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# Competing visions: the impact of Franco-German narrative divergence on EU strategy

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## ABSTRACT

The European Union's ability to craft and project a coherent strategic narrative is crucial for its global influence, yet it is complicated by the divergent approaches of its two key players, France and Germany. This article examines the extent to which French and German strategic narratives converge or diverge across six key foreign policy areas: relations with the United States, China, Russia, Africa, military power, and multilateralism. Using the conceptual frameworks of strategic narratives and narrative alliances, it operationalizes a typology of narrative convergence across five analytical dimensions and introduces the concept of narrative type mismatch: the finding that France and Germany frequently narrate the same issues through different types of narratives (system, identity, or policy), generating structural divergence even when substantive positions overlap. The analysis reveals that while both countries share the overarching goal of a strong Europe, the variations in their narrative types create a fragmented narrative alliance that weakens the EU's ability to act as a unified geopolitical player. Through concrete illustrations including defense cooperation, the Sahel, and the China de-risking debate, the article shows how this fragmentation creates policy friction and openings for external actors to exploit European divisions.

## KEYWORDS

Strategic narratives; France; Germany; European Union; narrative convergence; narrative type mismatch

## Introduction

The European Union's ability to craft and project a coherent strategic narrative is crucial for its global influence. Yet this ambition is complicated by the divergent approaches of its two most powerful member states, France and Germany. While both advocate for European strength, their differing interpretations of strategic autonomy, multilateralism, and security create a fragmented EU discourse that hinders collective action. This article examines the extent of Franco-German narrative convergence and its implications for the EU's capacity to present itself as a unified actor in global affairs.

In particular, it focuses on six key foreign policy issues: relations with the United States, China, Russia, and Africa, the role of military power, and multilateralism. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017) and narrative alliances (Homolar & Turner, 2024), it examines whether the Franco-German discourse forms a coherent 'narrative alliance' or remains fragmented as a loose 'discourse coalition.'

While both countries advocate for a strong and autonomous Europe, their approaches to global engagement reflect distinct historical legacies, national priorities, and strategic cultures. France, driven by a tradition of Gaullist autonomy, frames European sovereignty as an essential counterbalance to great-power rivalry, advocating for strategic autonomy in defense and global governance. Germany, shaped by its post-war identity and economic interdependence, maintains a more cautious approach, emphasizing multilateralism and transatlantic stability while avoiding narratives of hard power projection.

The article makes three contributions. First, it operationalizes the typology of narrative convergence proposed by Homolar and Turner (2024), developing observable criteria across five analytical dimensions to distinguish between discourse coalitions, narrative alliances, and discourse communities. This provides a replicable framework for assessing narrative convergence that can be applied beyond the Franco-German case. Second, it introduces the concept of 'narrative type mismatch': the finding that France and Germany frequently narrate the same issue through different types of narratives (system, identity, or policy),

generating structural divergence in the EU's strategic communication even when the two countries agree on substantive policy positions. This mechanism helps explain the persistent gap between the Franco-German consensus on a 'strong Europe' and the recurrent impression of strategic incoherence in the EU's external projection. Third, the article illustrates the concrete consequences of this narrative fragmentation for the EU's capacity to act, showing through specific short vignettes (including Franco-German defense cooperation, the Sahel withdrawal, and the China de-risking debate) that mismatched narratives create policy friction, coordination failures, and openings for external actors to exploit European divisions.

Thus, the article offers an analytical account of *why* the EU struggles to project a unified strategic posture. If France and Germany struggle to harmonize not just their positions but the narrative registers through which they frame those positions, the EU risks presenting an incoherent foreign policy that undermines its credibility as a geopolitical actor. Conversely, the areas where external shocks have forced narrative convergence (most notably on Russia and China) suggest that alignment is possible, though it requires deliberate attention to the types of narratives deployed.

### **Strategic narratives and narrative alliances**

Strategic narratives are 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors' (Miskimmon et al., 2015, p. 341). As the introduction to this special issue makes clear, the EU's narrative about the world order is fundamentally one of gradual ordering through policy integration, and this experience should be broadly generalizable worldwide (see also De Vries, 2023). However, the current transformation of the international system (Cooley & Nexon, 2020) fundamentally challenges this narrative. Moreover, the EU's institutional set-up, which combines supranational and intergovernmental aspects (Hix & Høyland, 2022), makes the establishment of a single strategic narrative difficult, since potential narrators include EU Commissioners, heads of state and government, and key ministers. As Miskimmon (2017, p. 102) observes, 'An identifiable EU narrative is often difficult to discern. EU and member state actors working in external relations often claim to speak for Europe, which amplifies the EU's diplomatic cacophony.' The transformations of the current international order risk amplifying this cacophony, since EU member states are likely to assess and react differently to these changes. Hence, it is worthwhile exploring the degree to which member states converge on how they talk about Europe in the world.

### ***From discourse coalitions to discourse communities***

To explore such (dis-)alignments, I take inspiration from Homolar and Turner's concept of 'narrative alliances,' defined as 'collective storylines that allow identification through differentiation' (Homolar & Turner, 2024, p. 215). The authors identify three ideal-types: 'discourse coalitions' (minimal integration, separateness), 'narrative alliances' (greater integration, 'we-ness'), and 'discourse communities' (the most integrated, togetherness). Given its institutional depth, the EU might be expected to constitute a discourse community. Whether this is empirically the case, however, remains an open question.

Applying this typology to empirical analysis requires operationalization. Building on the narrative analysis framework developed by Freistein et al. (2024), I propose five analytical dimensions along which narrative convergence can be assessed: plot structure, characterization of actors, policy prescriptions, temporal framing, and rhetorical alignment. [Table 1](#) summarizes the criteria for each ideal-type.

These thresholds are heuristic boundaries on a continuum. A discourse coalition is identifiable when convergence is limited to one or two dimensions; a narrative alliance emerges when convergence extends across at least three; and a discourse community requires convergence across all five. As this article demonstrates, the Franco-German relationship often falls short of the discourse community threshold even on issues where institutional coordination is most developed.

The operationalization also suggests a key analytical issue. When two states narrate the same foreign policy issue through different types of narratives (for instance, when one frames it as an identity question while the other frames it as a policy problem) the resulting divergence is qualitatively different from a situation where both use the same narrative type but disagree on content. I call this 'narrative type mismatch'. Two countries may converge on substantive policy positions yet still project strategic incoherence if one

**Table 1.** Operationalized criteria for distinguishing between discourse coalitions, narrative alliances, and discourse communities.

Dimension	Discourse Coalition (separateness)	Narrative Alliance (we-ness)	Discourse Community (togetherness)
Plot structure	Separate storylines; different protagonists and antagonists; no shared causal logic	Shared antagonist(s) and partially overlapping plot; distinct emphases on causes and solutions	Common plot with shared protagonist ('we') and antagonist(s); converging causal logic
Characterization of self and others	National 'I' dominates; Europe invoked instrumentally or not at all	Mix of national and European 'we'; shared characterization of key third parties with different nuances	European 'we' dominates; national identity subordinated; consistent characterization of others
Policy prescriptions	Divergent or contradictory preferred policy solutions	Overlapping strategic goals but different preferred instruments or sequencing	Converging goals and instruments; coordinated framing of implementation
Temporal framing	Different origin stories and futures; no shared 'turning points'	Shared crisis moments; partially aligned past and future narratives	Common past-present-future arc; shared foundational moments
Rhetorical alignment	No cross-referencing between narrators; accidental convergence at most	Some deliberate alignment; occasional echoing of partner's framing	Explicit mutual reinforcement; joint statements; deliberate co-construction

frames its commitment in terms of identity and historical obligation while the other frames it in terms of pragmatic necessity. Narrative type mismatch generates structural divergence in the EU's strategic communication even in the absence of substantive policy disagreement.

### **Types of strategic narratives**

To specify these narrative types, I turn to Miskimmon et al. (2017), who identify three categories. International system narratives explain the structure of the world, identify the key actors, and explain how the system operates: for example, the promotion of a 'rules-based order' now narrated as being under threat (Börzel & Zürn, 2021). Identity narratives define the story of a political actor, outlining its values and objectives; they can be powerful motivators for action within specific normative boundaries (Tsygankov, 2016). Policy narratives justify the necessity and desirability of a specific policy, detailing how it will be implemented (Fischer, 2003).

Crucially, these three types carry different implications for cross-national convergence. System narratives tend to be the most amenable to convergence, because they describe external realities that multiple actors may assess similarly under the same structural pressures. Identity narratives are the most resistant, because they are rooted in distinct national histories and strategic cultures. Policy narratives occupy an intermediate position: more specific than system narratives and therefore more likely to diverge, but more negotiable than identity narratives because they concern instruments rather than foundational values. This hierarchy has direct implications for the Franco-German case: where both countries narrate an issue through system narratives, convergence is more likely; where one narrates through identity and the other through policy, convergence is structurally difficult even when stated objectives overlap.

Combining the Homolar and Turner typology with the Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle narrative categories produces a two-dimensional analytical framework. On one axis, I assess the *degree* of narrative convergence for each issue area, locating the Franco-German discourse on the continuum between discourse coalition and discourse community. On the other, I identify the *type* of narrative each country deploys, and examine whether both narrate the issue through the same type. Where convergence is high and types are aligned, the EU can project a coherent message. Where convergence is low and types are mismatched, the EU's strategic communication is most vulnerable to fragmentation.

### **Case selection, data, and method**

I apply this framework to the narratives that French and German leaders adopt regarding six key issues: the relationship with the United States, China, Russia, and Africa, the role of military power, and multilateralism. These issue areas capture the diversity of challenges associated with the transformation of the international order along three dimensions. Relations with the United States, China, and Russia represent the EU's most consequential major-power relationships. Africa represents the EU's relationship with its immediate southern

neighborhood and provides a critical test case for narrative convergence given the different historical legacies that France and Germany carry on the continent, while also avoiding the disciplinary bias towards the study of 'great powers' identified in the strategic narratives literature (Miskimmon et al., 2017). Military power and multilateralism are cross-cutting substantive issues that capture, respectively, the means the EU is willing to deploy and its preferred mode of engagement with the international system.

The focus on France and Germany is justified by their weight as the EU's two largest economies and most important military powers, and by the central role of the Franco-German relationship in European integration (Krotz & Schild, 2012; Schramm & Krotz, 2024). While the degree to which Berlin and Paris converge on specific policies is well-covered in the literature – including on economic (Howarth & Schild, 2022), defense (Pannier & Schmitt, 2014), and industrial policy (Di Carlo & Schmitz, 2023) – this is less the case for narrative convergence. Existing studies explore how individual countries frame European issues (Chopin, 2017; Hertner & Miskimmon, 2015), how common frames facilitate policy integration (Hofmann & Mérand, 2020), or how the EU is legitimized in national discourses (Beaudonnet et al., 2023; De Wilde, 2023; Huntley, 2024), but they do not systematically address how narratives about the EU in the world are created and whether they are congruent across the two countries.

The analysis covers the Macron presidency in France (2017–2024) and the last Merkel government (2018–2021) and Scholz government (2021–2024) in Germany. The data collection stopped before Donald Trump's reelection and thus does not take his second presidency into account. A database of public speeches was constituted with the help of a research assistant, comprising speeches from the President (France) and the Chancellor (Germany), as well as the ministers of Economics and Finance, Foreign Affairs, and Defence in both countries. Including multiple institutional actors captures potentially diverging interests across ministries and allows observing narrative convergences or divergences not only between France and Germany but also within each country's executive apparatus. The multiplication of narrators and speech contexts also helps separate context-specific elements from recurring patterns in each country's discourse. Due to space limitations, the narratives are succinctly presented and illustrated with one illustrative quote, but the analysis is based on an examination of numerous sources.

Methodologically, the analysis combines thematic and discourse analysis (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024). I first conducted close reading to select relevant segments, then coded them according to the type of narrative (system, identity, or policy) they contribute to, drawing on the 'plot' and 'characterization' dimensions of narrative analysis (Freistein et al., 2024). I adopt a thin-rationalist approach, focusing on the logic of intentionality and the actors' attempts to frame specific issues, rather than investigating the deeper norms and beliefs embedded in the texts. This focus on intentionality and signaling of preferences through discourse enables the systematic comparison between French and German narratives.

Ideally, a broader analysis across all EU member states should be conducted, but resources and language limitations prevent this. However, this comparative study of the EU's two biggest powers could serve as the basis for further exploration.

## Germany's strategic narratives

### *The United States*

Germany's transatlantic narrative has evolved from Merkel's *identity narrative* of institutional commitment to Scholz's *policy narrative* of strategic necessity. Under Merkel, the relationship emphasized shared values and Germany's role as stabilizer of the liberal order: 'German-American and European-American relations are a pillar of our foreign policy. A foreign policy that is obviously guided by interests, but that is very much also committed to shared values' (Merkel, 2021). Trump's presidency created pressure to reposition Germany as a more self-reliant actor, though the shift remained non-confrontational.

Under Scholz, the Russian invasion of Ukraine reinforced the centrality of the transatlantic partnership. Scholz's rhetoric is marked by a notably emotional transatlanticism, describing the Biden presidency as 'a blessing for us all' and declaring that 'the United States of America have always guaranteed European security. And I am deeply grateful to the American people' (Scholz, 2023). This emotional framing contrasts with Macron's more qualified appreciation. Yet Scholz's government also acknowledged the fragility of this dependence, noting that 'the Trump administration turned the spotlight on our dependency on American

security guarantees' (Scholz, 2022b). The result is a narrative that evolves towards strategic pragmatism, though the emotional register of Scholz's transatlanticism retains identity elements that sit uneasily with a purely instrumental framing.

### China

Germany's China narrative has shifted from a *policy narrative* of economic pragmatism under Merkel to a more geopolitically aware *system narrative* under Scholz. Merkel framed China primarily through trade and investment, acknowledging tensions only cautiously: 'We will be addressing our strategic relations with China, which are characterized by close trade links but equally by very different approaches to social policy, particularly respect for human rights' (Merkel, 2020). While human rights surfaced in her rhetoric, they remained a secondary qualifier, tempered by Germany's dependence on the Chinese market.

Under Scholz, China is increasingly framed as a systemic rival. At the Munich Security Conference, he warned that 'China as well as others exploit the flanks of our democracies for their own interests' (Scholz, 2023), and explicitly adopted the EU's tripartite framing, describing China through 'the triad of 'partner, competitor and rival'' (Scholz, 2022a). Yet Scholz does not abandon Merkel's economic pragmatism entirely. The result is a hybrid discourse in which economic cooperation remains a priority but strategic caution is introduced – a shift that aligns with the EU's growing recognition of China as both an indispensable partner and a strategic challenge.

### Russia

Germany's Russia narrative has undergone the most radical transformation in its foreign policy, shifting from *policy-driven* engagement under Merkel to a security-driven *system narrative* under Scholz. Merkel's pragmatic approach, which shaped the pursuit of Nord Stream 2, was characterized by persistent commitment to diplomatic resolution. On the Minsk process, she declared: 'It grieves us to see that the ceasefire is still broken every single day. But we won't give up hope' (Merkel, 2018). This language of grief and hope frames the relationship through a diplomatic-moral lens where persistence in dialogue is itself a virtue. Following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Merkel's rhetoric became more normative, but room for dialogue remained.

Scholz's response to the 2022 full-scale invasion marks a complete rupture. His *Zeitenwende* speech redefined Germany's strategic position: 'Putin's Russia wants to redraw boundaries with violence – something that we in Europe never wanted to experience again. The brutal attack on Ukraine is therefore also an attack on Europe's security order' (Scholz, 2022a). Scholz subsequently emphasized Germany's material break with the past: 'we in Germany ended our dependency on Russian energy during the course of the last twelve months' (Scholz, 2023). There are legitimate doubts about the sustainability of Germany's *Zeitenwende* (Klinke, 2025), but rhetorically, the evolution from Merkel's hopeful diplomacy to Scholz's security-driven confrontation is unmistakable.

### Africa

Germany's Africa narrative has evolved from a predominantly *policy-driven* focus on development aid under Merkel to a more strategically aware engagement under Scholz, though it remains markedly distinct from the French approach. Under Merkel, Africa was narrated through the lens of development cooperation and migration management. She framed Africa in economic and humanitarian terms, linking the continent primarily to 'issues relating to cooperation on migration' (Merkel, 2020) and emphasizing European coordination: 'when individual member states work in cooperation with the Commission in specific African countries [they] achieve so much more than if we all headed off there to do our own thing' (Merkel, 2018). Notably absent from Merkel's discourse is any sustained engagement with Africa as a security partner, a silence that distinguishes the German narrative sharply from France's emphasis on counterterrorism and military operations.

Under Scholz, Africa is reframed as a strategic partnership with geopolitical relevance. In Dakar in 2022, Scholz declared: 'When I talk of an inextricable link between Africa and Europe, I'm therefore not only talking

about our past and present. I'm thinking of a genuine African-European partnership for the future' (Scholz, 2022c). He further emphasized Africa's dynamism: 'Africa is the youngest and fastest growing continent. If we manage to provide Africa's young people with a high level of training, that will bring incredible opportunities for development – first and foremost in Africa itself – but also for an ageing Europe' (Scholz, 2022c). Most revealing is Scholz's growing geopolitical pragmatism: 'If we refuse to cooperate with certain African states because they do not fully meet our standards, our values, then Russia will step in. Usually not for the good of the country or the stability of the region' (Scholz, 2023). This realist turn, linking African engagement to great-power competition, would have been unusual under Merkel.

Foreign Minister Baerbock's discourse further illustrates the evolution: 'We can see how Russia and others are spreading dangerous, false narratives in order to sow discord within our societies, but also between us and our partners. For example in many African countries, where Moscow is painting the picture of a cold, colonial West' (Baerbock, 2022). Yet even as Germany's Africa engagement becomes more strategically aware, its emphasis remains on development, economic partnership, and multilateral coordination – a fundamentally different register from France's narrative of security operations and post-colonial identity transformation.

### **Military power**

Germany's military narrative remains primarily a *policy narrative* mixed with an *identity narrative*, though the balance has shifted markedly. Under Merkel, Germany's approach was defensive and NATO-oriented, shaped by post-war constraints. She cautiously endorsed European military integration: 'We ought to work on the vision of one day establishing a proper European army. That would not be an army in competition with NATO – don't misunderstand me – but it could be an effective complement' (Merkel, 2018). The immediate qualifier is characteristic of Germany's identity as a reluctant military power.

With Scholz, the *Zeitenwende* marked a break. In a striking formulation, he declared: 'We Europeans, and before anyone else that means we Germans, must make more efforts towards credibly projecting enough military strength that other powers will not even think about attacking us' (Scholz, 2022b). The phrase 'before anyone else that means we Germans' is a remarkable piece of identity narration, singling out Germany as bearing special responsibility for European military credibility. This represents both an identity shift and a policy narrative focused on military modernization, driven by the urgency of the Russian threat.

### **Multilateralism**

Multilateralism has remained the most consistent feature of Germany's foreign policy, framed under Merkel as a core *identity narrative*. Her speeches consistently portrayed the EU, NATO, the UN, and the WTO as fundamental to global stability: 'In a globalized world, it is Europe that gives us our options in the first place!' (Merkel, 2020). This framing presents European multilateralism not as a constraint on national sovereignty but as its very precondition, a characteristically German formulation that anchors multilateral cooperation in identity rather than strategic calculation.

Scholz has continued this discourse but with a notable evolution, integrating military security into the multilateral framework. He argued in Prague that 'In a world that is home to eight – and perhaps ten – billion people in the future, each and every one of our European nation states is, taken by itself, much too small to stand up for its interests and values alone' (Scholz, 2022a), and that 'every improvement, every step towards greater compatibility between European defence structures within the framework of the EU, strengthens NATO' (Scholz, 2022a). Germany's commitment to multilateralism thus illustrates the evolution of an identity narrative that now encompasses security alongside its traditional economic and institutional dimensions.

## **France's strategic narratives**

### **The United States**

France's transatlantic discourse has been primarily an *identity narrative* with significant elements of a *system narrative*, as Macron has sought to redefine the partnership within the broader framework of European

sovereignty (Schmitt, 2017). At the Conference of Ambassadors in 2022, Macron acknowledged the alliance while immediately qualifying it: 'We should be grateful and thankful to the United States of America. Will that Administration always be the same? Nobody can tell, and we cannot delegate our collective security and our stability to the choices of American voters in the coming years' (Macron, 2022a). The rhetorical structure is revealing: gratitude is immediately followed by a warning about dependence, encapsulating the French identity narrative in a single passage.

At the GLOBSEC summit in 2023, Macron was even more direct: 'I say this very clearly, we Europeans must be active players of these treaties that cover our security and build the future framework. If we delegate our role to others, Russia, the United States or I don't know who, we will never be credible players' (Macron, 2023a). This dual approach (calling for European defense independence while maintaining transatlantic ties) underscores a vision of a multipolar world where Europe asserts itself as an independent power center. The system narrative is not one of severing ties with the U.S., but of recalibrating the relationship so that Europe is a strong and equal partner rather than a subordinate ally. The contrast with Scholz's emotional transatlanticism is striking.

### China

France's China stance combines an *international system narrative* and a *policy narrative*. From his first term, Macron framed China as a challenge requiring European independence from both superpowers. At the Conference of Ambassadors in 2022, he was explicit: 'We have China, a systemic rival with which we do not share democratic values but with which we must continue to work in order to find answers to common challenges – such as the climate and biodiversity' (Macron, 2022a). French leaders have been particularly vocal in refusing a binary geopolitical logic: 'We are not willing to have a strategy of confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific. Our strategy in the region is to preserve the freedom that comes with sovereignty' (Macron, 2022a).

During his state visit to Beijing in 2023, Macron further developed this framing: 'It goes absolutely without saying that we do not share China's political system. There is even a rivalry that we fully accept with the European Union, but we also know that we have major international issues on which we must engage, we have somewhat special human relations' (Macron, 2023b). This insistence on France's historically distinct relationship with China (emphasizing long-standing cultural, scientific, and economic ties) reflects an approach of engagement without subordination, ensuring that trade and investment remain priorities while France and Europe retain the capacity to act independently on security and strategic decisions.

### Russia

France's Russia narrative has shifted from a *policy narrative* of dialogue to an *international system narrative* centered on security. During his first term, Macron pursued engagement with Russia, framing it as a neighbor with whom Europe experienced 'tensions': 'Confronted with all the current tensions with certain neighbors such as Russia, Europe has shown a front of unity and sovereignty' (Macron, 2017). The measured register is far from the language that would emerge after 2022.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, Macron's rhetoric shifted dramatically. He offered a detailed analysis of Russia's discursive strategy: 'We are plunged into a war of narrative and of interpretation, because Russia wants to ... establish a contemporary relativism where, with the undermining of the universalism of our values ... it invokes rationality, logic, and changes the system of blame' (Macron, 2022a). This passage is significant because Macron explicitly identifies the *narrative* dimension of the conflict. He complemented this with a call for European unity: 'We must not let Europe be divided in the face of this war. That is a challenge every day, as we do not have the same past experiences with Russia' (Macron, 2022a), an acknowledgment that narrative divergence on Russia exists within Europe itself. As the war continued, Macron's position hardened further, bringing France's policy into closer alignment with NATO's deterrence strategy.

### Africa

France's Africa discourse is primarily an *identity narrative* that seeks to redefine France's role on the continent, shaped by colonial history, the legacy of 'Françafrique,' and ongoing military operations. From his first term, Macron signaled this desire. In the Sorbonne speech, he declared: 'Our European policy can no

longer view Africa as a threatening neighbor, but as the strategic partner with which we need to confront tomorrow's challenges' (Macron, 2017). At Ouagadougou, he proposed 'a friendship to act' built on 'telling everything to one another' (Macron, 2017b). This rhetoric was paired with concrete measures, including the reform of the CFA franc, described by Finance Minister Le Maire as 'a historic reform which will bring about the end of the CFA franc' (Le Maire, 2018).

During the second term, the identity narrative deepened. Macron stated: 'Africa is not a backyard and even less a continent to which the Europeans and the French could dictate a development framework, but it is a continent where we must build respectful, balanced, responsible relationships' (Macron, 2023c). He also framed the partnership in European terms: 'In recent years, we have laid the foundations of a Euro-African axis which was embodied at the Brussels summit in February 2022, under the French Presidency' (Macron, 2023c). This institutionalization represents an attempt to Europeanize what had been a bilateral Franco-African relationship.

However, the narrative remains contradictory. Alongside the partnership rhetoric, Macron forcefully defended France's military record: 'the fight that we have led and that we are still leading today on Malian soil and that we will continue to lead in the Sahel is just, legitimate and useful. It is our pride' (Macron, 2022b). This blend of partnership discourse and military pride reflects a fundamental tension: the desire to move beyond the post-colonial paradigm while retaining a security role that inevitably evokes it. The contrast with Germany's Africa narrative is stark: France narrates through an identity lens shaped by historical responsibility and security imperatives; Germany through a policy lens shaped by development goals. This constitutes a clear case of narrative type mismatch.

### **Military power**

France's military discourse is primarily an *identity narrative* emphasizing European sovereignty. From the Sorbonne speech, Macron has championed strategic autonomy, calling for 'ensuring Europe's autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO' through a 'common strategic culture' and a 'European intervention initiative' (Macron, 2017). At the Conference of Ambassadors, he was explicit: 'Defence Europe is not in competition with NATO, is not a replacement, but rather an additional pillar' (Macron, 2022a). French leaders do not seek to replace NATO but to ensure Europe is capable of independent military action when necessary (Schmitt, 2025). A key development has been Macron's growing emphasis on nuclear deterrence as a pillar of European security, explicitly put forward in his speech of 2 March 2026, in which he outlined ways to integrate European conventional forces and the French nuclear capability into a gradually interlocked deterrence posture (Macron, 2026).

### **Multilateralism**

Macron's multilateralism has evolved from a *policy narrative* positioning France as champion of global governance to an *international system narrative* integrating multilateralism with strategic autonomy. In the Sorbonne speech, he framed the EU as the exemplary multilateral achievement: 'Europe alone can enable us to take action in the world' (Macron, 2017). During his first term, multilateralism was deeply tied to his European vision, with multilateral cooperation framed as a way to counterbalance the influence of the United States and China.

During the second term, multilateralism took on a security-oriented dimension. Macron described Europe's Ukraine response as proof: 'In a few weeks, our Union imposed sanctions which until then seemed unattainable' (Macron, 2023d). The EU's coordinated response reinforced the argument that multilateralism must include military and strategic cooperation. At the same time, Macron emphasized involving non-Western actors: 'We need to convince the global South, because there is ... a fragility that we must be clear about' (Macron, 2022a). Overall, Macron's multilateralism has evolved from a policy-driven narrative to a more strategic, system-oriented one.

### **Cacophony or polyphony? the Franco-German fragmented narrative alliance**

The previous discussion leads to establishing Table 2 below, comparing the French and German strategic narratives across the six issue areas.

**Table 2.** Comparison of the French and German strategic narratives on selected policy issues.

	France	Shared	Germany
United States	System narrative Identity narrative	X	Identity narrative becoming a policy narrative
China			Policy narrative becoming a system narrative
Russia			Policy narrative becoming a system narrative
Africa	Identity narrative	X	Policy narrative
Military power	Identity narrative	X	Policy narrative and identity narrative
Multilateralism	Policy and system narrative	X	Identity narrative

Returning to the operationalized framework, the degree of convergence can be assessed against the five analytical dimensions. A discourse coalition is identifiable when convergence is limited to one or two dimensions; a narrative alliance requires convergence across at least three; and a discourse community requires all five. The Franco-German relationship does not fall into a single category. Instead, there is a complex pattern of partial convergence and divergence that varies by issue area.

### **Areas of convergence**

On China, France and Germany converge across three dimensions: both share the plot of a rising power requiring management, both increasingly characterize China as a systemic rival alongside economic partner, and both prescribe cautious engagement with strategic de-risking. They differ in temporal framing (France narrated the challenge earlier) and rhetorical alignment (Scholz echoes the EU's 'partner, competitor, rival' triad while Macron constructs a more independent framing). This constitutes an emerging narrative alliance. However, the April 2023 episode in which Macron warned against becoming 'America's vassal' during a state visit to Beijing, while Germany maintained its transatlantically-aligned framing, illustrated how *narrative asynchrony* can undermine EU coherence even on issues where the broad policy direction is shared.

On Russia, the war in Ukraine has forced dramatic convergence. Both countries share the plot (Russia as aggressor), the characterization (revisionist power), and the temporal framing (February 2022 as turning point). However, their policy prescriptions diverge: France frames its response through European strategic autonomy, Germany through NATO solidarity. This narrative type mismatch prevents a fully coherent European defense discourse even where the diagnosis is shared. It also carries implications for durability: Germany's policy framing suggests decoupling is a crisis response; France's identity and system framing suggests it is a permanent strategic posture.

On multilateralism, convergence is strongest at the level of goals: both countries emphasize global governance institutions as the foundation of European foreign policy. Yet the narrative type mismatch persists: France narrates multilateralism through a system and policy lens (multilateralism as instrument of European power), Germany through an identity lens (multilateralism as constitutive of what Germany *is*). Even on their most convergent issue, the underlying rationale (and the conditions under which multilateralism might be subordinated to other priorities) differs.

### **Areas of divergence**

On the United States, narratives diverge most visibly. Germany's discourse is structured around emotional commitment to NATO, with Scholz expressing deep 'gratitude' to the American people (Scholz, 2023). France positions itself as advocate for European autonomy, with Macron warning against delegating security 'to the choices of American voters' (Macron, 2022a). Both share the plot of a Western alliance under pressure, but their desired endpoints diverge: Germany wants a reinvigorated transatlantic partnership; France wants a rebalanced one. The second Trump administration may force greater alignment, but for the period under analysis, this remains a discourse coalition.

On Africa, convergence is weakest. France narrates through an identity lens shaped by colonial history and security imperatives; Germany through a policy lens of development and economic opportunity. Plot structures, characterizations, and policy prescriptions all diverge. The only shared dimension is temporal (both narrate a 'new partnership' post-2020). This makes Africa the clearest case of a discourse coalition in the Franco-German relationship.

The consequences of this divergence were concretely visible in the Sahel. France's withdrawal from Mali in 2022 was narrated in Paris as a strategic recalibration: Macron defended the operations as 'just, legitimate and useful' (Macron, 2022b) while pivoting toward new partnership models. Yet this narrative existed in isolation from any European strategic framework. Germany's parallel engagement (through EUTM Mali, development cooperation, and participation in MINUSMA) operated in an entirely different register, emphasizing capacity-building and multilateral mandates. Foreign Minister Baerbock framed the German approach as supporting 'African ownership' and 'African solutions to African problems,' a formulation with no equivalent in French discourse, where ownership of security operations was itself a source of pride. The result was that France's withdrawal appeared to external observers as a national decision rather than a coordinated European repositioning. The EU's subsequent effort to establish a military partnership mission in Niger was complicated by the absence of a shared Franco-German narrative about the mission's purpose. Russia, through the Wagner Group's expansion, was able to present itself as an alternative security partner precisely in the narrative vacuum that Franco-German divergence had created. The Sahel case thus demonstrates how narrative type mismatch (France's identity-driven security narrative versus Germany's policy-driven development narrative) can create strategic openings for competitors even when both countries are, in principle, engaged on the same continent.

On military power, divergence remains deep despite the *Zeitenwende*. France deploys an identity narrative (Europe as sovereign military power, extended to nuclear deterrence in Macron's March 2026 speech), while Germany deploys a policy narrative (military modernization as a necessary response to a specific threat). This structural divergence means that Franco-German defense cooperation, however substantial in practice, lacks a shared narrative foundation.

The consequences are tangible. The Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS), the most ambitious European defense industrial partnerships in a generation, have been plagued by persistent delays, industrial disagreements, and political friction. The narrative analysis helps explain why. France frames these projects as instruments of European strategic autonomy, part of an identity narrative in which Europe must develop sovereign military capabilities. Germany frames them as contributions to NATO interoperability and burden-sharing, part of a policy narrative responding to allied pressure. These different frames translate into divergent industrial priorities: France favors European-only supply chains and technological sovereignty, while Germany has been more open to transatlantic components. The different political justifications also imply different expectations about the projects' ultimate purpose, and different conditions under which funding might be sustained or revised in national parliaments. The absence of a shared narrative about why these projects matter creates persistent friction that industrial negotiation alone cannot resolve.

### ***Narrative type mismatch as a source of strategic incoherence***

The comparison across issue areas reveals a pattern more analytically significant than the observation that France and Germany sometimes agree and sometimes disagree. Even on issues where they share broad goals, their narratives operate through different types of framing. On the United States, France deploys an identity/system narrative while Germany deploys an identity-becoming-policy narrative. On military power, France foregrounds identity while Germany foregrounds policy. On multilateralism, France emphasizes system and policy while Germany emphasizes identity. Only on China and Russia (where external shocks have forced convergence) do the narrative types begin to align.

This matters because an identity narrative and a policy narrative on the same issue speak to different audiences, invoke different legitimization logics, and imply different conditions under which the commitment might be revised. An identity narrative frames a commitment as constitutive of who the actor is; it signals permanence, because abandoning the commitment would mean abandoning a part of the self. A policy narrative frames the same commitment as a response to a specific problem; it signals contingency, because the commitment is logically tied to the problem's persistence. When France frames European defense as a matter of identity ('who we are') and Germany frames it as policy ('what we must do given the current threat'), the implied durability and scope of the commitment differs, and external actors can perceive this difference.

The China de-risking debate provides a clear illustration. In April 2023, Macron's state visit to Beijing culminated in remarks warning against becoming 'America's vassal'. The statement provoked strong reactions, not because it

represented an entirely new French position (as the empirical analysis showed, Macron had long framed European independence vis-à-vis both superpowers) but because it broke ranks at the moment when the EU was projecting a coordinated ‘de-risking’ strategy. Germany’s more cautious framing, emphasizing the ‘partner, competitor, rival’ triad, was difficult to reconcile with Macron’s assertion of strategic independence. The episode illustrates how narrative type mismatch operates in practice: France narrated de-risking through a system narrative of multipolar autonomy, Germany through a policy narrative of economic diversification. What looked like EU consensus was, in narrative projection, anything but unified. Beijing could read the divergence as evidence of European disunity; Washington could read it as confirming doubts about European strategic reliability.

A similar dynamic is visible even on the EU’s most unified response. On Russia, both France and Germany aligned on seven packages of sanctions, but Germany narrated energy decoupling as a pragmatic crisis response (‘we in Germany ended our dependency on Russian energy during the course of the last twelve months,’ Scholz, 2023), while France narrated the same response through the lens of European sovereignty and strategic transformation (Macron, 2022c). The difference matters for durability: Germany’s policy framing suggests decoupling may be relaxed when the immediate threat recedes; France’s system framing suggests it is a permanent feature of a new European posture. Narrative type mismatch, in other words, generates structural divergence in the EU’s strategic communication even in the absence of substantive policy disagreement. It shapes the conditions under which joint action is negotiated, justified, and sustained over time. Shared narratives lower the transaction costs of cooperation and enhance the credibility of commitments; mismatched narratives raise those costs and weaken that credibility.

## Conclusion

This article makes three interconnected contributions. First, it operationalizes the concept of ‘narrative alliance’ (Homolar & Turner, 2024) by developing observable criteria for distinguishing between discourse coalitions, narrative alliances, and discourse communities. This provides a replicable framework applicable to other bilateral relationships within the EU and beyond.

Second, it introduces the concept of *narrative type mismatch* – the finding that Franco-German strategic incoherence stems not only from substantive disagreements but from the fact that the two countries narrate the same issues through different types of narratives. This helps explain why France and Germany can share broad strategic goals yet persistently project strategic disunity: the answer lies not primarily in divergent interests but in divergent narrative registers, which imply different durability of commitments, address different audiences, and suggest different conditions for revision.

Third, it traces the concrete consequences of this fragmentation through empirical vignettes, demonstrating that narrative divergence has material implications for policy coordination and external credibility. On issues where external shocks have forced convergence (Russia, China), the EU has shown remarkable capacity for unified action. Where narrative type mismatch persists (Africa, military power, transatlantic relations), the costs of fragmentation are visible.

The Franco-German strategic narrative does not fit neatly into one category. On multilateralism, China, and to a lesser extent Russia, France and Germany are evolving toward a narrative alliance. On transatlantic relations, Africa, and defense, their narratives remain closer to a discourse coalition. This *fragmented narrative alliance* (an intermediate formation with issue-specific variation) represents a distinct structural feature of the EU’s strategic communication. Whether recent developments, including the second Trump administration and Macron’s 2026 nuclear deterrence proposals, will push toward alignment or further divergence remains to be seen. What this article establishes is that the *type* of narrative deployed matters as much as its content, and that bridging narrative type mismatches requires attention not just to what France and Germany say, but to the different reasons they give for saying it.

Future research could apply this framework to other EU bilateral relationships, examine how audiences perceive mismatched narratives, and investigate when narrative alignment leads to more effective policy coordination and when policy coordination can proceed despite narrative divergence. In practical terms, if the EU is to assert itself as a credible geopolitical actor, institutional mechanisms (such as coordinated EU strategic communication and regular Franco-German alignment exercises on the framing of key issues) could help mitigate the risks of narrative fragmentation. Ultimately, the EU’s global credibility depends not only on what it does, but on its ability to tell a coherent story about why it does it.

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