

Strategic Narrative Contestation as Role-Defining Discursive Conflict Between European Powers

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Abstract

The article compares the strategic narratives of Britain, France, Germany, and Russia in relation to European security not only as products of their respective strategic cultures, but as productive instruments of foreign policy role and identity construction and revision. It analyses how each state develops and performs foreign policy role identity through narrative contestation and counter-framing, using a case study of the contestation over the structure of European security. It argues that these narratives constitute a discursive conflict that advances competing visions and self-perceived strategic roles, legitimising while also adjusting strategic roles and identities, and undermining those of competitors. Through narrative analysis of elite-level strategic discourse from 2022 to 2025, related to the conflict in Ukraine and the crisis of the European security order, the article examines how foreign and security policy is affected, constrained, and adapted through ideational contestation. Strategic narratives are shown to function simultaneously as instruments of influence and as frameworks that delimit strategic action and identity. The results indicate that the conflict to reconceptualise the security environment is dynamic and reactive, and affects identity and role reconstruction and the plausibility of policy justification for the states examined, over time, in each case.

Keywords: strategic narratives, European security, discursive conflict, discourse analysis, role Identity

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Introduction

The European security order has been profoundly transformed by the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022, becoming thoroughly destabilised and increasingly challenged. While this was most clearly visible in the changing policies, it is also apparent in elite-level strategic discourse, which has experienced continuous narrative struggles over legitimacy and authority, especially between the most powerful states. The security crisis which resulted from the conflict has led to several competing interpretations of the security order in Europe, which attempt to influence how the post-2022 balance of power should be reconstructed. The interpretations of the most powerful European states, manifested through strategic narratives, express how they understand their roles and justify their actions, as well as those of others, attempting to define European security for the benefit of their own interests and according to their self-perceived roles. Therefore strategic narratives offer a framework for analysing how state actors construct perceptions of the international system, their own identities, and specific policy choices. These are not simply discursive instruments but in fact have a meaning-making purpose that influences how political actors interpret events, express interests and legitimise action, framing them within wider understandings of international order. The article focuses on strategic narratives as channels of interaction across multiple state-level actors, and conceptualises their contestation as a form of discursive conflict that is productive of how European security is framed and organised

Narrative contestation has seldom been treated as much more than an obstacle to narrative effectiveness, yet here it is conceptualised as an active mechanism through which states negotiate roles, legitimacy and authority, and dispute those of others. As strategic narratives collide, they undermine, counter-frame and delimit one another through a form of discursive conflict, which is itself constitutive of the resulting understanding of the European security order. The article conceptualises these narratives, and therefore the resulting conflict, as based on the strategic cultures of the competing powers, which limit the range of plausible narratives and roles for a power. In saying that, strategic culture is here framed as a constraining background structure of strategic narratives, rather than a determinant of narrative content, so that contestation and adjustment remain analytically central. The European great powers examined in the article are Britain, France, Germany and Russia, and the analysed discourse spans the period between 2022 and 2025 in relation to the European security crisis caused by the conflict in Ukraine.

Therefore the main research question is how strategic narrative contestation among European great powers functions as a form of discursive conflict that determines their roles and identities in relation to the framing of European security. The analysis also examines how strategic narratives adapt in response to competing narratives while remaining based in underlying strategic culture. The empirical section uses the method of narrative analysis, performed on the most important foreign policy speeches by national leaders. In the article it is argued that through this discourse the leaders express the identity claims of their states

and of their competitors, frame security threats and position themselves in relation to others in the wider European order. Through chronological tracing of narrative interaction at the highest level, patterns of reinforcement, rejection and adaptation of narratives reveal how discursive conflict manifests in practice. The focus on strategic narratives is significant due to the examination of how competing narratives mutually constrain, delegitimise and affect one another through an interactional process. The analysis contributes to the literature by conceptualising narrative contestation as a productive form of discursive conflict through which role identities, legitimacy claims and the boundaries of acceptable security action are relationally constructed. The main argument therefore is that narrative contestation among European powers actively structures the roles, legitimacy claims and possible security actions of the state actors involved. The article first reviews the strategic narratives and strategic cultures of the four powers, then develops the theoretical framework in dialogue with previous approaches. Then it analyses discourse and finally discusses the implications of the results.

The strategic narratives and strategic cultures of the four powers

Considering that strategic cultures are an important factor structuring strategic narratives, this review section examines them for each analysed power. Strategic culture is here used in line with Snyder's understanding of it as a shared structure of ideas, conditioned responses and patterns of behaviour acquired within a national strategic community, through which political communities interpret security, threat and legitimate action (Snyder, 1977). The analysis proceeds with examination of the four selected states, starting with France. Zarobny (2018) infers assumptions about his understanding of French strategic culture, noting that its strategic culture is rooted in tradition and cultural factors which weigh heavily in its foreign policy choices, but that it is not closed to pragmatic adjustments. Its strategic culture includes memories of France's past glory and is based on its traditional strategic influence such as that provided by a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, however it is significantly affected by French cultural and identity factors, which are rooted in its "grandeur", global role, and European leadership. This role in European leadership is evident in its interest in peace and prosperity in Europe which it frames as being achieved through the EU, as Rozenberg (2015) notes, explaining that France also maintains its own power and prestige, as well as its global influence, through its leading role in the EU. As such, there is high support in France for the EU historically; however it is limited by discourse that stresses the importance of French national pride and strategic autonomy, which are deeply rooted in its culture. Schmidt (2007) notes that national pride caused French leadership to at times be sceptical of greater European integration due to the population stressing the importance of French sovereignty, identity, and historic grandeur.

Nonetheless, Huntley (2024) notes that rooted in French strategic culture is the fear of revisionism which established norms and international institutions would be undermined and disregarded by emerging powers, meaning it has strong interest in maintaining the

present order and stability in Europe. He adds that its strategic identity of a global actor with exceptional status and responsibility rests in its permanent role in the Security Council. Relatedly, Gheciu (2020) argues that president Macron has framed his presidency in a grand narrative of restoring French power and central role in Europe, while strengthening the EU and defending liberal internationalism against authoritarianism. She notes that his narratives accentuate the aforementioned grandeur of France, as well as the role of himself as its leader. Staunton (2022) adds to this that Macron has also reframed global politics through a civilizational lens while framing France as a protector of European values, arguing that Macron's use of the grandeur and exceptionalism narrative is meant to underline France's role in the EU as a main protector of its order. Bora (2023) relates this to Macron's proposals that the EU should become more geopolitical and globally assertive, which would mean French narratives stress both the exceptional French role but also the importance of defending the liberal European order against challenges.

As for Germany, Berenskötter and Stritzel (2021) note that it has slowly and carefully accepted its role of a power as part of its international role and expressing this evolution in its narrative. Its self-image as a power is based on concepts of a constrained or civilian power, due to its reluctance to appear dominating, but it also is presented as a benign hegemonic power due to its structural power in the EU. Bulmer and Paterson (2013) argued that this reluctant hegemony is related to Germany's role of stabilising the EU through its power and support of the international liberal order, noting also its caution in expressing it. Matthijs (2016) concurs noting that Germany had to adjust its narrative as its role is structurally conditioned, its implicit power necessitating a leadership role no matter the reluctance. Bartenstein and Wessels (2026) describe Germany as a pro-status quo reluctant hegemon, and describes the conflict in Ukraine as the decisive point of change where it could no longer sustain the civilian power narrative. However they add that this was framed as being done in the interest of the EU, so that a German geopolitical strategic narrative of responsibility for security would be more easily accepted as leadership rather than hegemony.

Huntley (2024) notes that the German aspiration to increase its global role is endogenous, and contained within the rules-based order of Europe, having a fear of revisionism like France. German narratives of power are always framed within the goal of upholding democracy and peace in Europe, which has a moral dimension for Germany, and are more restrained than French narratives, even in the post 2022 context. Eberle and Handl (2020) argue Germany adapted its foreign policy narrative to changing circumstances as early as 2014, noting that the civilian power narrative was retained yet augmented with more active engagement towards European stability and security. Even so, Tkocz and Stritzel (2025) argue that the 2022 crisis prompted a justifiable and major re-evaluation of Germany's cultural and ideational identity, which earlier favoured diplomacy and compromise. They note that Germany's narrative rapidly changed from opposing war itself, to opposing tyranny, while at the same time emphasising its own role as a responsible member of a multilateral community and its obligation to oppose aggression. Thus Germany also turned

its discourse towards security and strategy, taking extra care to justify it and appear restrained and defensive in expressions of power.

British narratives provide an interesting comparison due to its changing role after leaving the EU. Morris (2011) argues that Britain also has a narrative of greatness, having an assertive international stance aimed at maintaining its great power status. Traditionally it has sought to exercise restraint, support a balance of power, and avoid major crises, however it has moved towards greater interventionism justified by its self-perception as a great power with global responsibilities. Wallace (2017) points out that foreign policy is deeply connected with identity and limited by strategic culture. Because of that British narratives are framed by its historic self-perception of sovereignty and grandeur, which orients them towards Euroscepticism. As such the narrative of the EU never had strong cultural resonance for it, allowing a fast return of focus to earlier narratives after Britain left the EU. Hadfield and Whiteman (2023) argue that while leaving limited its influence in major multilateral forums, Britain re-evaluated its strategic position and compensated through traditional avenues such as the commonwealth and the UN in order to maintain itself as an active and significant power. Britain thus reasserted and redefined its role and identity through the narrative concept of Global Britain, which was meant to be an optimistic return to a global and independent role that enhanced its prestige.

Parnell (2022) notes that this narrative was instrumental in the British redefinition of its foreign policy identity, adding that the narrative became less optimistic and more pragmatic over time, as well as less tied to exceptionalism and insularity as good relations with the EU were maintained. Haugevik and Svendsen (2023) argue that the aforementioned Global Britain strategic narrative was a narrative of greatness and global influence that served to help mitigate the anxiety of leaving the EU. This allowed it to define itself in continuity within a changing international system, and as European security deteriorated, Britain increased its narrative focus on security and defence to remain perceived as powerful and relevant. Turner (2019) frames this strategic narrative as aimed at presenting Britain as having a natural leadership role in Europe and the world outside of the EU, and expanding the boundaries of what policies are considered possible or appropriate by placing it at the centre of international politics. However, Rogstad and Martill (2022) argue that the instrumentalisation of the concept of greatness is a persistent and historic part of British political discourse, similar to France and Russia, and that it merely re-emerged during the recent crises as the identity of the state needed to be solidified. Thus Britain has traditionally had a strong sovereigntist narrative of greatness and self-reliance that ebbed and flowed in relation to its position in Europe and its security order.

Russia provides another interesting comparison, having quite an idiosyncratic narrative. Roberts (2017) notes that its narrative is focused on asserting its role as a relevant great power, describing its foreign policy narratives as grounded in the country's political cultural and values. He notes that its narrative has moved towards a more ideologically charged moralism and nationalism which is related to Russian exceptionalism, combined with the perception of being under siege internationally. Svarin (2016) notes that Russia

has a self-perception of a great power based in its history, thus justifying its narrative of international significance and influence. Schiffers (2015) notices a relational element in its identity discourse, with a strong narrative of a “collective west” which is described as a negative and interventionist force which is Russia’s adversary, in comparison to Russia as a moral state wanting necessary global change. Russia receives legitimacy from its struggle and victimhood, as the west is described as attempting to restrict Russia’s greatness by undermining it. Szostek (2017) also notices Russian attempts to frame the global order as a competitive struggle in which Russia defiantly challenges Western dominance, arguing this is subordinated to its desire to be increasingly recognised as a morally justified great power.

According to Frear and Mazepus (2021), since 2018 Putin has increased the conservative and civilizational aspects of Russia’s narrative, moving from pragmatism to asserting greatness and emphasising power to the extent that this is now the baseline for its strategic narratives. Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2017) add that this narrative emanates from Russia’s traditional strategic culture that was retained from the time of the cold war without much adaptation, and that it was further instrumentalised due to its frustration over the failure to redefine the international system. They note that Western refusals to validate its identity claims lead it to be more assertive in demanding status recognition and hardening its narrative. Its identity narrative is therefore strongly relational, being developed in opposition to the west as an antagonistic “other”, justifying strategic decisions with moral language. Central to this narrative is the idea that Russia is struggling to end Western unipolarity and hegemony and to bring about a multipolar world (Hinck et al., 2018). To this, Bettiza and Lewis (2020) add that this sense of disrespect and delegitimation could be due to Russia acting from a weaker position in the international power hierarchy, necessitating increased contestation corresponding to its self-perception.

Götz and Staun (2022) conceptualise Russian strategic culture as having a dual nature, one of a deep-seated sense of strategic vulnerability towards the West, and the other centred on its entitlement to great power status and to a corresponding sphere of influence. They argue that Russia’s narrative portrays the country as both destined to be a great power and existentially dependent on this status if it is to survive, making the narrative existential. Dagi (2025) notes that the narratives emanating from this strategic culture instrumentalise and reframe historical memory to suit present strategic interests, arguing that it has a return effect on the strategic culture itself. He frames Russia as having a fully revisionist narrative that justifies its aggressive foreign policy as being forced and defensive, and frames its demands for a multipolar order as being an adaptation of a demand for a sphere of influence. Snigyr (2024) concurs and connects Russia’s narrative developments to the international order undergoing fundamental transformation, arguing that it has seized an opportunity to take a greater role at the head of an illiberal world defending traditional values against liberal internationalism which attempts to undermine the power and sovereignty of authoritarian states. Thus Russian narratives and strategic culture can be considered to be reactive, revisionist, aggressive and morally framed against an antagonistic “other”, making use of crisis as an opportunity.

Strategic narratives, identity, and narrative contestation

The applied approach to strategic narratives is based on the one developed primarily by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, being concerned with how political actors project, contest and adapt state role narratives in relation to international order. They conceptualise Strategic narratives as a tool used to present the role and power of a state through coherent storylines that are projected outwards by it, helping leaders contextualise policies in a compelling narrative that justifies them within a framework of culture and values. Provided they have communicative consistency they can achieve strong influence and change the perception of which policies are appropriate and how they are related to the international system. Developing the position further, they consider that leaders increasingly rely on them to define their country's place and role in international affairs, strategically presenting them to further state interests and interpret international events in their favour, especially in the context of great powers renegotiating the international order. These narratives can shape foreign policy as much as hard power, and not only provide a direction that a state can follow, but signal it to others, possibly to the detriment of mutual relations if narratives are mutually antagonistic (Miskimmon et al., 2015/a; Miskimmon et al., 2018). Zaffran (2019) adds that they allow for a justification of actions in terms of authority and morality, and in relation to legitimacy, sovereignty and the character of the international system as criticised or preferred. Schmitt (2018) argues that strategic narratives are also story frameworks through which political actors make sense of the past, present and future, framing current interests and goals of a state with traditional responsibilities. He argues that while they exist within the limits of political culture, they can also adjust and augment them in return.

Guzzini (2022) goes further to conceptualise foreign policy as based on a state's vision of itself that provides meaning, continuity and orientation for political action. He adds that this identity is intersubjectively constituted and is a relational construct that emerges through interaction, recognition, and differentiation from others, and that a state's narratives have the main role of sustaining and expressing that self-vision outwardly. This means that strategic narratives are flexible enough to allow political leaders to reinterpret various elements in response to changing circumstances within an overarching continuity. In relation to this Eberle and Handl (2020) argue that the most significant narratives for foreign policy are exactly those tied to identity, especially in relation to the international system and the identities of other states. They argue that identity narratives are vulnerable to external disruption, especially during international crises, and that they have a clear effect on foreign policy by determining which actions are conceivable. Gheciu's argument (2020) that identities and roles are enacted through performance continues this logic, adding that it is important for the narratives to be recognised and validated by their audience in order for the external perception of the state to be continually maintained.

As for strategic culture as a limiting factor to strategic options, Zarobny (2018) defines them as consisting of the collective ideas, emotional responses and habits within a national

community, involving shared beliefs about history and identity. As such it restricts decision making by affecting perceptions of threat, as well as of national identity and interests. Götz and Staun (2022) note that strategic culture does not determine state behaviour but influences how political elites interpret threats and opportunities, enabling certain policy options while limiting others, yet within these limitations political leaders can adjust narratives, especially during crises. Subotić (2016) agrees that crises provide greater leeway, connecting strategic narratives to ontological security. She argues that state narratives are culturally limited autobiographies that provide meaning and a sense of self, yet asserts that states can change their policies without undermining their identity and autobiographical continuity.

Strategic narratives can also be obstructed by their rejection by competitors, especially during a structural transformation such as the one that the current international system is experiencing. Researchers argue that periods of transformation present opportunities for new challengers to use strategic narratives to attempt to reshape the international order to their benefit, however strategic narratives are more likely to be obstructed in such periods by their rejection by competitors. As these narratives are meaning-making mechanisms, they are highly contested, with competing discourses challenging each other constantly as they seek to dominate the discourse around an issue to gain an advantage, and to exclude opposing narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017; Miskimmon et al., 2015/b; Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017). Bettiza and Lewis (2020) connect narratives to norm contestation, adding that through the narratives norms and values are promoted or challenged, with power and influence being exercised through this process. Van Noort (2019) notices that rising powers are increasingly contesting Western norms through strategic narratives, in order to influence the global discourse and reshape international norms and assert their interpretation of the international order and their normative roles within it.

Contestation is characterised by Szostek (2017) as an exercise of influence through soft power that also consolidates self-perception, while Subotić (2016) highlights the importance of narrative flexibility in retaining normative and discursive influence in order for states to maintain their space for manoeuvre. Guzzini (2022) finds this contestation and flexibility to be natural as identity claims in foreign policy are inherently contestable because they depend on recognition by others. Lerner, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2025) go further by arguing that contestation does not only concern alternative framings of international events, but involves struggles over the constitution of political reality itself, determining what is considered relevant, threatening, or legitimate. They argue that competing actors advance rival claims about the nature of conflict, responsibility, and appropriate responses, thereby delimiting legitimate action through conflictual meaning-making.

Theoretical framework

Strategic narratives are a useful analytical tool to examine foreign and security policies, being structured storylines through which political actors both interpret and justify

interests and policies. The approach to these narratives is aligned with a constructivist position, in which identities, interests, roles and understandings of security are considered to be socially produced through interaction, interpretation and recognition. Therefore they are not only communicative devices but meaning-making narratives that influence understandings of international order and of states' roles within it, thereby legitimising and explaining policy choices. They also do not exist in isolation, being constrained internally by historically informed strategic culture and confronted externally by competing narratives advanced by other states. Current research has primarily focused on how narratives are formed and projected, while giving less attention to how they are actively opposed and countered, and to how they adapt under sustained contestation and influence strategic culture in return. Strategic narrative interaction is therefore the focus of the analysis, within which narratives become productive of policy by determining what is plausible, legitimate, and strategically acceptable. Because the examined states seek to define the same European security structure and to position themselves as leading actors within it, their narratives collide through challenges to rival interpretations of threat, legitimacy, and responsibility, and through attempts to undermine rival role claims and delimit opponents' boundaries of acceptable action.

This is conceptualised here as a form of discursive conflict, as role-identities are negotiated through competing meaning-making action. Conceptualising strategic narrative contestation as discursive conflict allows for a more precise understanding of how strategic narratives operate politically, the contestation being an active mechanism through which states advance and defend their preferred visions of order and their leading roles within it. Through framing and counter-framing, discursive conflict undermines the plausibility of rival claims and constrains opponents' manoeuvre space, while attempting to stabilise a particular understanding of the security order within which policy is justified. Narratives are adapted and selectively reinterpreted through interaction, with contestation enabling change within strategic-cultural bounds rather than unbounded narrative revision. Through it, states define the European security order through their perspective, positioning themselves as a leader, stabiliser, defender, or challenger, and delegitimising the role claims of others, making role-identity relational rather than only contested.

Method

The method used for the empirical section is qualitative narrative analysis, examining strategic narrative contestation between the four powers in the period 2022–2025, exploring how narratives evolve during the security crisis which followed the emergence of conflict in Ukraine. The material consists of major public speeches by political leaders, including heads of state, government, and foreign ministers, of the four states, delivered at major national and international platforms and focused on significant geopolitical events. The analysis proceeds chronologically and comparatively, with narratives being examined in relation to each other. The unit of analysis is the strategic narrative as manifested in the speeches,

focusing on role claims, identity constructions, threat framings, responsibility attributions, and preferred courses of action. Within the analysis, core narrative elements are identified for each state, which are then traced in reference to each other within the narratives, to examine patterns of challenge, reinforcement, and reinterpretation in response.

Discursive conflict is operationalised as observable interactional moves in which speeches counter-frame rival narratives, contest or delegitimise rival role claims, redefine responsibility and legitimacy, or set boundaries on opponents' acceptable action, including where such moves are made through direct reference to a competing actor or its stated position. While the empirical analysis is structured chronologically, this is used primarily as an organising device, while the analytical logic is interactional, stressing the most significant periods. The discussion which succeeds the empirical section synthesises results by examining the narratives of the four powers separately and relationally. The analysis is organised into three periods reflecting major transformations of the conflict during 2022-2025, which serve as an organising framework for tracing variations in the intensity and function of strategic narrative contestation.

Strategic narrative contestation as discursive conflict in European security

In early 2022, in the lead up to the conflict itself, the state actors began to position themselves discursively. Macron described the EU's identity as a peace project united by common values that secured peace and democracy in Europe, saying it was entering a period of upheaval requiring renewed political commitment and diplomatic effort. He argues that the EU should no longer be limited to reacting to crises, but needed the power to anticipate them, calling for an EU that could respond to geopolitical challenges, and that would become a balancing power that could maintain the European security and support collective security (Macron, 2022/a). Scholz (2022/a) similarly framed European security as founded on a rule-based international order that depended on cooperation and the core promise that even the strong would play by the rules, emphasising readiness to negotiate but distinguishing between legitimate security interests and aggressive demands. He rejected the concept of spheres of influence as non-negotiable and supported greater European sovereignty and its increased role, whereby it would act as a power among powers, yet he argued that the transatlantic partnership was still central. The British PM also emphasised the importance of diplomacy, while placing stronger emphasis on deterrence through transatlantic structures, highlighting Britain's contribution to NATO and describing it as unconditionally committed to European security. He also rejected spheres of influence, calling for Europe as a continent of sovereign and secure states (Johnson, 2022).

Putin (2021) also framed the international environment as entering an era of fundamental transformation marked by instability, however he blamed this on Western states and claimed they were trying to undermine and contain Russia in order to maintain their dominance. He argued that in response Russia was supporting a multipolar world based on sovereign

states, later justifying Russian aggression against Ukraine by the assertion that NATO had aggressive designs against Russia and framed it as a threat in order to justify its expansion. He claimed that NATO was the central cause of the European security crisis and the erosion of trust (Putin, 2022/a), depicting its expansion as an existential threat to Russia's survival and future, claiming the west refused Russian attempts at dialogue and accommodation out of a fear of a strong Russia (Putin, 2022/b). Scholz (2022/b) framed the aggression as destroying the European security order and isolating Russia from the international community, condemning it as seeking to divide into spheres of influence through force, and threatening it would pay a high price as NATO was committed to collective defence in the pursuit of peace in Europe. The British PM warned that the Western response had to ensure Russia failed in its aggression as otherwise this would lead to further instability across Europe, announcing a new approach focused on hard security, military power, stronger global alliances and NATO presence, and declaring that geopolitics had returned (Truss, 2022/a).

Putin continued to frame Russia's actions as the defence of its sovereign right to pursue its interests, arguing that Western states interfered in the affairs of other states and endangered Russia by promoting their values. He framed that Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space was focused on cooperation rather than control, accusing Western states of interventionism instead and announcing Russia would undermine what he termed an unjust Western dominated international order (Putin, 2022/c). Macron countered by declaring that the conflict in Ukraine was a direct rupture of collective security and international law that risked pushing Europe and the world toward a system where security and sovereignty were determined solely by power relations, military strength, and alliances, amounting to a return to imperialism, which France rejected (Macron, 2022/b). He described the conflict as a manifestation of a broader weakening of norms, framing Europe as being in a dangerous situation in which the old security order was eroding, while presenting France as an independent, agile, and respected power at the core of European strategic autonomy. He said France acted as a balancing power committed to multilateralism, which had an important role for EU defence and sovereignty as it was also a nuclear-powered permanent member of the Security Council (Macron, 2022/c). The British PM described the crisis of the international system as a struggle between democracies and autocracies, in which democracies required stronger defence and security in a new era of strategic competition (Truss, 2022/b).

Scholz (2022/c) then said European security was at a watershed moment and that its security order was attacked, calling Russia a neo-imperialist autocracy that was a direct threat to Europe, saying Russia could not allow a free and equal Europe as it undermined its policy of domination. He urged for a stronger and more sovereign EU that could safeguard its own security, both on its own and alongside NATO, calling for equality and cooperation to be maintained over supremacy. In contrast, Putin escalated by framing the crisis as a struggle over Russia's historical right to sovereignty and its position in the world, arguing that the "collective West" was trying to preserve a neo-colonial, unipolar order that denied

sovereignty, identity, and equality to others. He rejected the notion of a Western-defined rules-based order as illegitimate, hypocritical, and imposed without consent, accusing Western powers of seeking domination rather than cooperation. In doing so he framed the conflict as a broader civilizational and historical struggle against Western hegemony and in favour of multipolarity (Putin, 2022/d; Putin, 2022/e).

As the conflict entered a stalemate phase in early 2023, the narrative struggle continued and developed. Macron (2023/a) described the European response to the conflict as one of sustained and long-term commitment, part of which was the consolidation of a stronger and more sovereign Europe capable of addressing geopolitical challenges. Scholz (2023/a) similarly framed the situation as one showing European and transatlantic unity, explicitly acknowledging that Germany had broken with long-standing policy principles, particularly the refusal to supply weapons in an active war in order to pressure Russia. He added that conflict escalation had to be prevented while reaffirming Germany's responsibility for European security and announcing further steps toward a Europe of defence. He accepted that a multipolar world was emerging, arguing that the EU therefore had to become more geopolitical in order to protect peace, but that this had to be based on cooperation (Scholz, 2023/b).

The British PM emphasised a strong commitment to freedom and democracy, calling on Russia to be held accountable for its aggression, as the international order is slowly rebuilt (Sunak, 2023), while his foreign secretary emphasised the continued importance of NATO for collective security in Europe, with the EU being only complementary (Cleverly, 2023). Macron (2023/b) continued to frame the conflict as a struggle over the future of Europe, and while he admitted the primacy of NATO as a guarantee of security, he argued for the EU becoming a greater security actor rather than relying on others. He condemned Russia as having imperialist ambitions, emphasising that Europe had now chosen strategic autonomy and sovereignty, and was developing its defence capacities. He said the conflict forced France to rethink and rapidly adapt its strategic posture, presenting the transformation of French armed forces and their deployment as evidence of national resilience and sovereignty. He said strong armed forces were necessary for not only defence but for maintaining France's position in Europe and its international influence (Macron, 2023/c).

The Chancellor of Germany called for strengthened alliances, new partnerships, and universal respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, rejecting the idea that smaller states could be treated as subordinate to larger powers (Scholz, 2023/b). The British PM deplored the erosion of faith in international cooperation, while reaffirming a strong commitment to internationalism based on UN principles, calling for renewed collective action to defend them while presenting Britain as a responsible global leader (Starmer, 2024). The Russian President then claimed that attempts by powerful Western states to impose their interests on others had failed, and that Russia refused to submit to what he termed western hegemony, continuing his discourse of a country under international siege as justification for its aggression. In response to Western framings of the international security order, he claimed that the west was aggressively expanding and required an enemy,

so that they put Russia into this role, while mocking the “rules-based order” Western leaders promoted and demanding Russia was a civilisation-state and a foundational pillar of an emerging multipolar world (Putin, 2023). He later added that the former international order was irreversibly over, and that a new sovereigntist multipolar one would replace it, claiming a “collective west” was causing wars in order to prevent it while trying to isolate or marginalise Russia (Putin, 2024).

Macron (2024/a) then reaffirmed the call for greater European sovereignty and autonomy so it could defend itself from Russian ambitions and protect the security architecture of Europe. He added that the EU could not delegate its responsibility anymore and that it had to be at the table when the continent’s future security order is decided, while stressing that France was a loyal ally and a military power. He then framed France’s future as being inseparable from the EU, which itself had to be more assertive, becoming a sovereign and “power Europe” that commands respect and provides for its own defence (Macron, 2024/b). Scholz (2024) concurred with the insistence that the EU’s deterrence and defence must remain credible in order to prevent Russia from imposing peace, supporting greater European unity and responsibility, although he framed the EU’s efforts as subordinate to NATO’s role. Within this he again framed Germany as a responsible European power contributing to security. As the conflict increasingly became stagnant and diplomatic efforts re-emerged, Macron (2025/a) stated that it was time for Europe to finally assume control over its security, again framing Russia as the central danger. He now emphasised military strength as being both expected and required, and called for European defensive rearmament. He also reissued the call for the restoration of effective multilateralism and a collective European response to oppose Russian imperialism rather than appease it.

Scholz (2025/b) again had a similar discourse whereas he expressed the need for Europeans to be strong, united, and capable in their own right in order to protect the international order and the inviolability of borders, yet still framed security as dependent on strong transatlantic ties. The British PM now framed Britain as having a historical responsibility and a duty to prioritise collective security and deploy all available in response to growing instability in Europe, which inevitably affected it. He stressed the need for cooperation within NATO as fundamental to European security, and argued Putin only responded to military strength (Starmer, 2025/a). He linked this to a significant transformation of British foreign policy towards rebuilding both hard and soft power and reasserting national interest in a context of intensified global competition. He termed this as a new internationalism that recognised the centrality of defence and the limits of relying solely on international institutions (Starmer, 2025/b). His foreign secretary conceptualised this as “progressive realism” which called for more pragmatism and military strength to deal with an unstable international environment (Lammy, 2025/a; Lammy, 2025/b). In this period Putin (2025) continued blaming the west for the international crisis and continued to claim it was failing to maintain hegemony, claiming they exaggerated the threat of war in order to justify militarisation. He declared that Russia was on the ascent, having persisted

through Western attempts to isolate it because it was essential to global balance, and warned it would respond decisively to any threats to its security, sovereignty, or statehood.

Discussion

As the empirical analysis has demonstrated, strategic narrative contestation among European great powers functions as a form of discursive conflict through which European security is defined, roles are negotiated, and legitimacy is constructed and denied. This contestation does not function as a secondary or communicative-only layer alongside material power politics, but as a parallel contest in which authority, responsibility, and acceptable action are actively negotiated. This is observable in the recurring narrative interactional moves including counter-framing of rival claims, contestation of their role claims, redefinition of responsibility and legitimacy, and attempts to delimit rivals' legitimate space for action. Comparative analysis shows that each power exhibits a distinct role narrative rooted in its strategic culture and interests, which is developed through contestation. France exhibits a leadership-oriented role narrative positioning itself as central to European security and order, emphasising European sovereignty, autonomy, and defence capacity as conditions for stability. Germany exhibits a role narrative centred on restraint, responsibility, and order preservation, seeking to reconcile increased security engagement with a continued rejection of hegemonic ambition. Britain exhibits a confrontational counter-revisionist role narrative that prioritises deterrence, collective defence, and opposition to Russian claims, framing European security primarily through NATO. Russia exhibits a revisionist role narrative that frames European security as threatened by Western expansion and challenges the legitimacy of existing arrangements, presenting itself as a sovereign great power contesting a hegemonic order.

The interaction between Western and Russian narratives reveals fundamentally incompatible understandings of security, order, and legitimacy, with the incompatibility enacted through repeated responsibility and legitimacy redefinition. The narrative contestation was not constant over time, but rather developed as the conflict it was related to transformed over three phases, indicating that it is a dynamic process responsive to discursive pressure. While sustained and multi-actor contestation might be expected to weaken narratives over time, in the Russian case it instead reinforced narrative rigidity and intensification, showing an asymmetry in the effects of contestation on identity and narrative change, as Russia's strategic narrative shows minimal responsiveness to counter-narratives, as its self-perception as a great power functions as an existential narrative, being deeply rooted in strategic culture and historical experience. The Western states deny Russia's self-claimed role of an emerging revisionist power, while Russia continues to deny Western authority to set the legitimacy criteria, furthering the divide between them and limiting the effect of contestation due to fundamentally incompatible perceptions.

Perceptions differ between the three Western states as well, whereas France emphasises European sovereignty and defence capability through the EU, Germany advances a sovereign

Europe narrative while anchoring it in NATO complementarity, and Britain prioritises NATO deterrence as the primary guarantor of the European security order. Of the three, Britain was the most counter-revisionist of the three in relation to Russia, while Germany was more oriented toward restraint and escalation management, and France was more reactive and dynamic. The strategic narratives of the three Western states exhibited greater flexibility and adaptation in response to counter-framing, and their narratives were adjusted through interaction, although not transformatively. The results of the analysis imply that strategic culture constrains the range of acceptable adaptations, but does not prevent selective reinterpretation, with leaders actively adapting elements of their respective strategic cultures, with this being more permissive under conditions of crisis. Narrative contestation can thus operate as a mechanism of role negotiation and indirect power, whereby strategic narratives do not only justify foreign and security policy after decisions are taken, but define the conditions under which policies become appropriate, legitimate, and defensible within the European security order.

Conclusion

Having examined the strategic discourses of European great powers, the article shows how strategic narrative contestation operates as a form of discursive conflict through which roles, identity, legitimacy, and authority within the European security order are negotiated and contested. The analysis indicates that strategic narratives do not function simply as communicative efforts, but interact through conflict, determining how security is framed and how foreign and security policy choices are justified, constrained, and defended. While results confirm that strategic narratives are rooted in strategic culture, which conditions the range of possible role conceptions and security framings available, they also indicate it does not function as a static or deterministic framework. A conceptual contribution is made by re-theorizing strategic narrative contestation not as a problem of persuasion or a failure of reception, but as a constitutive political process and a form of discursive conflict. Contestation is shown to be politically productive by affecting role identities, legitimacy, and the boundaries of acceptable security action. Thus strategic narratives can be understood as both structured by strategic culture and transformed through interaction with rival narratives rather than as rigid projections, which could influence the strategic cultures in return.

Throughout the examined period, narrative contestation shaped the terms on which security action was narrated as legitimate and which strategic roles were narrated as viable. The article thus attempts to extend strategic narrative theory toward interaction and contestation, doing so by linking narrative contestation to role identity formation, recognition, and strategic culture. This means that roles are not simply declared or claimed, but negotiated relationally through discursive conflict, and that strategic culture remains bounding without being unchangeable through discursive means, as contestation provided controlled adaptability rather than identity collapse. In arguing this, it is not

suggested that strategic narratives are independent of material power, political action, or geopolitical constraints, but rather that narrative contestation interacts with material dynamics by affecting legitimacy, authority, and the conditions under which policy choices become appropriate and defensible. Conceptualising narrative contestation as discursive conflict therefore offers an analytical framework applicable beyond the empirical context of the article, with relevance for other contexts in which competing role conceptions and security narratives intersect. The findings also diverge from the assumption that continual contestation would necessarily weaken or moderate strategic narratives, as the Russian case instead shows narrative hardening, while the Western cases show more selective and careful adaptation. Narrative contestation should therefore be treated as constitutive and politically productive, especially in times of crisis or renegotiation of the accepted international order. Future research could expand the narrative analysis to other powerful state actors, or other states directly affected by the deterioration of the European security order.

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