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Differentiated Integration and the Common Security and Defence Policy: Two Case Studies – MED7/MED9 and the Visegrad Four

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The aim of this paper is to analyse the various forms of differentiated integration and to map the geopolitical intentions of two clearly identified groups of European Union Member States: those in Southern Europe (MED7 and MED9) and those in Central and Eastern Europe (the Visegrad Group), within the framework of permanent structured cooperation (PESCO). In the literature, differentiated integration is described in several ways. Terms such as core Europe, Europe à la carte, two-speed Europe or multi-speed Europe, enhanced cooperation, and variable geometry integration are commonly used. Although these terms are often treated as synonyms, these expressions refer to distinct forms of differentiated integration. This study focuses on two case studies of regional groupings within the EU. The central research question is how PESCO can facilitate differentiated integration in these subregional forms of cooperation and what types of differentiated integration emerge as a result. This paper does not assess the effectiveness of PESCO itself but instead examines statistical data concerning membership and leadership roles held by Member States. The research is based on official statements and publications relating to Member State collaboration, EU documents, and data published on the official PESCO website.

Key Words: European Union, differentiated integration, PESCO, Visegrad 4, MED7 and MED9

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important innovations introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon was the extension of differentiated integration to the field of

the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The Treaty established Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as a new, flexible instrument for enhanced cooperation, aimed at promoting interoperability, addressing capability shortfalls, and strengthening collaboration in the field of defence. Its objective is to enhance the defence capabilities available for European Union (EU) CSDP operations or for other international frameworks such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or the United Nations (UN).

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The aim of this paper is to analyse the different types of differentiated integration and to map the geopolitical intent of two clearly defined groups of EU Member States: those in Southern Europe (MED7 and MED9) and those in Eastern Central Europe (the Visegrad Group (V4)), in relation to their cooperation under the umbrella of PESCO. This study focuses on these two case studies of regional groupings within the EU. The research question is how PESCO can support differentiated integration in these two subregional formats of cooperation, and what forms of differentiated integration emerge as a result. Furthermore, this paper contributes to the existing academic discourse on differentiated integration by examining how PESCO reflects widely recognised models such as core Europe, multi-speed integration, and variable geometry, while also encompassing more regionally rooted forms of cooperation.

This study does not measure the effectiveness of PESCO projects; instead, it focuses on the collaboration network of participating member states, based on primary statistical data. The methodology adopts a mixed approach, examining regional collaboration patterns. The qualitative pilar of the research is grounded in official statements and publications concerning Member States' collaboration, EU documents, and data published on the official PESCO website. The quantitative pilar involves a network-oriented analysis, in which participants are positioned and evaluated based on their collaborative activities. In examining the network, all links between participants are treated with equal weight, without accounting for leadership roles or other asymmetries. Although PESCO formally designates lead nationsfor each project, the practical significance of leadership remains ambiguous and often limited in practice. In many cases, the role of 'lead nation' is primarily administrative or symbolic, rather than indicative of substantial agenda-setting power. Projects are typically co-developed through close consultation among participating states, with leadership roles rotating or

reflecting a willingness to assume organizational responsibility rather than political dominance. Moreover, the EU framework constrains the ability of lead states to unilaterally shape outcomes. As such reason, coding leadership roles as disproportionately influential risks overstating national asymmetries. By contrast, the binary network approach [209]
captures what is empirically observable and comparable across projects: the presence or absence of cooperative ties between Member States. So called intra-regional and inter-regional links are also calculated to demonstrate the strength of collaboration within a certain region or between different regions. In this context, the MED7, MED9 and V4 groupings are taken into consideration. Calculations were conducted using Microsoft Excel, while network visualisation was carried out using Gephi version 0.10.

Within the EU, the CSDP is the most recently established policy area. It has developed only since the late 1990s, largely in response to the devastating experience of the Yugoslav wars. The institutionalisation of the EU's own security and crisis management structures started with the integration of certain tasks and institutions from the Western European Union. Over the past two decades, alongside the development of crisis management structures and ongoing debates regarding the EU's relations with NATO, the idea of a European Security and Defence Union and the concept of European strategic autonomy have surfaced repeatedly. In the wake of the EU Global Strategy, various EU institutions and Member States have supported the acceleration and deepening of European security and defence cooperation. This cooperation has been further strengthened by the fact that 23 EU Member States are also members of NATO.

This process has been driven by a combination of external and internal factors, including the Arab Spring, Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the mass migration and refugee crisis triggered by turmoil and armed conflicts in the EU's southern neighbourhood, the deterioration of EU–US relations during Donald Trump's presidency, and the outcome of the Brexit referendum. the changing global environment, which is contributing to a new arms race, must also be acknowledged. Since 2017, the gradual realisation of deeper European defence cooperation has been built on at least six key pillars: the establishment of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the launch of PESCO, the introduction of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the creation of the European Defence Fund (EDF), the establishment of the

European Peace Facility (EPF) and the implementation of the Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC). In particular, Russia's aggression in Ukraine has significantly accelerated the process of integration across many policy areas (Molnár 2022; Anicetti 2024; Nizhnikau and Moshes 2024).

[210] Although, the V4 cooperation originated in 1991 and MED7/MED9 cooperation started in 2013, collaboration among EU Member States in the field of defence policy began much earlier – and initially outside the framework of EU treaties. Within the EU, there are several traditional clusters that promote differentiated defence cooperation, i.e. the Benelux countries (Meijer and Wyss 2018, Bund et al. 2017, 26), Nordefco and the Baltic countries (Nordefco n.d.; Estonian Ministry of Defence n.d.). Among these defence cooperation clusters, the Franco-German axis is arguably the most significant. Originally established by the Élysée Treaty of 1963, it was reinforced by the 2019 Aachen Treaty (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2019). Since 1991, France and Germany have also been cooperating with Poland within the framework of the Weimar Triangle. The idea of a broader Weimar Plus formation was proposed in 2012, with the support of the foreign and defence ministers of Spain and Italy (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2024). However, between 2015 and 2023 Poland played a more active role in the V4 cooperation. This is well illustrated by the fact that the last Weimar Triangle foreign ministers' meeting took place in 2016 (Auswärtiges Amt 2021), and the joint declaration issued in January 2020 did not even include a reference to foreign, security or defence policy (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2020b). Due to differing foreign policy goals and perceptions of the Russian threat in Europe, the V4 group has gradually lost its significance following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Zaborowski 2020).

In Southern Europe, Portugal signed a bilateral defence treaty with Spain in 2015 (Branco 2015). In this region, two countries – Cyprus and Malta – are not members of NATO. Malta follows a policy of neutrality and chose not to participate in PESCO. Cyprus is a unique case, as its territorial dispute with Turkey remains an obstacle to closer ties with NATO (Ellēnikē Dēmokratia 1960). Cooperation between Greece and Cyprus is strong. Since 2007, Cyprus has regularly participated in Greek-led EU battlegroups. The V4 is another regional group in which – despite differing perceptions of security – defence ministers began holding regular meetings in 1999, and defence cooperation was further strengthened in 2012 (Visegrad Group 2014b). Since 2016, the V4 coun-

tries have established three EU battlegroups. Cooperation within the Weimar Triangle was also revitalized under the new Polish government led by Donald Tusk.

In addition, it is important to mention the Central European Defence Cooperation, which was established in 2010 based on a Hungarian and Austrian proposal. The group, which includes Czechia, Croatia, Hungary, Austria, Slovenia and Slovakia (and Poland as an observer), is not investigated in this research due to overlaps with the two groups chosen for examination (Magyarország Kormánya 2020). [211]

A comparation of the Mediterranean and Visegrad cooperations demonstrates that differentiated integration in defence is not limited to core-periphery structures or core Europe but is also embodied in intraregional solidarity and interregional dependences. This analysis serves to strengthen the theoretical discourse by underlining the way defence cooperation produces hybrid form of differentiation.

REGIONAL GROUPS

The Visegrad Group

The Visegrad Group – named after a historical precedent[1] – was founded by three East-Central European countries on 15 February 1991. The main goals of the declaration were democratisation, the establishment of a modern free-market economy, and integration into the European political and economic system (Visegrad Group 1991; Koller and Arató 2025). Since the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Visegrad Group has comprised four countries. The V4 is not a formal international organisation. It has not been institutionalised. It has no governmental structures, legal personality, or rules governing decision-making procedures, and there is not even a permanent secretariat; however, the administrative structures of the rotating presidency function as an informal secretariat. The cooperation remains highly flexible and therefore provides a platform for regular meetings among various actors. Official prime ministerial summits are held annually, following the change in the presidency on 1 July.

[1] Visegrád is an old Hungarian historical town located in the Danube Bend 30 km northwest of Budapest. In 1335, Charles Robert, Hungarian king, John the Blind, the King of Bohemia, and Casimir III the Great, the King of Poland, signed an economic and commercial agreement against Vienna, thus establishing long-lasting economic cooperation in the Middle Ages.

The political stances of the V4 countries on certain EU policies have drawn criticism. For instance, the V4 countries responded to the migration and refugee crisis with a unified position that directly contradicted the approach of EU institutions and several other Member States re-
[212] garding European migration and asylum policy (Strnad 2018). According to Vladislav Strnad, the V4 adopted a sovereigntist approach, with national sovereignty becoming a central element of its identity (Strnad 2021). The group – particularly Poland and Hungary – opposed the Council of the European Union's decision to relocate refugees from two Mediterranean countries, Greece and Italy.

Security and defence cooperation was not among the original declared goals of the V4; instead, full integration into the EU and the need for regular consultation on security matters were stated as the V4's main objectives. NATO accession became a goal of the V4 in 1994 (although the founding charter was not officially amended), when NATO invited the East-Central European countries to join. In January 1994, the defence ministers agreed to broaden their cooperation, with the aims of strengthening transatlantic ties and achieving full NATO membership (NATO 1994).

A major milestone in the development of the V4 was reached in 1999, when Czechia, Poland and Hungary became members of NATO. Another significant step followed in 2004, when all four V4 countries became EU Member States and Slovakia joined NATO. With these goals achieved, it became necessary to revise the framework of cooperation and adapt the objectives to the new international environment and alliance memberships (EU, NATO). This new context also created additional opportunities for defence collaboration.

Since the 2012 Polish Presidency, defence cooperation has been a key priority. Although each presidency has sought to implement medium- and long-term defence policy programmes, cooperation between the participating countries has remained limited (Molnár and Szenes 2018). As a result of this process, a long-term vision for deepening defence cooperation, along with an action plan to support practical collaboration, was adopted in 2014 (Visegrad Group 2014a). The programme of the Slovak Presidency (2018/2019) was the first to explicitly identify PESCO as a priority and as an important instrument for strengthening European security and defence cooperation. During this presidency, the V4 countries initiated discussions on a potential joint project for upcoming waves of PESCO initiatives. The presidency

also emphasised the importance of mutual information exchange concerning the development of PESCO projects in which the V4 countries were either participants or observers. This included the 'Euro Artillery – Indirect Fire Support' project, led by Slovakia with the participation of Hungary, as well as a project on Military Mobility (Visegrad Group 2018). The Czech Presidency once again sought opportunities for a joint V4 PESCO project (Visegrad Group 2019). The Polish Presidency also highlighted the importance of PESCO projects. One of the priorities of the presidency was the development of common positions and the coordination of activities during the debate on the PESCO strategic review. The V4 countries agreed to explore further opportunities for cooperation, 'for example by having all V4 countries participate in joint PESCO projects' (Visegrad Group 2020). The programme of the Hungarian Presidency for 2021/2022 included the fulfilment of commitments related to the successful implementation of PESCO projects (Visegrad Group 2021). [213]

It is worth noting that the Slovak Presidency for 2022/2023, and the Czech Presidency for 2023/2024 did not mention the implementation of PESCO projects. Instead, they emphasised the importance of opportunities 'to use EU and NATO initiatives that support research, development and joint procurement of measures proposed by the European Commission to address the Defence Investment Gaps' (Visegrad Group 2022, 4) and 'for cooperation in the modernisation of the armed forces of the V4 countries, including within NATO and EU initiatives aimed at joint research, capability development and procurement' (Visegrad Group 2023, 8)

According to data form 2024, the V4 countries are involved in several PESCO projects: Poland is engaged in 13, Hungary in 11, Czechia in 7 and Slovakia in 3 in ongoing projects. Each V4 country has coordinated or is coordinating one project (Consilium 2021).

MED7/MED9

The MED7/MED9 is also an informal group of EU Member States. Initially, it was composed of seven Southern European countries: Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Malta and Portugal. Croatia and Slovenia joined the group in 2021. The cooperation, often referred to as 'Club Med' was established in Brussels in 2013 to provide a forum for consultation and coordination on positions regarding issues of shared concern and common interest. The MED7/MED9 is not a formal inter-

national organisation and has not been institutionalised. It should be emphasised that the seven Southern European countries represent approximately 40% of the EU population and 40% of its economy. Half of the EU's coastline is also located in the Mediterranean region (South
[214] EU Summit n.d.). Although Portugal does not have a Mediterranean coastline and therefore cannot strictly be classified as a Mediterranean country, it plays a highly active role in the cooperation. Portugal shares geographical, political and economic commonalities with the Mediterranean region. Perhaps due to specific historical circumstances, Croatia and Slovenia were not originally part of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, and Croatia became a Member State in 2013. In 2021, both countries joined the group and attended their first summit in Athens in September of that year – marking the inaugural meeting of the MED9 group. Mediterranean identity plays an important role in both countries. This is evidenced by the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI University) in Slovenia and the appointment of a Croatian politician as the first Commissioner for the Mediterranean within the European Commission for the 2024–2029 term.

The first meeting of MED7 ministers for foreign affairs took place in Alicante, Spain, in 2014. The permanent representatives of the MED7/MED9 countries meet regularly in Brussels, and ambassadors accredited in Portugal have held regular meetings with the Portuguese Secretary of State for European Affairs in Lisbon. Since then, Club Med has engaged in frequent consultations prior to various council meetings in Brussels (Petrides 2016, 11).

The group gained momentum in 2016 during discussions on how to respond to the refugee and migration crises. A turning point was the organisation of the first MED7 Summit in Athens in September 2016, where the Heads of State and Government reached a common position on issues such as migration, Brexit and the future of the EU. The first summit concluded with a declaration in which MED7 leaders affirmed their 'strong commitment to European unity' and to the European 'values of freedom, democracy and rule of law, as well as tolerance and solidarity' (South EU Summit 2016).

The consolidation of the MED7 as a regional group was reinforced by the regular organisation of summits. The second summit was held in 2017 in Lisbon. The declarations adopted in Lisbon and Madrid that year did not explicitly mention PESCO as a priority but reaffirmed the

countries' commitment to fully implementing the European Council conclusions of 15 December 2016 on defence, aimed at enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy (South EU Summit 2017a; 2017b). The 2018 declaration focused more on issues relating to migration policy and economic growth (South EU Summit 2018). Since then, MED7 leaders have [215]
continued to use these summits to coordinate their positions ahead of EU-level meetings in Brussels (Euronews 2018). The MED7 summits have also come to be referred to as 'the South EU Summits.'

The declaration that first mentioned PESCO was adopted in 2019 in Nicosia. It emphasised the importance of its successful implementation (South EU Summit 2019a). The Valletta Declaration, also in 2019, welcomed 'progress to bolster European defence, with a view to enhancing the EU capacity to be a security provider, its strategic autonomy and its ability to cooperate with UN, NATO and other partners.' MED7 leaders acknowledged the importance of EU security and defence initiatives (South EU Summit 2019b). In 2020, the Ajaccio Declaration focused on the conflict with Turkey, security challenges in Libya, and the management of the migration crisis (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2020a). In the 2021 Athens Declaration, the 2022 Alicante Declaration, and the 2023 Valletta Declaration PESCO and EU defence are not explicitly mentioned, only references to European strategic autonomy and open strategic autonomy appear (Kypriakē Dēmokratia 2021; República Portuguesa 2022; Élysée 2023)

It should be noted that three members of the MED7/MED9 – Spain, France, and Italy – are among the EU's so-called 'Big Four' countries. Alongside Germany, they are regarded as Europe's 'defence frontrunners' (Blockmans 2021). In 2024, these countries were involved in most PESCO projects: France in 49, Italy in 34, and Spain in 30. In terms of leadership, France coordinated 15 projects, Italy 13, and Spain 5. It is also worth noting that even medium-sized MED9 states play a significant role in PESCO: Greece participates in 18 projects and coordinates 6, while Portugal is involved in 17 and coordinates 3. Smaller countries are also engaged Cyprus participates in 8 projects, Croatia in 7, and Slovenia in 7.

THEORETICAL AND LEGAL BACKGROUND

The Treaty of Lisbon introduced a new legal mechanism for differentiated integration in the field of the CSDP, which forms an integral part of CFSP, namely PESCO. According to Article 42(6) of the Treaty

on European Union (Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union 2025), Member States with greater military capabilities that meet higher standards may establish PESCO. This type of cooperation provides a framework for enhanced integration and various forms
[216] of differentiated cooperation within the EU.

According to a report by the Committee on Constitutional Affairs in the European Parliament, differentiated integration takes several forms: opt-outs, enhanced cooperation initiatives, PESCO, and intergovernmental formations outside the EU treaty framework (such as the European Organisation for Nuclear Research and the European Space Agency). Differentiation is seen as a flexible mechanism that allows a subset of Member States to proceed with deeper integration in specific policy areas, helping to bridge the gap between differing political positions across the EU. Discussions on differentiated integration began in the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1990s during debates on the creation of the euro area. Although this model of integration is now well established, a fundamental question remains unanswered: how is it possible to ensure a balance between finding flexible solutions and maintaining the EU's unity (European Parliament 2018) The field of defence has long been an area marked by divergent political perspectives among Member States. The creation and launch of CSDP missions and operations, as well as the à la carte approach to participation in capability development projects under the European Defence Agency, have all been shaped by differentiation. Consequently, it has been considered a pragmatic solution making it possible for the EU to move ahead in the field of defence (Törő 2014, 66).

There has been a substantial body of academic literature on the topic of differentiated integration (De Neve 2007; Von Ondarza 2013; Blockmans 2017; Howorth 2019; Siddi et al. 2022; Pirozzi and Bonomi 2022). The threefold classification proposed by Alexander Stubb in 1996 is frequently cited in the literature. He distinguishes between different forms of differentiated integration based on time, space, and matter. Stubb identifies three types: (1) temporal differentiation (e.g. the concept of a two- or multi-speed Europe), (2) territorial differentiation (e.g. the concept of a core Europe or a Europe of concentric circles or variable geometry), and (3) sectoral differentiation (e.g. the concept of Europe à la carte) (Stubb 1996). The report of the European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs employs a very similar categorisation, distinguishing between time differentiation, or a multi-speed

Europe, where the objectives are shared but the pace of implementation varies; manners differentiation, or Europe à la carte; and space differentiation, commonly referred to as 'variable geometry' (European Parliament 2018). According to Blockmans, there is an issue with such classifications, as the boundaries between these categories are often [217]
rather ambiguous (Blockmans 2014). Although the terms used above (e.g. 'multi-speed Europe' and 'Europe à la carte') are sometimes treated as interchangeable, they in fact refer to distinct forms of differentiated integration.

Within the framework of variable geometry, closer cooperation remains permanently out of reach for the countries remaining outside the cooperation, potentially leading to a lasting division among groups of Member States (Koller 2012; Koller 2019, 57). Nicole Koenig has emphasised that variable geometry presumes the permanence of differentiation and, as such, does not contribute to the realisation of an 'ever closer Union' (Koenig 2015). Csaba Törő has explored the significance of PESCO as an institutionalised mechanism for differentiation in defence policy. According to Törő, PESCO serves as a standing platform to accommodate diverse aspirations and capabilities of the Member States (Törő 2014). However, Blockmans argues that PESCO has not supported more sophisticated theories of multi-layered differentiation (Blockmans 2021).

In 2016, the EU global strategy proposed the need to make 'full use of the Lisbon Treaty's potential' (European External Action Service 2016). Following a decision by the Member States in December 2017, the Council of the European Union resolved by qualified majority to launch PESCO, with the participation of 25 countries. Denmark, Malta, and the United Kingdom opted not to participate (Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315, 57). As a consequence of the Brexit referendum, the United Kingdom left the EU on 31 January 2020. In response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and following a successful referendum, Denmark took the decision to join the CSDP, and in 2023, the Council confirmed Denmark's participation in PESCO.

Following the five waves of decisions in 2017, 2018, 2019 2021, and 2023, there are currently 66 active PESCO projects. Due to duplication of existing structures and processes, the EU Training Mission Competence Centre project was closed in 2020 (PESCO n.d.). By 2024, six projects have already been closed. PESCO has developed a two-tier governance system. On the one hand, common rules apply across the

initiative; on the other hand, the participating Member States determine the specifics of each individual project. The possibility for PESCO projects to receive additional funding from the EDF contributes to the sustainability of cooperation (Molnár and Szabolcs 2020). However,
[218] the success of PESCO initiatives depends primarily on the political will of the participating Member States (Biscop 2020a). The EU has so far launched several initiatives aimed at strengthening European defence capabilities and strategic autonomy. Nonetheless, in terms of both scale and ambition, none of these developments has fulfilled the initial high expectations. In the academic literature, there are doubts regarding the effectiveness of PESCO (Biscop 2020b; Bonvicini 2020). Given the gap between the initial high expectations and the outcomes achieved thus far, the implementation of PESCO has attracted criticism (Blockmans and Macchiarini Crosson 2019).

According to the Council's classification, PESCO projects are divided by operational domain and principal tasks. These include projects on Air Forces and Systems; Space; Cyberspace and C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance); Maritime Security; Land Forces, Formations and Systems; Training and Facilities; Maritime; Land and Formations, Systems; Enabling and Joint; Air Systems; Cyber and C4ISR; and Space.

PERMANENT STRUCTURED COOPERATION PROJECTS

Air Forces and Systems

Twelve projects fall under the category of air forces and systems, ten of which are led by Mediterranean countries. France leads four, Italy four, and Spain two. All three Mediterranean countries also participate in the German-led Eurodrone project (Germany, for its part, leads three projects in total). Among the MED9 countries, Greece, Croatia, Portugal, and Slovenia take part in one project each. France is emerging as a 'pulling country,' with involvement in ten projects (compared to Italy's eight and Spain's seven). The role of the EU's Big Four Member States is particularly prominent in this domain. Spain, France and Germany also collaborate outside the EU framework (e.g. in the development of the Future Combat Air System) (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2020, 74). France and Italy also work jointly with the United Kingdom on air defence system modernisation through the Aster programme (Defence Aerospace 2016). The Mediterranean region is home to several major companies in the air defence sector, including Dassault (France), Leonardo (Italy), and Indra (Spain).

Among the V4 countries, Czechia and Hungary are each involved in three projects, although not the same ones. In 2014, the V4 countries agreed on a long-term vision action plan, which included air defence cooperation as a possible area for cross-border collaboration based on bilateral agreements. However, this has not materialised within the framework of enhanced cooperation (Szenes 2016, 16). [219]

Space

In recent years, space has become a central focus of the EU's security and defence policy. In 2016, the European Commission published the Space Strategy for Europe (European Commission 2016). In 2023, the Commission and the High Representative published the first EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence. In 2019, a new Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space was established, and in 2024 the European Commission created the new role of Commissioner for Defence and Space. Four PESCO projects fall within the space domain. France leads two, with Germany and Italy each heading one. Compared to the Big Four, the role of other Mediterranean countries in this area is minimal. Only Spain and Portugal are involved in these newly launched projects focused on the defence of space assets. Spain participates in three projects, while Portugal is involved in one.

France is home to the main European space projects, such as Ariane 6, the Copernicus programme, and the Galileo satellite and navigation system. France published its National Space Strategy in 2019, with the aim of ensuring the country's freedom of access to, and action in, space, thereby strengthening strategic autonomy (Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants 2019). Intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance activities in space are also integral components of French nuclear deterrence policy (Laudrain 2019). In 2019, the establishment of a new French space command was announced, placed under the authority of the Air and Space Force (Office for Science and Technology of the Embassy of France in the United States 2019).

In 2019, Italy launched the Ital-GovSatCom initiative, which supports domestic companies in the development of satellites, complementing the Govsatcom (Governmental Satellite Communications) programme of the European Commission. In addition, Franco-Italian space cooperation is under way for the first time: Athena-Fidus is a dual-use satellite that is expected to become operational in 2024. Spain announced in early 2018, in its new capability development plan, that it will develop military telecommunications satellites. Each of the Big

Four Member States possesses operational satellites (Germany and France seven each, Italy nine, Spain three).

Of the V4 countries, only Poland takes part in two of the relevant PESCO projects. According to Poland's 2016 space strategy, its current
[220] goals include the deployment of a Polish satellite.

Cyberspace and C4ISR

According to the EU's Cyber Defence Policy Framework, published in 2018, cyberspace is recognised as the fifth domain of operations, alongside land, sea, air and space (Council of the European Union 2018a). The updated version of the framework identified priority areas for cyber defence and clarified the roles of various actors (Council of the European Union 2018b). One of the key objectives of the 2020 cybersecurity strategy was to build operational capacity to prevent, deter and respond to cyberattacks (European Commission 2020). Twelve PESCO projects are focused on cyberspace and the C4ISR system.

In the Mediterranean region, Greece leads two projects, while Spain, France, Italy and Portugal each coordinate one. Mediterranean countries thus play a central role in advancing cyber-related projects. All of the Big Three Member States are involved in the ESSOR project. Additionally, French-Italian-Spanish cooperation has been established on the development of a strategic C2 system for CSDP missions and operations. Work on the European High Atmosphere Airship Platform is also based on Franco-Italian cooperation. The project aims to create a balloon-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platform capable of providing continuous surveillance from the stratosphere. France and Italy also cooperate with other Member States in the Cyber Ranges Federations (CRF) project. Greece and Cyprus are working together on two projects (One Deployable SOF Tactical C2 Command Post and another, as yet unnamed). These two Member States have also concluded several bilateral defence agreements with non-EU countries in the area of cybersecurity, including Egypt, Israel, and the United States (Reuters 2019). Spain and Portugal work together on three projects (EUMILCOM, ESSOR and AMIDA-UT. It is evident that in this operational domain, key axes of cooperation include Franco-German, Franco-Italian, Portuguese-Spanish, and Greek-Cypriot partnerships. Spain and Portugal also addressed the issue of cyber defence in their 2015 bilateral defence treaty (Gobierno de España 2015).

The institutional arrangements relating to cybersecurity vary signif-

icantly among the V4 countries: Hungary and Poland take part in two different projects, while Czechia leads one (Electronic Warfare Capability and Interoperability Programme for Future JISR). However, the V4 countries do not cooperate in any cybersecurity-related projects. Although some progress has been made in this area (e.g. the establishment of the 2013 Central European Cyber Security Platform, in cooperation with Austria) (Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy 2016), many opportunities for cybersecurity collaboration remain untapped. To date, there appears to be no genuine willingness to engage in cybersecurity cooperation through PESCO. [221]

Maritime Security

The first comprehensive EU Maritime Security Strategy was adopted in 2014, aligning the objectives of the European Security Strategy and the Integrated Maritime Policy. The revised action plan accompanying the Maritime Security Strategy, published in 2018, highlighted the potential contributions of CARD, the EDF and PESCO (European Commission 2018). In 2023, the 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan – An Enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats' was published. This new strategy identifies PESCO projects as key examples of cooperative efforts in the field (Council of the European Union 2023). Ten PESCO projects are currently linked to maritime security.

It is no coincidence that cooperation between the Mediterranean Member States is particularly strong in this area. Participation in maritime projects is limited to the EU's coastal countries; 15 Member States take part in it. Among the Big Four Member States, Italy, Spain, and France are emerging as 'pulling countries' and centres of gravity. Italy leads three projects, and Spain one. France participates in seven projects, Italy in six, and Spain in five. Among the smaller Member States Greece and Portugal each coordinate one project. A notable example of long-standing multilateral defence cooperation is the European Maritime Force, established by Spain, France, Italy, and Portugal in 1995 (www.euromarfor.org). In 1997, Spain and Italy also formed a joint naval force, operating within the Euromarfor framework of (Adams and Ben-Ari 2006, 73). Since 2017, France and Italy have pursued joint naval shipbuilding projects, and in 2019, the two countries announced the creation of a joint venture between the state-

controlled French Naval Group and the Italian company Fincantieri (Altmeyer 2019).

Several examples illustrate this cooperation: Spain and France are cooperating on the Maritime Unmanned Anti-Submarine System project; Greece, Cyprus, Spain, France, Croatia, and Italy are jointly engaged [222] in the Upgrade Maritime Surveillance project. France, Italy, Spain, and Greece are cooperating on the European Patrol Corvette project. Overall, the three largest Mediterranean countries play a central role in maritime security cooperation, and, in addition, regional partnerships, such as between Spain and Portugal, and among the Southern European Member States are particularly significant, as Greece takes part in six, Portugal in five, and both Cyprus and Croatia in one each.

For most V4 countries, maritime security is not a priority due to their landlocked or inland geography. Poland is the only V4 country to participate in maritime projects (participating in two).

Land Forces, Formations and Systems

Cooperation among EU Member States in the area of land forces is much more intensive than in other domains. There are currently eight ongoing PESCO projects related to land forces. In these projects, the cooperation and leadership of the Big Three Mediterranean countries is particularly prominent. Eighteen Member States are involved in the six projects led by these three countries.

The three largest Mediterranean countries (plus Germany) have participated in a joint project, the crisis response centre known as EUFOR CROC. Germany, Spain and France are also working together on the Integrated Unmanned Ground System (UGS) project. Italy, Spain, Greece, and Croatia are cooperating on the Deployable Military Disaster Relief Capability Package. France leads three projects and is involved in six projects. Italy is also prioritising this area of operations by leading two projects and participating in three. Greece, France, and Cyprus cooperate on the Main Battle Tank Simulation and Testing Centre. Although regional or group-based cooperation is visible here, collaboration with the major Member States remains decisive.

Despite the fact that cooperation in the field of land forces frequently appears among the defence policy objectives of the V4 countries (Visegrad Group 2015), they cooperate on only two projects. Czechia, Hungary, and Poland cooperate on the UGS project. Czechia and Hungary participate in the Integrated Unmanned Ground Systems 2

project. Hungary and Slovakia previously collaborated on the now-closed Euro Artillery project.

Training and Facilities

There are currently nine PESCO projects in the training and facilities category, with twelve Member States participating. The Big Four previously operated a joint EU Training Mission Competence Centre, which was closed in 2020 due to overlapping responsibilities with other EU bodies, such as the European Security and Defence College. France and Italy are working together on a Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defence Training Range, while Spain and France are participating in the EU Test and Evaluation Centres project. Portugal is collaborating with Spain on a PESCO project to create an innovation hub to support national, NATO and EU cyberdefence and security training. France, Italy, Portugal and Spain are jointly involved in the European Defence Airlift – Training Academy (EDA-TA) project. Cyprus is cooperating with Greece on establishing a new EU intelligence school. Once again, the involvement of the major countries proves crucial, although France and Italy each lead only one project. Among the medium size Member States, Portugal and Greece also lead one project each. There is notable cooperation between Spain and Portugal, and, to a lesser extent, among the Balkan Member States; countries in South-Eastern Europe also cooperate in training-related initiatives. [223]

Although training and education cooperation has long been a priority for the V4 countries – alongside plans for a joint military education platform – only Poland and Hungary are currently involved in a PESCO project in this field (the Special Operation Forces Medical Training Centre (SMTC)), led by Poland. They also collaborate on the Hungary-led EUROSIM project.

Enabling and Joint Work

Ten PESCO projects fall into the category of enabling and joint work. In terms of content, this category covers a broad range of topics. With the exception of Ireland, all Member States that are active in PESCO are involved in the project on military mobility. In this domain, the Franco-German axis and the Big Four play a central role: France leads four projects, Germany two, and Italy and Spain one each. The involvement of the Mediterranean states is also significant: France participates in ten projects, Spain in seven, Italy in five, Portugal and Slovenia in four,

Greece and Croatia in three, and Cyprus in two projects. In addition to military mobility, the Big Four countries are jointly engaged in the European Medical Command and the development of a Network of Logistic Hubs. Spain, France and Italy cooperate on both the Twister project
[224] (Timely Warning and Interception with Space-Based Theatre Surveillance) and the Energy Operational Function (EOF). Spain, France and Germany work together on the co-basing project.

One of the V4's key defence priorities is logistical and medical cooperation in defence policy. All V4 countries are involved in the development of a Network of Logistic Hubs, while the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland participate in the development of the European Medical Command. Poland and Hungary participate in three projects each, Slovakia in two, and Czechia in one project.

Measuring the Collaboration Network of PESCO Participants

Following a review of the official statements and documentation related to the PESCO projects, it is necessary to examine the collaborative patterns to better understand the position of the participating states and their links within their own region (namely MED7, MED9 or Visegrad 4) and beyond. The collaboration network of all participating countries across every PESCO project – regardless of specific domain – can be visualised as follows (figure 1).

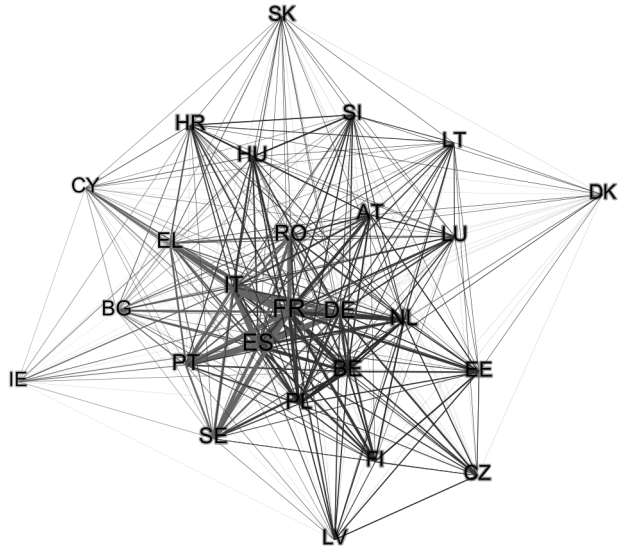

FIGURE 1
Collaboration Network of Participating Countries of the PESCO Projects

NOTES Based on the official statistics of the PESCO projects.

TABLE 1 Share of Links by Intra and Interregional Collaboration in the States Examined

	CY	FR	EL	IT	PT	ES	CZ	HU	PL	SK
(1)	36.21	32.48	40.00	41.98	39.25	36.31	9.26	9.86	8.26	12.20
(2)	44.83	36.75	47.00	46.30	42.06	40.78				
(3)	53.70	63.25	53.00	53.70	57.94	59.22	90.74	90.14	91.74	87.80

NOTES Share of links: (1) intraregional links (MED7/V4), (2) intraregional links (MED9), interregional links (MED9/V4). Based on the official statistics of the PESCO projects.

The collaboration network comprises all participants in the PESCO projects. In terms of its general characteristics, the network includes 26 nodes (Member States), and 317 links between them. The average degree of the network is 24.38, and the average weighted degree is 90.77. The network diameter is 2, and the graph density is particularly high at 0.975. The modularity is 0.05. The network consists of 3 clusters, as follows:

- 1st cluster with 7 participants: Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden.
- 2nd cluster with 15 participants: Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Hungary, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Finland.
- 3rd cluster with 4 participants: Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece, and Cyprus.

These clusters reveal strong collaboration among most Mediterranean countries, while the second cluster contains a broader and more diverse group – including the V4 countries However, it is important to point out that Greece and Cyprus appear as outliers, forming their own distinct cluster due to their particularly strong bilateral cooperation

In network analysis, centrality measures determine the position of the nodes. Regarding the closeness centrality, the top 5 leading countries are Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and Belgium. Of these, France, Spain, Italy, and Germany belong to the 1st cluster, while Belgium is the leading country of the 2nd cluster.

The distribution of intra- and interregional links can be analysed as shown in table 1.

When calculating the share of intra and inter regional links, each link between participating countries is weighted 1. The Mediterranean region is assessed in two sub-regions – MED7 and MED9 – to ac-

TABLE 2 Top 5 Partner Countries of the States Examined

	CY	FR	EL	IT	PT	ES	CZ	HU	PL	SK
1	EL	IT	IT	FR	ES	FR	DE	FR	FR	IT
2	FR	ES	FR	ES	FR	IT	FR	IT	DE	EL
[226] 3	IT	DE	CY	DE	IT	DE	NL	DE	ES	FR
4	BE	SE	ES	EL	DE	PT	LV	ES	BE	DE
5	BG	RO	PT	PT	RO	SE	ES	SI	NL	ES

NOTES Based on the official statistics of the PESCO projects.

count for variations in the number of collaborating countries, which could influence the share of internal versus external connections. Data demonstrate that the Mediterranean countries collaborate more intensively with each other than the V4 countries do. The share of intraregional collaboration does not increase significantly when comparing the MED7 and MED9, shedding light on the leading role of the 'core' MED7 countries. This pattern of relatively dense intraregional ties suggests that differentiated integration in European defence is not only structured by the presence of a core and periphery, but also by the capacity of certain subregional clusters to foster cohesion among themselves. In this sense, Mediterranean cooperation reflects a regionalized variant of differentiated integration, which complicates traditional typologies such as multi-speed Europe or variable geometry.

Although the number of participants may introduce some bias, the Mediterranean countries are more active and display a significantly higher level of intra-regional collaboration than the V4 countries. With the exception of Slovakia, the V4 countries show a very high share of inter-regional collaboration, exceeding 90%. Unlike in the Mediterranean case, the Visegrad states demonstrate limited intra-regional collaboration and instead rely heavily on inter-regional ties with larger actors. This indicates a different mode of differentiation: one less rooted in regional solidarity and more in asymmetric dependence on the 'Big Four.' Such a pattern highlights the layered highlights of differentiated integration; wherein smaller regional clusters position themselves within broader cross-regional networks rather than consolidating as autonomous blocs.

Having examined regional collaboration patterns, another important question arises regarding the top 5 partner countries of the participating states (table 2).

Among Mediterranean countries, we observe the dominance of Italy

(as the top partner for France and Greece) and France (for Italy and Spain). For Cyprus, Greece is the leading partner, while Portugal shows Spain as its main partner, though Spain ranks Portugal as only its fourth. Among the V4 countries, the dominance of France (in the case of Hungary and Poland), Germany (in the case of the Czech Republic) [227] and Italy (in the case of Slovakia) can be observed. These patterns confirm that V4 countries tend to partner with core actors – as these countries dominate the whole collaboration network as we could see by the closeness centrality as well. The contrast between Mediterranean cohesion and Visegrad interdependence illustrates how PESCO generates multiple, overlapping forms of differentiation. Rather than conforming neatly to the established typologies such as multi-speed, variable geometry, or core Europe, these patterns suggest that defence integration proceeds through a more hybrid and layered structure of regional and cross-regional collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of PESCO projects must be understood within the broader context of a deteriorating security environment and growing geopolitical cooperation. The Russian aggression against Ukraine and weakened transatlantic relations have created an increased necessity for enhanced cooperation in the framework of CSDP and defence capability development, with the aim of achieving greater strategic autonomy. PESCO provides an important platform for capability development, as well as for building effective cooperation and trust in a policy area traditionally marked by national sensitivity. PESCO best practices demonstrate which model of cooperation will be sustainable for addressing capability gaps.

Currently, 26 Member States are participating in PESCO projects. In the Mediterranean region, Malta is the only country not involved. All V4 countries are engaged in enhanced cooperation. However, a clearly regional approach to implementation is only evident to a limited extent. Only one project – Military Mobility – includes full participation from both the MED7/MED9 and V4 groups. Notably, this project also includes non-EU participants: the USA, Canada, Norway, and the UK. There is only one PESCO project (the Network of Logistic Hubs) in which all of V4 countries are active and their role can be considered dominant. In virtually every category of PESCO projects, however, the role of the Big Four countries is dominant. It is worth mentioning that

three of the Big Four Member States are located in the Mediterranean region.

The Big Four are involved in the most projects: France is involved in 49 projects, Italy in 34, Spain in 30, and Germany in 25. In terms of leadership, France leads 15 projects, Italy 13, Germany 8 and Spain 5 (24). [228] Their dominance reflects how the concepts of core Europe, concentric circles, and multi-speed integration are manifesting in practice. PESCO is built upon the development of previously existing and strategically relevant projects in order to increase the EU's strategic autonomy. The willingness of Member States to cooperate is shaped by their prior experiences in defence cooperation, both outside or inside the EU. The creation of PESCO projects was determined not only by geographical location or previously established thematic groups but also based on the principle of variable geometry – that is, based on the economic conditions and defence policy interests and political will of the Member States.

Cooperation among Mediterranean states is strong across several sectors, and the region plays a central role in promoting differentiated integration. Despite the stated defence policy ambitions of the V4 countries, many potential opportunities for deeper PESCO involvement remain underutilised.

It is also important to highlight the contributions of medium-sized Mediterranean states. Greece participates in 18 projects and coordinates 6, while Portugal is involved in 17 and coordinates 3. Smaller countries also participate: Cyprus takes part in 8 projects, Croatia in 7, and Slovenia in 7 projects. Of the V4 countries, Poland is engaged in 13 PESCO projects, Hungary in 11, Czechia in 7, and Slovakia in 3. Although they are involved in a significant number of projects, these countries are underrepresented in leading roles. Each of the V4 countries coordinates only one project.

The findings of this research enhance academic discourse on differentiated integration. By comparing regional patterns, the study demonstrates that existing typological frameworks, such as core Europe, multi-speed or variable geometry, do not fully account for the layered and nuanced reality of intra- and inter-regional collaboration. The centrality of the 'Big Four' demonstrates the decisive role played by a small number of dominant industrial and political actors. However, the sub-regional variations reveal the diverse mechanisms through which cooperation takes shape. While the Mediterranean states demonstrate

strong intraregional cohesion, the Visegrad countries are marked by a greater reliance on external, interregional ties.

Looking ahead, one of the key strategic questions is how the EU can evolve from a security community, primarily concerned with its own protection and operating in a complementary capacity to other international organisations, into a fully-fledged European defence union. Although this transformation will likely be gradual, it is already clear that the implementation of PESCO marks a significant step towards the further Europeanisation of the CSDP. Nevertheless, the ultimate success of this process depends primarily on the political will of the EU Member States. [229]

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