

The Dynamics of Security Issues in the European Region: A Case Study of the Formation of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Date received: 27 January 2026 Revision date: 30 June 2026 Date published: 12 August 2026 Keywords <i>PESCO</i>; <i>European security governance</i>; <i>Regional Security Complex Theory</i>; <i>amity</i>; <i>enmity</i>; <i>NATO</i> Correspondence Email: agung.permadi@budiluhur.ac.id *Corresponding author	European security has transitioned from military-centric strategies to strategies based on multidimensional threats including migration, cyber-attacks, hybrid warfare, and regional conflicts. This change indicates the transformation of the EU strategy regarding the identification and addressing of security challenges, affecting European strategic autonomy and the EU-NATO partnership. A significant part of these changes is the creation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2017, with EU member states pledging deeper military collaboration and creating joint capabilities with increased military spending. This study examines: what was the impact of the amity in Europe on the uneven collective response of the EU to the establishment of PESCO in 2017? Through the application of qualitative comparative case study methodology and Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory, and focusing on the concept of amity, the author aims to analyze the divide and cooperation among European states. The results show that the creation of PESCO was an institutional response to the 2014 Crimean crisis and the Russian aggression, along with the strong amity of the twenty-five founding signatories, while Denmark, Malta, and the UK remained outside of the initiative for constitutional, historical, and structural reasons, respectively, including Brexit. This demonstrates the limits of amity as a driver of a binding institutional commitment. It was shown that PESCO is a sincere but uneven response to regional security challenges and that NATO is still the predominant channel of European security.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2010s, Europe has witnessed a significant shifting of security challenges of a more complex, irregular nature that cannot be accounted for as simply as challenges of conventional military responses. Some examples have included unique migrations spawned by conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa and, specifically, the Syrian civil war and collapse of the Libyan state (Sadrić, 2019). Europe was subsequently flooded by refugees, taxing an already burnt-out European Union. This challenge created disunity among Burden sharing members, and fueled anti-immigration sentiment, even increasing nationalism (Larémont et al., 2020).

With the 2014 Crimea invasion, Russia changed the game in Europe. This move was considered to be an illegal breach of international law and a threat to regional security, most notably to the Baltic states and the Eastern European states that had/have a conflictual relationship with Russia. It raised fears of further acts of Russian aggression and caused the European Union and

NATO to strengthen their collaboration and move their forces closer to Russia (Özdamar, 2010). It emphasized to the EU the changing nature of threats and the need to update their defense capabilities.

Internally, Brexit added more political and security instability in the region. The UK is one of the strongest military powers in Europe and an important player in security in Europe and beyond (Cladi, 2023). With its departure, a gap was created which the EU has had to fill as best as it can, largely without British and NATO support, as it used to. Criticism of NATO has increased as well, whether the alliance is able to respond to challenges that do not fall within its scope, such as cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and transnational terrorism (Coffey, 2013), etc. The UK withdrawal combined with the aforementioned criticism incited the EU to create its own defense structures. PESCO, launched in 2017, was one of the first realizations of this commitment (Pohanka & Novotný, 2021).

The integration of EU security and defense policy has been a long process. The foundations for this integration were created with the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Article 42 (6) and Protocol 10 established the legal basis. Yet the will for this remained lacking for a long time. Some member states were concerned that an independent defense policy would weaken the role of NATO. In the end, the lack of political will was the main reason for the Defense Treaty's slow introduction.

PESCO aims at improving the cooperation of European Union (EU) member states by creating shared defense strategies (Pohanka & Novotný, 2021) and defense budgets, investment in shared defense technology and industries, and defense force collaboration. Participating countries willingly agree to adjust defense spending and use their military assets for joint defense projects (Shea, 2020). PESCO gives the EU the ability to respond to crises on its own (Simón, 2012). It is also part of the CSDP and other crisis management strategies (Moolakkattu, 2010). Intergovernmental cooperation for intelligence, counterterrorism, and cybersecurity (Bazarkina, 2022; Shea, 2016) can take place in PESCO.

After 2016, the Brexit referendum and the Crimea annexation broke the European security order and created opportunities for new partnerships. Brexit, on one hand, enabled the EU to deepen defense ties without accommodating the U.K.'s longstanding skepticism on European defense integration (Cladi, 2023). The threat from Russia on the other hand heightened the imperative for a swifter and more self-sufficient European security framework (Hananel, 2024). After months of intensive meetings among the EU members and institutions, 23 of them agreed to create PESCO by signing a joint notification on the 13th November 2017, two more states signed up later, making it 25. Launched by the European Council in December 2017, PESCO became a fundamental part of the European Defence Union.

While Brexit, NATO, and the Crimea situation all impacted the security environment of that time, they do not explain, by themselves, why states responded differently to these challenges; some states responded by deepening their commitment to collective defense, while others showed remarkable restraint. Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory is applicable here as it does not define regional security as an unwelcome response to threats; instead, it is security framed by the relationships of trust and rivalry between the states of a region, which Buzan calls amity and enmity. Seen this way, the establishment of PESCO cannot be interpreted as an immediate response to either Brexit or the Crimea situation; it must be assessed as part of the web of relationships through which European states have traditionally positioned themselves vis-à-vis one another and in relation to hypothetical external threats. This makes us rethink the amity relative to the European region; how

did it direct the European Union's collective, uneven, response to the establishment of PESCO in 2017?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study takes a qualitative approach and uses comparative case-study design. This approach is best suited to understanding outcomes across contexts (Yin, 2018), which is the case here when looking at the case of PESCO's formation in 2017. It is examined using Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), focusing on the concept of amity. Amity describes the relationships of cooperation and trust among the member states of a region. In the context of this study, amity will be analyzed in regard to its ability to bring a group of states into deep institutional cooperation and the constraints that exist due to legal, constitutional, or structural limits (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These constraints will be analyzed to explain the borders of cooperation that PESCO will be aligned against. This approach will allow PESCO to be assessed beyond its technical response to external threats as a construct of the European state's relational history.

Three data sources will be used for this analysis. The first source is document analysis. This will use official statements on foreign policy, speeches by important representatives, and government statements on defense and security. A recognized method for tracking the way different states defend and justify their attitudes over time will be used (Bowen, 2009). The second source is the academic literature on PESCO and European regional security, largely based on publications such as *European Security* and the *Journal of Common Market Studies*. The third source is publication and press commentary by think tanks and international media, including the European Council on Foreign Relations, Politico, and others, and helps to show how contemporary policy analysts and the press interpreted these issues in real time.

There are two analytical approaches used on the materials. Content analysis is the first of the two. With this approach and using an appropriate method to systematically glean meaning from large bodies of text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), this approach aims to identify and analyze the statements and policy documentation for recurring themes within them. The next step, thematic analysis, uses the RSCT framework, and aims to analyze the good and bad relationships between European states in the context of PESCO (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These two steps are designed to move the analysis beyond what states said and into why they said it, aiming to place the observations regarding trust and rivalry within the focus of RSCT.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

PESCO as an Institutional Response within the EU's Security Architecture

After the Cold War, more attention was paid to non-military aspects of security, including the economy, the environment, and social issues (Amaritasari, 2017). The concept of comprehensive security has advanced to include the prevention of conflicts, as well as the promotion of sustainable development. The concept of national resilience is more comprehensive, as it deals with the challenges faced by a country in meeting its interests and in ensuring its survival (Siregar, 2014). Comprehensive national defense and security, which encompasses a country's entire capabilities, determines national security (Mardhani, 2020).

Additionally, more emphasis is placed on the multiple and interconnected facets of security and the integrated nature of security problems, necessitating a multi-sectoral and multi-level

government partnership, including civil society and private business. PESCO is an instrument of defense cooperation among EU member states established to respond to such challenges (Indrawan & Efriza, 2018).

Terrorism, along with transnational crimes including drug and human trafficking and cybercrime, emerged after the events of 9/11 as a global issue that has affected virtually every country (Meliala, 1994). Of particular concern are threats that extend beyond borders. Climate change threatens to upend entire nation states. The extreme weather, rising sea levels, and unrelenting natural disasters can easily undermine the stability of a nation's social, economic, and political orders. The same can be said of land and territorial disputes as a source of conflict. There is an increasing correlation between global, regional, and local issues. These developments demonstrate that the threats once considered most pressing are increasingly less orthodox, and more likely to manifest in the convergence of many threats (Hidayanto et al., 2020). Consequently, the international community has heightened cooperation across the full spectrum of its resources, from diplomacy to law enforcement and intelligence to defense, to confront these threats.

Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) is an element of the EU's security and defense policy tool that offers member states the opportunity to work together on various cooperation initiatives in the security and defense domain. Starting in 2007, with the signing of the Lisbon Treaty, PESCO offered a basis for forming international teams to undertake specific tasks to reinforce the military capabilities of EU member states with the purpose of the CSDP (Pohanka & Novotný, 2021). PESCO works toward the building and improving of EU security systems responding to the challenges of the current political and security architecture of the world. It offers an opportunity to those EU member states that are politically ready and willing to enhance cooperation on defense and security to do so. PESCO member states undertake joint commitments to build military capabilities, to enhance the interoperability of their armed forces and to implement joint defense projects. The core objectives of PESCO are to improve the EU's defense capabilities and to enhance cooperation and improve the efficiency of defense budget spending among member states.

As the main avenue for collaboration on defense projects among EU member states since its establishment in 2017, PESCO strengthens member states' determination to undertake the most complex missions (Shiffrinson, 2020). PESCO provides more opportunities for member states to deepen their defense collaboration. It provides a framework for member states to build joint military capacities, make their forces more capable of working with one another, and engage in activities to improve their defense sectors. Different from NATO, PESCO is not a substitute for the alliance, and is thus not an effort to create a competing or rival alliance. PESCO is an extension to NATO, strengthening EU defense in a way that allows member states to take more responsibility for their own security. In the current situation of heightened global competition for power, it is more necessary than ever for the EU to deepen its defense collaboration.

PESCO was instituted to enhance Europe's autonomous capabilities in security and defense. Such capabilities as those of the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Malta were not included in PESCO enforcement for various reasons ranging from neutrality to issues with loss of sovereignty. An additional detail that needs mentioning is that the founding of PESCO has been an indirect response to criticism aimed at NATO's sustainability, especially those coming from political figures like Donald Trump.

Regional Security Complex Theory to the Case of PESCO

Before the 20th century, there was a conventional and mainly militaristic notion of security in Europe. This involved considerations of lands, arms, and alliances (Wæver, 1998). The understanding of security in Europe, particularly after World War I and World War II, was influenced by the upheaval and division of Europe during the Cold War. From 1991, European security thoughts and imaginings began to change (Morgan, 2012). Security stopped being solely the domain of the military. Now security included disruption of information, climate change, energy problems, mass migration, and transnational terrorism (Amaritasari, 2017). In this context, the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) built by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver served as a fundamental building block for analyzing modern-day security dynamics. Buzan, in particular, developed the notion of security from the protection of the military to human protection. He stressed how the mutual relations of states inside a region create patterns of friendship and hostility, which in turn determine the nature of security integration.

The main theoretical framework that we will use to analyze the process of the establishment of PESCO is the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), originated by Barry Buzan and developed with Ole Wæver in its latest version (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). RSCT holds that components of the international system cannot be meaningfully analyzed in terms of security by focusing on the actions of individual countries. Instead, it must be analyzed by the regional systems of security, and the interactions of actors in these regional systems, that integrate a regional security complex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This regional security system is a response to single, more serious and systemic security challenges that are present and dominant within a given region, and are more widespread than among the security challenges that exist between regional systems (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). PESCO offers an institutional answer to the Ukraine crisis, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, international terrorism, and the migrant crisis in Europe. All these phenomena reflect the shortcomings of unilateral approaches. (Rutigliano, 2023). The facts show that Europe is now a real regional security complex. Member states generally understand that their national security is interconnected with regional security and with the cooperation of the other member states.

RSCT also describes structures of security complexes through the concepts of friendship and animosity. Friendship is the positive relationship between states; animosity is the deep suspicion and/or hostility. (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In the case of PESCO, friendship is best described as the shared interests and the political unity of the 25 EU member states. These states perceive external threats and the geopolitics of the region as requiring a collective response of trust and collaboration, characteristic of an amity structure.

This section will address how RSCT applies to the European security situation that birthed PESCO, having articulated the fundamental tenets of RSCT. Based on Buzan and Wæver, the threats that security collectives face internally are more connected than the threats that inter-regional security collectives face. Consequently, states that comprise such a security complex read one another's security decisions as pertaining to them (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In the case of Europe, it implies that PESCO has to do not only with the EU's internal institutional mechanisms; it should be seen as a security framework born out of the security complex of the early to mid-2010s in which a number of European states engaged. For a significant part of this period, a number of European states viewed Russia's annexation of Crimea with concern (Rutigliano, 2023).

This regional interconnectedness enables the notions of amity and enmity to be employed more meaningfully. The most recent empirical work applying RSCT to the post-2022 European security environment, has demonstrated that, since the launch of the Russia-EU/NATO conflict, EU and NATO member states' amity has strengthened around the shared understanding of the Russian

threat, and enmity has also hardened towards Russia and its allies (Andžāns, 2023). Within the European complex, the twenty-five states that joined PESCO display amity as well. They share a similar understanding of the Russian threat and are prepared to do so through commitment to bind defense cooperation. Using RSCT, it is expected that in the same regional complex, not all states share the same intensity of threat perceptions, and this is where the internal variation between states and their responses to PESCO becomes relevant and theoretically significant, as it clearly demonstrates the pattern of amity and not a regional consensus (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Using RSCT in this way goes beyond providing a backdrop vocabulary to the study and structures the main analysis. Rather than assuming the threat perceptions across the EU are the same, RSCT suggests that analysis should focus on the regional distribution of amity and enmity and the degree to which they explain the PESCO and member states' responses to it.

Patterns of Amity: The Twenty-Five Signatory States

In accordance with Buzan and Wæver, Amity describes the building of relationships based on confidence, concord, and the ability to adjust. In the context of PESCO, Amity refers to the political concord and interests of the 25 EU nations who signed the declaration in 2017. These nations identified a challenging environment of Russian assertiveness and geopolitical instability and determined a response of trust and coordination was warranted. The nations agreed to translate this coordination into firm commitments of defense spending, joint capability development, and the attainment of mutually compatible levels of operability. According to RSCT, this pattern of Amity is not a mere byproduct of the shared membership of the EU, but rather a shared perception of the degree of threat from Russia and its rising assertiveness that has further integrated these nations beyond what would be expected from their institutional membership.

Whereas amity may explain the cohesion of the twenty-five signatories, the examples of Denmark, Malta and the UK demonstrate the points where this amity ceases to be viable. None of the three is in a relationship of enmity to the PESCO coalition; amity is a reasonable description for each of them. In the absence of threats, none of these examples illustrates a commitment to a binding institutional creation.

Denmark failed to join PESCO due to the Danish voters' 1992 rejection of the Maastricht Treaty. A compromise for the successful voting the following year devised a Danish defense opt-out, allowing Denmark not to participate in defense-related decisions and actions of the EU. Because of this, Denmark was not involved in the defense structures of the CSDP for nearly 30 years. Denmark has been a founding member of NATO and a member of NORDEFCO. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 lead Denmark to change its view of defense neutrality. Denmark's leaders described the return of war on the continent as a "Zeitenwende." The voters of Denmark also changed their view of defense neutrality and in a referendum in June 2022, a majority of voters chose to eliminate the defense opt-out. In May 2023, Denmark joined the European Defense Agency and PESCO with the approval of 26 member states. The process Denmark went through illustrates that a regional security complex can change the position of a state. What began as constitutional distance was reclassified as amity due to a significant external threat (Paulissen et al., 2025).

Malta's situation is unique. Neutrality is protected in its Constitution, tracing back to when the country declared neutrality during its independence. The provision for neutrality was included in the 1964 Constitution of Malta, as later amended (Constitute, 2016). Danish opt-out, on the other hand, was an exception to the EU treaty obligations, which was negotiated. During the Cold War, successive Maltese governments defended a policy of foreign neutrality, which also included a policy

of military neutrality (Galea, 2022; Government of Malta, 2022). However, this has not meant that Malta has withdrawn its participation completely in the European security system. Practically speaking, Malta has continued participating in civilian missions of the CSDP and focuses on the management of migration from the Mediterranean and cooperation with North Africa in the area of security (Emad, 2024). In addition, it is worth noting that neutrality is evolving in public opinion. Surveys showed that a vast majority of the Maltese public supports deeper integration of the EU's military structure (Sansone, 2023; Cassar, 2024). Thus, Malta provides a good illustration of how this is avoidance of enmity rather than enmity itself. The PESCO is a good example of this. It shows that, for Malta, distance from PESCO is the result of a lack of exposure to the European security system's threat perceptions rather than dislike of the states that initiated it.

The UK missing from PESCO is different from Denmark and Malta because it is not about choosing to opt out. As a non-EU country after withdrawing from the EU, the UK became ineligible to join PESCO. Exclusion from PESCO is a structural case of Brexit, not voluntary opting out (Cladi, 2023). Before the UK's EU withdrawal was finalized, the UK government had already refused to participate in the proposed EU defense architectures, and in 2018, the government withdrew its support for an EU Defense Battle Group and Glad to have EU defense architectures rest under NATO (McTague & Herszenhorn, 2018). This further reinforced the UK government's preference for a structured NATO-centered arrangement, which is known as the option of "Atlanticism before European defense integration" (Mason, 2016; Gardiner, 2007). Since the UK left the EU, it has continued to engage the region for its security through other mechanisms outside PESCO. For example, the UK leads the Joint Expeditionary Force with Nordic and Baltic allies (Antinozzi, 2022), and a partner in defense cooperation with France under the Lancaster House Agreement. The UK's recent negotiations with the EU also touch on the creation of some modest post Brexit EU-UK security and defense partnerships (Commonwealth & Development Office, 2025; van Rij, 2025; Whitman, 2025). This illustrates that RSCT itself has a boundary case: the UK's exclusion from the PESCO that it established is not the same as the UK's exclusion from the regional security space of the EU, as it participates in EU defense architectures integrated by NATO and bilateral structures, while it maintains no formal defense commitment to the EU.

These three cases make it clear that the "unevenness" in Europe's overall response to PESCO can't be credited to a single factor. Denmark's case shows a temporary, but later reversible, legal exception created by negotiation. Malta's case illustrates a steadfast constitutional identity that exists alongside growing openness to cooperation. Finally, the case of the UK illustrates a permanent self-made restriction, stemming from Brexit. From the point of view of RSCT, the three cases show no hostility toward the amity coalition that formed around PESCO; instead, each shows a limit on the stretch of a state's relationship with the regional security complex that can be transformed into an institutional commitment at a given time.

Patterns of Amity: The Twenty-Five Signatory States

In comparison to other regions, Europe has one of the most complex regional security structures. The membership of many of the organizations which comprise the different layers overlap. The EU, through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (adopted in 1993) and the CSDP (initiated in 1999), institutionalizes the EU's internal and external security coordination, despite the fact that the EU does not have a standing military. NATO is still the most important organization for collective defense of the European countries, founded in 1949 with the principle that an attack on one member is considered to be an attack on all members. Since then, the organization has broadened the scope of its mission to include fighting non-traditional threats, like terrorism and cyber threats. NATO and the

EU have, for the most part, cooperative relationships; however, there are tensions which arise due to differences in how the organizations think about burden-sharing.

Some organizations focus on more particular areas. The Energy Community formed in 2005 and extends the EU's internal energy market to the Balkans, Black Sea, and Caucasus regions. In regard to stability and security, the Community integrates all aspects of regional energy within the continent. The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), the largest regional security organization in the world, offers a broad scope in the politico-military, economic-environmental, and human-rights dimensions and includes Russia and Central Asian countries among its members, making it an important actor in dialogue and prevention of conflicts. Neither the EU nor NATO have similar capacities. The European Defence Agency, formed in 2004, assists EU member states to develop their military capabilities and does so complementarily with the EU's endeavor to build strategic autonomy while it maintains its commitments with NATO. The overlapping mandates present a collective goal to confront multiple facets of security challenges, while also demonstrating a source of tension and fragmentation of strategy.

The challenges Europe currently faces in geopolitics are far from what could be considered typical military security concerns. The challenges posed by the 2015 migration peak placed pressure on European states' systems for managing the movement of people and caused divisions within the EU regarding solidarity and burden-shifting, which gave traction to populist and Eurosceptic views in a number of member states (Maldini & Takahashi, 2017; Handler, 2019). Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea highlighted traditional forms of territorial threats in Eastern Europe and posed a test case for both NATO and the EU regarding their ability to respond to conventional attacks (Makio & Fuccille, 2023; Hallams, 2009), as the Asia-centric ISIS posed new forms of transnational asymmetric threats including radicalization and digital/cyber threats, as well as energy and terrorism threats (Gunaratna, 2019).

Brexit added further pressure by removing a major military power and a P5 country from the EU's internal security architecture (Sigit, 2021). It has intensified the need for increased strategic autonomy and put a greater spotlight on the future of European defense cooperation. More broadly, ongoing political fragmentation among and within member states, especially on fiscal policies (North vs. South) and migration & values (East vs. West), have challenged collective decision-making. This is also coupled with the changing strategic landscape (e.g. the rise of China) and the uncertainty of the United States' long-term commitment. This has prompted the necessity for Europe to develop its own strategic role (Heinrich, 2021).

CONCLUSION

While the EU develops independent defense capabilities, the security situation in Europe with the Russia-Ukraine war and increasing tensions along NATO's eastern border underscores NATO's role as the main security provider on the continent (Dempsey, 2023). PESCO and other components of the CSDP framework and the European Defense Fund were not created to substitute NATO. They were designed to work in parallel to NATO, enhance EU interoperability and joint defense spending while most member states continue to prioritize the assurances of the Atlantic alliance for their core security needs. This is reflected in the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass, which seeks to improve the EU's architecture for collective security by 2030 and is a response to the so-called "re-emergence of war in Europe" (European Union External Action, 2024). Against this backdrop, the differential framings of the UK, Denmark, and Malta in the PESCO reflect the different constitutional and structural realities, especially Malta's neutrality, Denmark's pre-2022 opt-out, and

the UK's case post Brexit, on their commitments to EU regional security. These different framings do not suggest a rejection of EU security cooperation.

Notably, these positions are not static. As an example, Denmark lifted its opt-out following a 2022 referendum and joined PESCO as its 26th member in May 2023. This illustrates how Denmark's membership in a regional security complex can quickly change with the altering of threat perceptions, even as Denmark continues to hedge through NATO and the Nordic cooperation frameworks of NORDEFCO and the JEF. The UK and Malta have sustained their distance from PESCO while maintaining their engagement with European security in other ways (the UK through NATO and the Joint Expeditionary Force, as well as through the Lancaster House treaties), and Malta through CSDP civilian missions, the Mediterranean migration cooperation, and through its remaining obligations of the EU's mutual assistance clauses (TFEU Articles 42(7) and 222). These three cases demonstrate that the increasing European defense integration is more of a political issue than a capability issue, based on the ability of member states to adapt and build trust across different threat perceptions and different constitutional frameworks. In the future, it is likely that the EU and NATO defense architectures will remain parallel, with non-PESCO states continuing to engage with European security in other ways outside of full integration into the EU's collective defense.

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