidency, reflect this growing awareness and the push toward greater responsibility-sharing within the EU (Haavik, 2024). Ultimately, this context has forced Europe to confront a long-delayed truth: that reliance on the U.S. can no longer be taken for granted. Consequently, Europe has begun crafting a "Plan B," seeking to stand as a hard power in its own right (Balfour, 2025).

Secondly, the unilateralism, isolationism, and unpredictability that characterized Trump's foreign policy had a profound impact on the EU's strategic calculations. The United States' withdrawal from major international agreements and institutions—such as the Paris Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the World Health Organization—and its general disregard for multilateralism, significantly accentuated the unpredictability of Washington's global posture. This climate prompted the EU to act more autonomously in safeguarding its interests and values on the international stage, compelling a reassessment of its security and defense strategies. In response to this uncertainty, the EU sought to uphold multilateralism and strengthen its diplomatic capacity as a means to ensure stability within the international system. Notably, debates intensified around the need to utilize the CFSP mechanisms more effectively and to solidify the EU's presence as a global actor. Furthermore, instruments such as the European Peace Facility have enhanced the Union's ability to financially support joint security operations, reinforcing its capacity for independent crisis management and security provision (Haavik, 2024).

Thirdly, Trump preferred to conduct international relations through transactional agreements that served the United States' direct interests and even referred to the EU as an "enemy." This iconoclastic approach often had adverse consequences for European allies, undermining nearly all dimensions of traditional transatlantic cooperation. By perceiving transatlantic ties as unnecessary, Trump effectively made greater

European autonomy an inevitability. This shift encouraged more coherence within the EU on defense and security policies and intensified debates around SA among European leaders and EU institutions. As dependence on an unpredictable United States became increasingly risky, the pursuit of SA gained traction. In this context, the EU emphasized the need to build its internal strength and to seek new bilateral partnerships to defend its values and interests in a transactional world. Additionally, the EU launched the CARD process to improve the coordination of defense planning and spending among member states, aiming to enhance the efficiency of defense investments and address existing capability gaps (Haavik, 2024; Weber & Quencez, 2025).

Trump's skeptical stance toward the transatlantic alliance triggered a growing quest for greater autonomy in the EU's security and defense posture. Mader et.al. (2024) demonstrate that heightened international threat perceptions increased public support for defense integration at the EU level, extending even to segments traditionally associated with Euroscepticism. Within this context, although not the sole driver, the uncertainty generated by Trump-era policies significantly reinforced the political will behind initiatives such as PESCO, EDF, and CARD (Hoeffler et.al., 2024; Mader et.al., 2024). Ultimately, Trump's presidency should not be viewed as the singular cause of the EU's pursuit of SA; rather, alongside other geopolitical developments such as Brexit and the war in Ukraine, it constituted a critical external shock that accelerated the process and infused it with renewed momentum. From a transatlantic perspective, the Trump era reshaped the alliance, eroded trust in the U.S. as a security guarantor, and strengthened the perception that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own defense. This shift has become a central dynamic shaping EU security and defense policy and has led to the rapid implementation of concrete mechanisms such as PESCO, EDF, CARD, and the European Peace Facility. These developments reflect the EU's determination to adapt to a changing global security environment and to enhance its capacity to safeguard its own strategic interests.

Within the EU's institutional framework, this perceived necessity was explicitly articulated by then-European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in 2017, stating that "*Europe cannot and should not outsource its security and defense*" and emphasizing that "*by 2025, we need a fully-fledged European Defence Union*" (*European Commission, 2017b, 2017a*). In the same year, then-High Representative of the Union for Foreign

Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini underscored the significance of building a common EU defense policy, stating in reference to PESCO and European defense cooperation: *"Twenty-three European countries signed an agreement on Permanent Structured Cooperation in the field of defense. Technically called PESCO, this agreement in practice lays the foundation for the future of European defense." (Mogherini, 2017)*. In 2018, then-French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, in his speech at the Munich Security Conference, drew attention to the same need by stating: *"The EU has activated many of the options offered by the Lisbon Treaty to develop SA. This collective effort has enabled progress along two key axes: the instrument is the European Defence Fund; the method is Permanent Structured Cooperation."* (Phillipe, 2018). At the same conference, then-German Defence Minister and later European Commission President from 2019 onwards, Ursula von der Leyen, similarly stated: *"On the one hand, we want to remain transatlantic, but on the other, we also want to become more European. We want Europe to carry more weight in terms of military power. In doing so, Europe can become more independent and self-confident… "(Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2018)*. According to Abeele (2021: 20) the support for an autonomous European defence and security structure has been consistently upheld by key leaders such as Charles Michel —who held the position of President of the European Council until 1 December 2024 —President Emmanuel Macron, and, to a lesser extent, Angela Merkel. In this sense, it can be argued that both the positions of individual member states and EU institutions have remained steadily aligned in this direction.

However, following Trump's political resurgence, the desire for a joint and supranational EU defence structure, advocated by institutions and leaders often regarded as the driving forces of the Union, has not been uniformly shared by all member states. Although participants in PESCO, countries such as Poland, Sweden, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and the Baltic states have expressed reservations toward establishing a supranational and autonomous defence policy, driven by diverse national motivations. In contrast to France's proactive and sovereignty-focused stance, the "Group of Twelve" —comprising Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Ireland, the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Malta, and Spain— has articulated a more liberal and market-oriented vision of SA. This group emphasizes principles such as strengthening the internal market, maintaining a strict position on state aid, and upholding commitment to a multilateral trade system anchored in the World Trade Organization(Van den Abeele, 2021 .

Poland's position lies somewhere between the two primary axes, reflecting a cautious and conditional approach. It views SA primarily through the lens of enhancing the EU's internal capabilities and resilience to crises. While acknowledging that state aid can stimulate innovation, Poland also emphasizes the importance of maintaining fair competition. The country firmly supports the transatlantic relationship and sees NATO as the cornerstone of European security, asserting that SA should not be confined solely to the Eurozone. In this regard, Poland perceives SA as a tool to strengthen the EU's international standing. For instance, in 2018, speaking on behalf of the Polish government, spokesperson Bocheneck stated that *"Poland's defence policy priority is to cooperate with NATO, and cooperation within the framework of PESCO should in no way compete with NATO."* (IAR, 2017)

Austria, on the other hand, approaches SA from a more technical and sectoral perspective, emphasizing the need to map and strengthen strategic value chains. In this context, sectors such as environmental technologies, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity are considered priority areas, and it is underlined that cooperation at the European level and support for IPCEI's should be enhanced. Austria's proposals are more flexible and functional compared to the rigid stance of the "Group of Twelve." Furthermore, its recommendation to modernize competition law contradicts the approach advocated by the Twelve. Some member states, such as Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Baltic countries, have remained relatively silent in the SA debates. Countries like Belgium and Luxembourg have shown indirect support by signing joint letters initiated by the Group of Twelve. This silence suggests that some member states may prefer to act cautiously in the SA discussions, taking into account the potential costs of taking sides (Van den Abeele, 2021). When Latvia joined PESCO, the Ministry of Defence stated on its official website that *"the launch of PESCO is an important step in strengthening the military capabilities of the EU Participants. This will complement NATO capabilities and facilitate practical EU-NATO cooperation,"* thereby implicitly acknowledging NATO's primary role and avoiding the creation of an autonomous structure outside the transatlantic alliance. Similarly, while the Swedish government emphasized the importance of cooperation through PESCO, it also underlined the intergovernmental nature of this collaboration. In the same vein, during a meeting held in March 2018 to coordinate their foreign policies, the governments of Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania stressed the indivisible

nature of NATO security, while also highlighting the necessity of coordination among European states (Donath, 2009: 32-33).

On the other hand, the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), launched at the suggestion of French President Emmanuel Macron, was designed to operate outside both the EU and NATO frameworks and was conceived as the first intergovernmental step toward European strategic autonomy. Envisioning a joint intervention force, a shared defense budget, a common operational doctrine, and a European Intelligence Academy, the initiative included only nine EU member states. Similarly, Germany's Framework Nations Concept was designed as a comparable effort, involving 17 member states in pursuit of a more integrated and collaborative European defense structure (Howorth, 2019: 24). In summary, this divergent reading of the Euro-Atlantic relationship within the EU has effectively split the Union into two camps. On one side are those who view the strengthening of European capabilities as a rational response to Trump's efforts to undermine both NATO and the EU, as well as a necessary form of Western resistance against the Russian threat in Eastern Europe. On the other side are actors who perceive the best strategy against Trump as preserving the transatlantic "fortress" and waiting out his presidency. This division ultimately hampers the construction of a supranational European defense and security architecture (Howorth, 2019: 25).

In conclusion, Trump's neo-mercantilist, protectionist, and national interest-driven rhetorical foreign policy has pushed EU member states to reconsolidate, much like in the 1980s. However, shifting geopolitical contexts and evolving threat perceptions have led to divergences among member states in terms of defense and security policy preferences, prompting a tendency toward intergovernmental cooperation structures developed outside the institutional framework of the EU. As a result, while this shift in U.S. foreign policy may have created strategic room for maneuver for the EU, differing national positions and the continued influence of high politics on state behavior have prevented the Union from fully capitalizing on this space within a truly supranational framework.
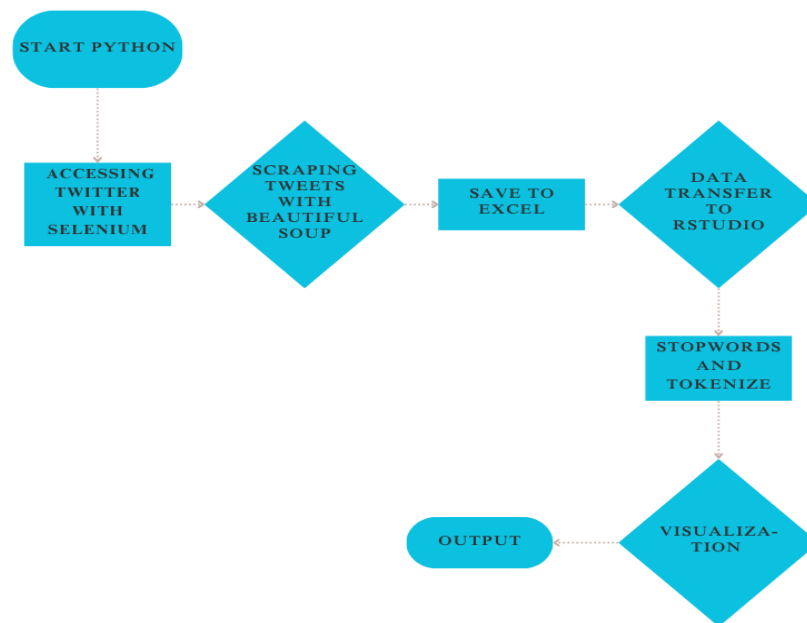
4. Methodology

All these institutional and political developments point to the structural dynamics shaping the EU's orientation toward SA, while also being reinforced by the discourse and public messaging of political leaders. This transformation, which gained momentum particularly during the Trump era, has become observable not only through official documents and policy initiatives but also through discursive practices in the digital sphere. In this context, the communication strategies employed by leaders on social media platforms offer valuable insights into the EU's strategic orientation, security perceptions, and international positioning. Accordingly, this section of the study presents empirical analyses based on text mining of X (formerly Twitter) data, within the framework of digital diplomacy, to render visible the leaders' positions on SA and to explore discursive divergences in greater depth.

One form of digital diplomacy, known as "twiplomacy," enables political leaders and institutions to convey foreign policy messages via the X platform, thereby influencing both national and global public opinion (Ovalı, 2020; Strauß et.al., 2015). This platform has evolved into a strategic arena where states project their international identities and articulate their foreign policy orientations (Danziger & Schreiber, 2021; Shahin & Huang, 2019). Posts shared via X contribute to the discursive construction of foreign policy and provide a platform for leaders to legitimize their strategic choices (Adesina, 2017; Collins et.al., 2019). A growing body of literature has explored the scope of digital diplomacy by analyzing the rhetoric employed by state actors during times of crisis, their strategic narratives, and the representations of foreign policy across digital platforms (Glasscock, 2023; Wang et.al., 2021; Zappettini & Rezazadah, 2024). On the other hand, the X platform can be regarded not only as a digital tool for foreign policy communication but also as a unique site of observation that enables the tracing of discursive shifts in states' foreign policy orientations. In this sense, it provides a valuable empirical and theoretical ground for analyzing foreign policy practices and transformations (Huddleston et.al., 2022).

This section builds on the growing integration of data science into the field of international relations (Huddleston et.al., 2022; Podiotis, 2020) and is conducted to support the discourse and attitude analysis of political leaders examined in previous sections. Specifically, it aims to reveal the discursive reflections of Donald Trump's neo-mercantilist foreign policy approach, investigate the discursive markers that reflect France and Germany's SA-oriented security policies, and identify Poland's divergent stance from this general European trend through the analysis of X data. Since state actors' communication strategies on social media offer indirect yet meaningful insights into their foreign policy priorities, perceptions, and orientations, this analysis provides a valuable contribution that reinforces

Figure 1. Data Collection and Processing Workflow Illustrating the Analysis Process of Data Retrieved from the X Platform

Source: Created by the author.

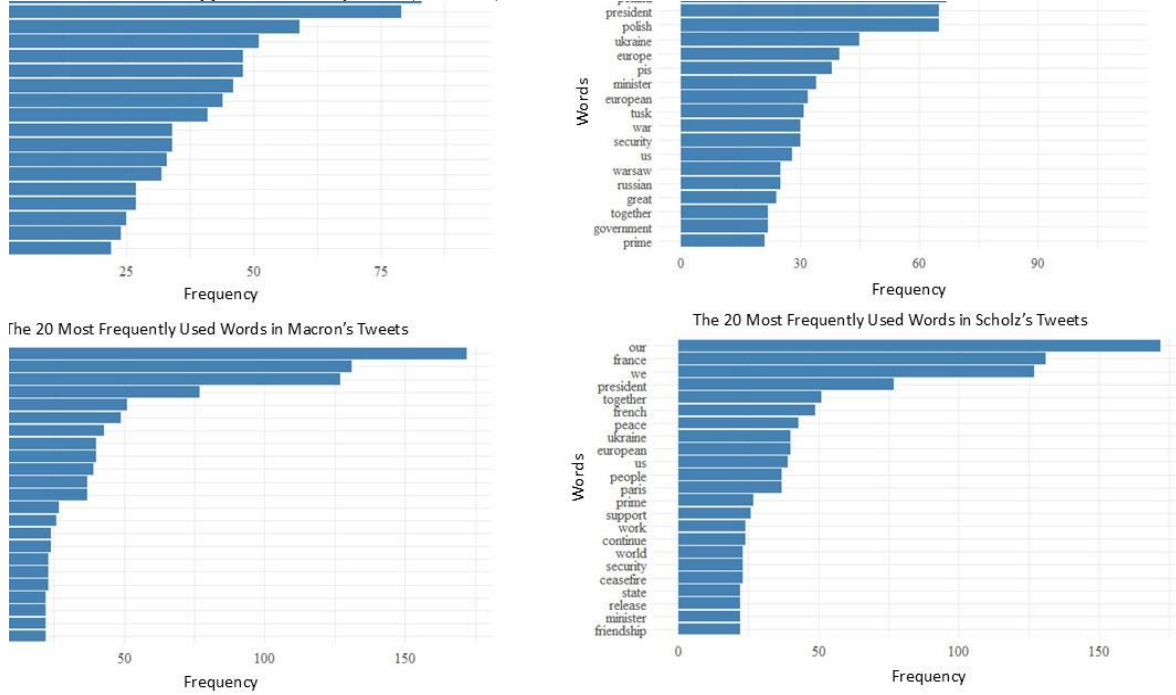both the theoretical and empirical discussions of the study.

In this study, a total of 1,098 tweets posted by national leaders on the X platform between 2022 and 2025, comprising 8,989 words, were analyzed. The data were collected using the Python programming language with the help of Selenium and BeautifulSoup libraries. Selenium is a browser automation tool that enables the scraping of interactive and dynamic content, while BeautifulSoup is used to parse HTML and XML content and convert it into meaningful data (Virtanen, 2023; Wendt & Henriksson, 2020). When used together, these tools offer an effective method for scraping both static and dynamic web data. Similar approaches have been adopted in the literature; for instance, Jang et al. (2019) collected fake news data from Twitter, while Pathinayake et al. (2024) used Selenium to analyze public sentiment on the X platform regarding the Russia–Ukraine war. In this context, the study adopts a methodologically consistent approach with existing practices for scraping and analyzing discursive data related to digital diplomacy.

Following the completion of the data collection process, the tweet data were transferred into the RStudio environment for further analysis. Prior to analysis, the texts underwent standard preprocessing steps, including lowercasing, removal of punctuation marks, and elimination of stopwords. Subsequently, word frequency analyses were conducted for each leader's

tweets. Throughout the analysis, commonly used packages such as "tm" (text mining), "tidytext" (text processing compatible with the tidyverse framework), "dplyr" (data manipulation), and "ggplot2" (visualization) were employed. The overall workflow of the data processing and analysis is illustrated in Figure 1.

The findings that emerged during the analysis process provided a meaningful foundation for identifying the discursive patterns of the respective leaders. Through the extracted word frequencies, the key themes emphasized by the leaders, such as foreign policy, security, and cooperation, were systematically revealed. To enhance the interpretability of the results, the top 20 most frequent words were visualized using bar charts, clearly highlighting the discursive differences among the leaders. The effectiveness of such text mining-based content analysis in social media research has been emphasized in prior studies. For instance, Al-Rawi et al. (2021) employed a similar approach to analyze social media contents and identify digital discourse patterns using text mining techniques. Therefore, the analytical process adopted in this study demonstrates both methodological consistency and alignment with the existing literature.

In this study, the text mining analysis conducted on X data to understand the foreign policy discourse of leaders sheds light on the strategic orientations of Trump, Tusk, Macron, and Scholz by examining the most prominent terms used

Figure 2. Frequency Analysis Based on Tweets Collected from the Leaders

The 20 Most Frequently Used Words in Macron's Tweets

The 20 Most Frequently Used Words in Scholz's Tweets

in their tweets. The findings reveal that the vocabulary employed by these leaders reflects not only their discursive preferences but also their ideological and strategic inclinations. Among the most frequently recurring terms in Trump's tweets, such as "great," "honor," "hero," "vote," "team," and "president", one can observe that X is used not only as a tool for domestic political legitimacy but also to construct a nationalist discourse that glorifies American values. These keywords reflect Trump's neo-mercantilist posture in foreign policy, his "America First" doctrine, and his populist approach aimed at appealing to his political base.
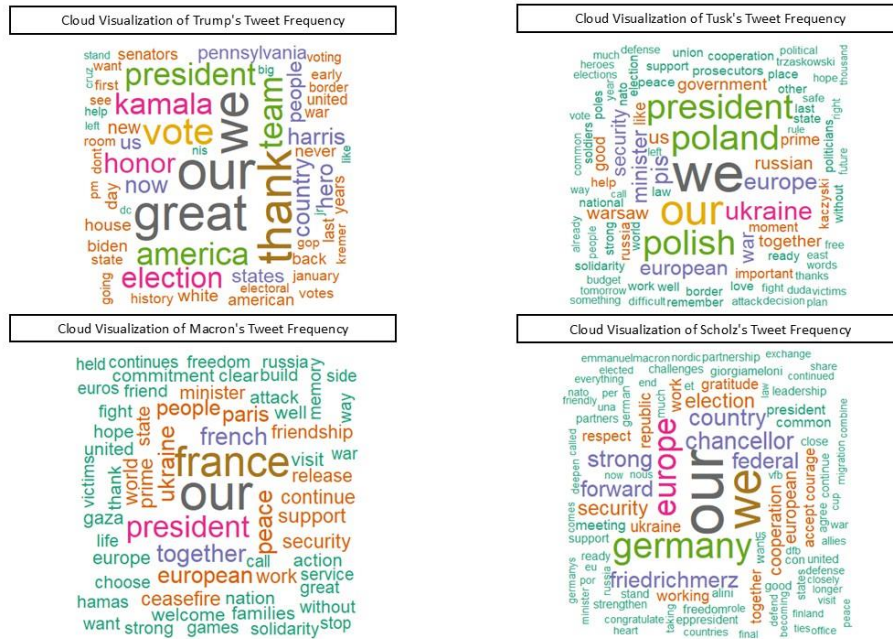
In contrast, the prominence of terms such as "together," "peace," "support," "work," and "security" in Macron's tweets indicates France's emphasis on multilateralism, shared European values, and institutional solidarity under the EU framework. Similarly, Scholz's tweets, featuring keywords like "together," "European," "support," "continue," and "ceasefire", reflect a comparable orientation. The foreign policy discourses of both leaders are shaped by principles of a common European security strategy, peaceful conflict resolution, and collective diplomacy, aligning closely with the broader objective of SA. Structurally, Scholz's rhetoric resembles that of Macron, and it becomes evident that both leaders perceive foreign policy not merely as a matter of national interest but as an integral component of a collective European identity.

On the other hand, the frequent appearance of terms such as "war," "Russian," "we," "our,"

"border," "NATO," and "security" in Tusk's tweets reflects Poland's foreign policy priorities centered on security. These terms indicate that Tusk's foreign policy discourse places a stronger emphasis on threat perception, leaning towards a more militarized and assertive rhetoric. Although collective identity markers like "we" and "our" are present, Tusk's approach diverges from the normative-constructivist tone of Macron and Scholz, instead adopting a more securitized, occasionally Atlanticist, and national security-oriented stance. This analysis confirms the study's core assumption that foreign policy discourses within the EU should be examined through the lens of differentiated integration, and it highlights that leaders' individual uses of X are strongly tied to their respective national foreign policy orientations.

Ultimately, this section demonstrates that the neo-mercantilist foreign policy approach of the Trump era not only revived the debate on SA within the EU but also revealed discursive divergences in how member states responded to this shift. Foundational and agenda-setting countries such as Germany and France developed discourses aligned with SA, grounded in multilateralism and a Europe-centered understanding of security, as a reaction to the destabilizing posture of the Trump administration in the international system. In contrast, Poland constructed a more national and security-oriented narrative, partially distancing itself from this trend. This indicates that even around a common objective like SA, discursive, structural, and historical differences significantly shape the trajectory of European

Figure 3. Word Cloud Visualization of the Frequency
Analysis Based on Tweets Collected from the Leaders

integration, preventing it from proceeding in a simultaneous, homogeneous, and fully inclusive manner. Accordingly, the study's findings, informed by digital diplomacy data, suggest that despite shared concerns, the adoption of different strategic roadmaps among member states points toward a more asymmetric and differentiated future for EU foreign policy integration.

Conclusion

This study conceptualizes Donald Trump's foreign policy not merely as a classical neo-mercantilist orientation, but as a strategic intervention shaped by an aggressive and transformative neo-mercantilist doctrine. Trump's approach combined economic protectionism with assertive diplomatic communication strategies, aiming not only to reorder the international system but to redefine it according to the primacy of U.S. national interests. In contrast to Habermas's theory of communicative action, this strategy can be understood as a form of strategic action, one that seeks not mutual understanding or rational discourse among actors, but rather the imposition of interests and discursive dominance. In this context, Trump instrumentalized diplomatic communication, distancing it from normative consensus-building. His actions, such as withdrawing from multilateral institutions, reevaluating alliance structures based on cost-benefit calculations, and undermining global normative frameworks, constituted an aggressive challenge to the foundational norms of the liberal international order. Amid growing distrust in NATO, Trump's "America First" approach has reframed SA as a vital security reflex rather than

a symbolic ambition. His rhetoric, portraying alliances as outdated and transactional, undermined transatlantic trust—especially in Berlin and Paris—prompting the EU to prioritize building its own defense capacity. As a result, SA became a strategic imperative guiding institutional reforms. Beyond military autonomy, the shift expanded to include digital, energy, and supply chain independence. Ultimately, SA evolved into a multidimensional requirement for the EU to sustain its global presence and normative power in an increasingly uncertain international system.

The parallels drawn between the 1990s and the Trump era highlight the EU's capacity to transform external shocks into structural opportunities. Following the end of the Cold War, the reduction of U.S. military engagement in Europe created a moment for the EU to take its first significant steps toward institutionalization in the field of security, most notably with the Maastricht Treaty laying the groundwork for political integration. Similarly, the Trump administration's harsh criticisms of NATO and its challenge to traditional assumptions of transatlantic solidarity triggered reflexes within the EU to reduce strategic dependence on the U.S. In both periods, the EU exhibited similar tendencies under differing contextual circumstances, with the need to enhance not only normative but also institutional and operational capacities in security becoming increasingly evident. Trump's cost-benefit-based approach to foreign policy, his portrayal of NATO as a financial burden rather than an ideological alliance, and his "America First" rhetoric

strengthened the view among European capitals that the continent's security architecture needed to be reconstructed on its own terms. This led to a shift in the EU's positioning—from being solely a value-based normative power to becoming a more comprehensive actor supported by strategic agency and hard power instruments. In this context, both the geopolitical vacuum of the 1990s and the post-2016 atmosphere of transatlantic distrust served as threshold moments during which steps in EU security and defense gained momentum. In each case, Europe converted moments of crisis into opportunities for deepened integration, deploying new institutional tools and reconfiguring the discourse of SA according to the prevailing conditions.

Although the EU's pursuit of SA gained momentum during the Trump era, structural and normative divergences have prevented its transformation into a common defense architecture. While France promotes SA through selective, NATO independent structures, Germany emphasizes inclusivity and transatlantic balance. Eastern European states, prioritizing U.S. security guarantees, remain cautious toward Europe-centered defense initiatives. Discourse analysis reveals that Macron and Scholz frequently highlight collective terms like "together," "peace," and "support," whereas Tusk emphasizes more security-driven language such as "war," "NATO," and "Russian." These variations underline how structural and discursive mismatches limit supranational defense integration. In conclusion, this study focuses on analyzing the impact of Donald Trump's aggressive neo-mercantilist foreign policy on transatlantic relations through the lens of strategic action and the EU's pursuit of SA. Based on the findings of the empirical discourse analysis, it is evident that the Trump administration's confrontational stance toward multilateral institutions accelerated the orientation toward SA in Europe; however, normative, strategic, and political divergences within the EU continue to hinder the transformation of this orientation into a supranational defense architecture.

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