A discursive analysis understanding the framing of political willingness in the Netherlands towards military interoperability within the European Union.

A CONFLICTED NATION: ANALYZING POLITICAL DISCOURSE WITHIN THE NETHERLANDS ON EU MILITARY INTEROPERABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the willingness of the Netherlands in political discourse to enhance military interoperability within the European Union. Existing literature has examined defence integration through institutional or strategic lenses; the thesis differentiates by focusing on how political willingness is expressed through discourse in national politics. The study conducts a discourse analysis through a theory-testing approach of Dutch parliamentary and media debates from January 2018 until May 2025, through an operationalization of three hypotheses based on neo-realist and neo-functionalist theory. The findings reveal a shift: Before 2022, Dutch discourse was dominated by a realist logic of NATO reliance, while post-2022 discourse increasingly reflects support, but notably constrained, for EU-level defence cooperation. The thesis concludes that political willingness within the Netherlands is increasing but that it remains conditional, as concerns over autonomy and fiscal burden sharing within the EU persist. The results contribute to and nuance existing literature on EU defence integration and contribute to a general understanding of discursive political reasoning within the Netherlands.

Keywords: political willingness, discourse analysis, military interoperability, EU defence, Netherlands, neo-realism, neo-functionalism, sovereignty

During the preparation of this work, the author used <u>no</u> artificial intelligence tools.

List of Abbreviations

EDF – European Defence Fund

EEAS – European External Actions Service

EPC – Extra-Parliamentary Cabinet

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PC – Parliamentary Cabinet

PESCO – Permanent Structured Cooperation

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly volatile global security environment, the question of European military integration has shifted from a matter of political preference to one of strategic necessity (Clapp & Lazarou, 2025). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has re-awakened long-dormant fears of territorial aggression on the European continent. At the same time, U.S. President Donald Trump's skepticism towards NATO has caused doubts about the reliability of NATO among EU member states (Nemeth, 2024). With NATO's military strength still heavily reliant on American commitment (Nemeth, 2024; Bond & Scazzieri, 2022), these developments have amplified a critical strategic question: without the United States, can Europe defend itself?

These seismic shifts have compelled the European Union and its member states to reevaluate the foundations of their defence policies (Anicetti, 2024). In this context, the idea of European military interoperability has become a core element in European political discourse (Clapp & Lazarou, 2025). As the EU advances with military interoperable initiatives such as PESCO and EDF, the imperative is that integrating military capabilities is no longer just seen as an ambitious goal, but as a strategic necessity.

Building on these geopolitical developments, this thesis focuses on an underexplored dimension of the debate through the investigation of the political willingness of an EU member state: the political willingness of the Netherlands to enhance military interoperability within the EU. Few studies have empirically assessed the domestic political drivers that determine whether and how member states commit to military integration. In particular, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding how internal Dutch political dynamics shape its willingness to participate in EU defence efforts.

The knowledge gap is to be filled by analyzing how Dutch political actors frame and respond to EU military interoperability in political discourse. Specifically, the thesis asks: *To what extent is there political willingness in the Netherlands to enhance military interoperability within the European Union?* To answer this question, a qualitative case study is conducted. This analysis will be conducted by examining political debates, policy documents, institutional strategies, and media coverage from 2018 to 2025. More specifically, a comparison is made by covering the extent of political willingness from 2018-2021 & 2022-2025. This design allows for the assessment of whether political willingness has changed in

response to the context of the Ukraine war, rising EU defence activity, and domestic political restructuring (Fiott et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study is based on two contrasting theoretical frameworks, namely neo-realism and neo-functionalism, which offer different explanations for the motivations behind or against military interoperability within the Netherlands.

The main research question is primarily analytical and explanatory. It aims to assess both the level and character of political willingness within Dutch institutions and discourse. Moreover, through an investigation how political actors frame, support, or resist EU interoperability initiatives, and under what conditions this willingness is activated or constrained. Through an approach that contains 3 lenses, stemming from neo-realism and neo-functionalism, the thesis explores how institutional, strategic, and ideational variables shape Dutch political discourse towards military interoperability within the European Union.

To guide this inquiry, the following sub-questions are created:

- What structural or institutional challenges impact the Netherlands' interoperability with the European Union?
- How does the Netherlands' political discourse compare to that of other EU member states?
- Has political willingness for military interoperability changed after the war in Ukraine?
- What future scenarios for military interoperability are suggested by the political discourse and empirical findings?

The significance of this research is both academic and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature on EU defence integration by identifying willingness as a distinct and measurable political variable separate from institutional capacity or opportunity. Empirically, it provides a rigorous, data-driven account of Dutch political behavior on military integration. The findings may also be useful for EU policymakers and Dutch defence strategists by revealing the conditions under which support for military interoperability is most likely to be mobilized or constrained.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 first explains the definition of political willingness and military interoperability, after which it discusses the relevant

theoretical perspectives on political willingness and European defence cooperation based on two theories. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological design and process of the thesis. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, while Chapter 5 discusses the implications and concludes the findings of this thesis.

2. Theoretical Framework

To answer the central research question and its sub-questions, it is essential to establish a clear conceptual and theoretical framework. This study investigates political willingness as a discursively constructed phenomenon based on the premises and assumptions of the theories provided. As such, the next Chapters outline how political willingness is defined and operationalized in this thesis. It then introduces the theoretical perspectives of neo-realism and neo-functionalism, which form the basis for the coding framework used to interpret how political discourse on EU military interoperability within the Netherlands is perceived. Together, these theoretical lenses help to identify and classify the underlying logics that inform how political actors express support, resistance, or conditionality towards European defence cooperation.

A theoretical framework comprising two main theories, neo-realism and neo-functionalism, will be maintained. These theories serve as a guiding mechanism to rationalize an explanation of political behavior. Neo-realism addresses the core dynamics of defence cooperation, where its assumptions are enumerated under 'Assumptions neo-realism'. Neo-functionalism acts as an alternative theory if the assumptions of neo-realism do not sufficiently explain the reasoning behind political discourse in the Netherlands. This framework will be used to formulate hypotheses with these theories as a guiding mechanism. The assumptions underlying the theories are highlighted in the next paragraphs. Subsequently, the hypotheses are created, as illustrated in Table 1.0 & Table 1.1. However, first, the concept of political willingness is defined to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon itself, which is crucial for the research. Furthermore, the theoretical assumptions lead to three hypotheses, each of which represents a distinct set of coding, operationalized in Chapter 2.5, through which political willingness to support EU military interoperability may be expressed or constrained. These hypotheses directly connect to the research question by specifying under what theoretical conditions Dutch political actors are expected to support or oppose military interoperability.

2.1 Political willingness

To understand the topic of this thesis, the definition of 'Political willingness' is provided. Political willingness is defined as the actor's motivation or inclination to engage in political action despite potential risks and costs (Cioffi-Revilla and Starr, 1995). Moreover, willingness is the 'subjective evaluation of benefits versus costs and is influenced by factors such as beliefs, preferences, and perceived legitimacy of the political environment' (Cioffi-Revilla and Starr, 1995). In this case, Political willingness is conceptualized as the extent to which Dutch political institutions and actors demonstrate support for policy initiatives aimed at enhancing military interoperability within the European Union (NATO, 2025). This support may manifest itself through a range of mechanisms, including legislative action, budgetary commitments, public discourse, and active institutional engagement. Thus, political willingness encompasses areas like rhetorical expressions, such as positions articulated during parliamentary debates and policy addresses, concrete commitments, including participation in joint military initiatives, alignment in defence planning, and financial contributions to cooperative defence structures. Thus, political willingness is understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for policy action (Cioffi-Revilla and Starr, 1995). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that political willingness, while a necessary precondition for policy action, is not sufficient in itself in order to translate to action. Cioffi-Revilla and Starr (1995) argue that willingness must be considered alongside the availability of opportunity, institutional capacity, enabling conditions, and strategic context, as well as the presence of uncertainty. Even when political actors signal strong willingness, outcomes may be constrained or redirected by bureaucratic inertia, external dependencies, or institutional fragmentation.

Concluding, this thesis focuses specifically on the discursive expression of willingness, recognizing that it provides insight into political intent but does not guarantee implementation. The findings should therefore be interpreted as a measure of *stated political support*, rather than a direct predictor of strategic or operational outcomes.

2.2 Military interoperability

In addition to clarifying the concept of political willingness, this thesis provides the definition of military interoperability to ensure a clear understanding of its core subject. Giordano (2025) defines interoperability as "the ability for allies to act together coherently, effectively, and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic objectives." In the context of this thesis, interoperability refers specifically to the capacity of EU member states to align military planning, capabilities, and operational procedures within the framework of joint European defence efforts. The assessment of political willingness towards military interoperability will follow this definition of military interoperability.

2.3 Neo-realism

The foundation of this thesis relies on the theories provided, since they act as a guiding mechanism in the research process. Thus, it is essential to outline the assumptions neo-realism is based on, as these assumptions serve as the foundation of the mechanisms in this thesis that will explain Dutch political willingness to enhance military interoperability within the European Union. Neo-realism provides a useful lens to identify what motivates state behavior and what structural or political barriers might constrain deeper cooperation. The assumptions this thesis lists of neo-realism are primarily based on the Theory of International Politics (Waltz, 1979). Note that other existing theory in this chapter underpins and solidify these assumptions. Each assumption is related to the thesis topic, implying what each assumption may mean for the research outcome.

2.3.1 Anarchy

Neo-Realism argues that the international system is anarchic: no overarching authority exists to enforce order or provide guaranteed protection (Waltz, 1979). This suggests a sovereignty-based mechanism, indicating that states must rely on their capabilities or historically trusted alliances like NATO. Thus, from a realist perspective, interoperability may only be supported if it does not compromise the Netherlands' ability to act autonomously in a security crisis. This neo-realist argument is further strengthened by Keleman and McNamara (2021), who argue that the European Union has not evolved through war pressures but rather through

market integration and institutionalization. Consequently, the EU is perceived as lacking joint and centralized military authority, which neo-realists deem essential, given the anarchic nature of the international system. Furthermore, if a unified command is perceived as absent, states like the Netherlands regard EU military frameworks as incapable (Keleman and McNamara 2021).

2.3.2 Distribution of Power

States operate within a system where power is unequally distributed. The structure of the international system determines their behavior (Waltz, 1979). Thus, the relative power of each state influences its behavior. Dutch actors involved in defence policy may perceive that deepening EU defence integration risks consolidating power in larger states like France and Germany. If interoperability initiatives disproportionately benefit these actors, this could reduce support from the Netherlands, as policymakers might fear dependency on more powerful states. Thus, EU interoperability mechanisms can be seen as a way for the Netherlands to lose strategic independence, leading to resistance to interoperability.

2.3.2 Balance of Power

States aim to maintain an equilibrium to avoid domination by others. This is done through internal balancing (e.g., increasing defence spending) or external balancing (e.g., alliances) (Waltz, 1979). This logic explains Dutch reliance on NATO as external, especially the role of the U.S. for the Netherlands as an external balancing force against Russia. Moreover, political actors within the Netherlands might prefer NATO-led or bilateral initiatives over EU-centered defence mechanisms, limiting willingness to support EU interoperability unless it complements NATO structures.

2.3.3 Rational Actors Seeking Security

States are assumed to act rationally in pursuit of their survival and security (Risse-Kappen et al., 1995). Furthermore, states try to maximize security through actions that weigh the involved risks, benefits, and costs in policy. EU defence initiatives may be perceived as irrational, for instance, as inefficient, unreliable, or 'a waste of money', particularly if supranational decision-making is perceived as slow or politically constrained. Therefore, rational security policy may lead to a more selective or conditional participation in EU military interoperability.

2.3.4 Relative Gains and Cooperation Constraints

Neo-realism emphasizes that states are more concerned with relative gains than absolute ones. Even when cooperation is mutually beneficial, it may be avoided if others gain more (Grieco, 1988). This is highly relevant to Dutch concerns about defence budgeting, procurement, and industrial participation in EU projects like the EDF if Dutch actors believe that other actors or states benefit disproportionately, the involved actors can act as a barrier to political support.

2.3.5 Sovereignty Preservation

Cooperation is limited due to concerns over sovereignty and potential cheating. States are reluctant to give up decision-making autonomy (Waltz, 1979; Grieco, 1988).
It suggests that the willingness to pursue EU interoperability will be constrained unless mechanisms are strictly intergovernmental, and sovereignty is safeguarded.

2.4 Neo-functionalism

If neo-realism does not explain Dutch defence behavior, neo-functionalism may offer a more suitable framework for explaining political discourse within the Netherlands. Neo-functionalism, originally developed to understand European integration, focuses on the role of supranational institutions, non-state actors, and spillover processes. Contemporary scholars such as Jensen (2019) and Niemann et al. (2018) have refined this theory to explain how political and economic integration can deepen across different policy areas, including defence. Below, the key assumptions of neo-functionalism are outlined.

2.4.1 Supranational actors

Neo-functionalism assumes that states are not the only relevant actors in the international system. Supranational institutions, political parties, interest groups, and bureaucracies also drive integration processes (Jensen, 2019). Political willingness may be shaped not only by state-centric strategic concerns but also by the preferences of actors such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, pro-European parties, the European Commission, and EU defence agencies. These actors may advocate for interoperability as part of a broader integration agenda.

2.4.2 Spillover Effects

Integration in one policy domain can create functional pressure for further integration in adjacent areas (Niemann et al., 2018). While spillover is not automatic, it can occur politically, functionally (through institutional linkages), or be cultivated by actors who benefit from expanded integration. The growing integration of EU foreign and economic policy, especially in response to crises like COVID-19, the Ukraine war, and tariff wars, may create momentum to expand EU-level integration and military cooperation. If Dutch officials already participate in joint procurement or joint foreign policy coordination, defence interoperability could be the next logical step. Spillover thus helps explain gradual increases in willingness, even if full integration remains politically sensitive.

2.4.3 Supranational Institutions as Drivers of Integration

Neo-functionalism emphasizes on the autonomous role of supranational institutions like the European Commission or the European External Action Service (EEAS), which can shape agendas and facilitate cooperation (Niemann et al., 2018). Moreover, the existence of structured EU defence tools such as PESCO or the EDF may offer a platform that lowers the barrier for Dutch policymakers to engage in. By framing defence interoperability as technical or efficiency-focused rather than political, these institutions may enable increased Dutch willingness without requiring controversial treaty changes.

2.4.4 Neo-Functionalism as a Middle-Range Theory

As Jensen (2019) argues, Neo-functionalism has evolved from a "grand theory" to a middle-range theory better suited to explain sector-specific integration than the entire EU project. Political support for interoperability may grow incrementally, but through pragmatic engagement with specific projects or missions that align with national interests.

The neo-functionalistic logic is operationalized in Chapter 3 based on the functional spillover mechanism. This mechanism assumes that integration in one domain creates interdependencies in institutions that generate pressure to integrate in adjacent areas (Haas, 1958). In this context, growing interdependence across various areas within the EU will be used as reasoning to further integrate sectors in the European Union. More specifically, political discourse that supports EU military interoperability can be interpreted not only as a consequence of internally accumulated interdependence but also as framed through support

for EU procurements and efficiency reasoning. Therefore, as illustrated in Chapter 3, defence policy can be viewed as an extension of the EU for further integration.

2.5 Two strands

Neo-realism is often treated as a unified theory, but it contains two distinct strands relevant to this study. The first strand suggests that interoperability can be strategically useful as an external balancing mechanism, particularly when national security requires strong alliances and shared military capacity, such as under rising threat perception (Waltz, 1979). It is precisely relevant to this study as northern EU member-states are historically reliant on the USA as a mechanism for external balancing (Bond & Scazzieri, 2022). Stephen Walt (1987) further builds on these premises by highlighting that states act not only in response to power, but form alliances based on the perceived threat from other states. It could thus be expected that, through an external balancing act, when threat perception is high, support for EU-level defence cooperation can be considered limited.

This external balancing mechanism is operationalized in the methodological framework under H1 found in Chapter 3, where these mechanisms are considered in the hypotheses.

The second neo-realist strand is more skeptical, by emphasizing the risks of sovereignty loss, dependence, or unequal fiscal burden-sharing, especially in supranational frameworks like the EU (Walt, 1987). This strand considers external threats as less immediate, but perceives supranational integration as a risk to a nation's sovereignty. States that value autonomy highly may neglect the benefits of alliance to maintain independence (Walt, 1987). Furthermore, Walt (1987) argues that states avoid the potential benefits of alliances due to concerns of entrapment by being part of costly alliances.

Moreover, existing literature further highlights the relevance to this thesis's specific case of The Netherlands as northern EU member-states structurally adhere to more national sovereignty, while opposing fiscal burden sharing through mechanisms like Eurobonds (Mathijs & Merler, 2020). It is noted that H2-related discourse is not necessarily anti-EU sentiment, but rather rooted in a broader definition of democratic legitimacy within the European Union (Beetz, 2019). Finally, states may resist supranational initiatives when they are redistributing competencies like defence (Coman et al, 2024).

Neo-functionalism stands in contrast to the two strands of neo-realism. It stands as an alternative explanation if states support deeper cooperation in EU defence integration.

The assumptions listed in Chapter 2.3 will serve as the basis for the development of this hypothesis, focusing on the role of internal EU dynamics, functional spillover processes, and the agency of supranational institutions in shaping Dutch defence behavior.

2.6 Hypotheses

Based on the previously outlined assumptions of neo-realism and neo-functionalism, this research formulates three hypotheses to explain the logic in Dutch political discourse that influences the level of political willingness to enhance military interoperability within the European Union. Each hypothesis represents a distinct theoretical logic, based on the different expectations about state behavior, institutional dynamics, and the strategic rationale for, or against, military interoperability as listed in previous chapters. These hypotheses will guide the empirical analysis of political discourse. More specifically, the hypotheses below operationalize the theoretical logics from neo-realism and neo-functionalism about the central research question: *to what extent is there political willingness in the Netherlands to enhance EU military interoperability?*

First, the hypotheses are explained in a table in words to further solidify and assess the hypotheses based on the theoretical framework in Chapter 2.

Subsequently, the hypotheses will be listed in a table that will assess the hypothesis through the relationship between the dependent and independent variables.

This chapter aims to explain the expected relationship in detail, providing the reader with an in-depth understanding of the research objective.

Table 1.0 - Hypotheses by Theory

Hypotheses	Neo-Realism (H1)	Neo-Realism (H2)
To what extent is there political willingness in the Netherlands to enhance military interoperability	Neo-realism theory holds that states prioritize their own security and survival in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). Under conditions of heightened external threat, for example, like increased tensions due to the Russian-Ukrainian war, the	From a neo-realist viewpoint, states are cautious of cooperation that may lead to relative losses, particularly when they fear losing strategic autonomy or political influence (Grieco,

| within the European Union? | Netherlands is expected to reinforce existing defence alliances due to higher threat perceptions, preferring NATO over EU interoperability, either with or without a US-led NATO alliance. From this perspective, interoperability is more likely to be pursued through NATO mechanisms or bilateral frameworks, where strategic control and military readiness are perceived as stronger and more effective than through the EU. More specifically, the mechanism in this hypothesis illustrates NATO as a more reliable defence mechanism over EU-level procurements. Political discourse in such periods may reflect a strong adherence to NATO and reduced trust in EU defence capabilities. This hypothesis draws from the assumptions of anarchy, security-maximizing behavior, and external balancing. | 1988; Walt, 1987). If defence interoperability implies a transfer of authority to EU institutions which could be perceived as dominated by more powerful member states (e.g., France or Germany), Dutch political actors may resist such integration. This resistance may be especially pronounced in areas related to joint military funding, procurement, or command structures, where concerns over sovereignty and control are strongest. This hypothesis connects to the assumptions of distribution of power, relative gains, and sovereignty preservation, and expects political debates to emphasize national interest, fairness, and institutional caution. |

Hypotheses	Neo-Functionalism
To what extent is there political willingness in the Netherlands to enhance military interoperability	Neo-functionalism states that integration in one domain can create spillover effects into other areas through institutional mechanisms and interest alignment (Niemann et al., 2018; Jensen, 2019). If the Netherlands already cooperates with the EU in domains such as joint procurements or foreign policy coordination, this may gradually increase support for further cooperation in defence. Supranational

within the European Union?	institutions play a key role in facilitating such spillovers by lowering transaction costs and framing interoperability as a pragmatic, efficiency-driven initiative. This functional spillover-based hypothesis assumes that political willingness grows incrementally, driven by institutional momentum, bureaucratic familiarity, and domestic actors who view integration as beneficial or inevitable.

Table 1.0: A description of the expected hypotheses based on the assumptions listed in Chapter 2.

As mentioned earlier in this Chapter, the following table will highlight the expected relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

Table 1.1 - Expected hypothesis relationship IV → DV

Hypothesis	Independent Variable (IV)	Dependent Variable (DV)	Expected relationship
H1 – External Balancing Logic (Realist 1)	Threat Perception	The extent of political willingness for EU military interoperability	Higher perceived threats (IV) → Low EU Interoperability within a preferred US-based NATO framework (DV).
H2 – Sovereignty/Budget Concern logic (Realist 2)	Sovereignty & Budget concerns	The extent of political willingness for EU military interoperability	High concerns about sovereignty/budget (IV) → Low willingness for Interoperability (DV).
H3 – Neo Functionalist Logic	Functional spillover	The extent of political willingness for EU military interoperability	Functional spillover effect within the EU (IV) → High willingness for interoperability (DV).

Table 1.1: Describing the expected relationship between the independent and dependent variables based on the assumptions of the theories listed in Chapter 2.

These hypotheses aim to explain discursive expressions of political willingness, not direct policy outcomes. As explained in Chapter 2, political actors may signal support or opposition rhetorically without necessarily translating these into concrete policy changes.

While both theories offer valuable lenses, they are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they represent different emphases on explaining the rationale in political discourse; one prioritizing external systemic pressures, the other internal institutional dynamics. Their combined application allows for a richer understanding of the forces that shape Dutch strategic decision-making. Having defined the key theoretical lenses and their operational hypotheses, the following chapter outlines how these assumptions are systematically applied through a qualitative discourse analysis of Dutch political discourse.

3. Methodology

This section aims to explain the case description and the research process, including the data collection and analysis methods. Additionally, a coding scheme is visualized to provide a transparent explanation of how codes are translated into answers. First, a justification of the case selection is provided.

3.1 Case selection

The case selection of the Netherlands presents itself as an interesting case for investigating political willingness towards EU military interoperability. As a mid-sized EU member state with a long-standing commitment to NATO and a traditionally transatlantic orientation, its position within European defence integration is notably nuanced (Česnakas & Juozaitis, 2023). Beyond its strategic positioning, the Netherlands is a relevant case as it can have institutional leverage within EU policymaking. As an EU member state, the Netherlands holds the capacity to influence or block defence integration initiatives. More specifically, the minister-president can veto common security policies in the European Council (European Council, 2025). Thus, if political discourse in the Netherlands reflects a consistent lack of willingness towards EU interoperability, it could affect the position of the minister-president of the Netherlands in the European Council, which may have significant effects on EU-level outcomes, especially in the EPC cabinet of Schoof-1 due to its flexible structure. In contrast, an increase in domestic political support can signal alignment with, or enablement of, deeper defence integration. Therefore, analysing Dutch discourse not only investigates national

preferences, but also offers insights into potential facilitators or constraints within broader EU decision-making structures.

This makes the Netherlands a theoretically relevant topic for examining how EU member states balance national autonomy with collective security ambitions. As such, the Dutch case can act as a useful test case for international relations theories in this thesis by opening up an opportunity to empirically apply and contrast these theoretical frameworks in a real-world context where both security rationales and integration pressures are at play in political discourse.

3.2 Case description

Although guided by structured hypotheses and well-established theoretical frameworks, this study is fundamentally exploratory. The central research topic, political willingness for EU military interoperability in Dutch political discourse, has not been empirically examined in existing literature. Furthermore, the use of qualitative discourse analysis allows for a flexible approach that may reveal hybrid or unexpected theoretical alignments. The research does not claim that the lenses used, namely neo-realism and neo-functionalism, are the correct ones; it merely observes whether these lenses explain political behavior. Rather than confirming a single theory, this research explores which theoretical logics appear most prominently in political discourse in the Netherlands and how these patterns evolve over the given period. As such, it aims to generate insights into a complex and evolving political phenomenon, rather than deliver a definitive causal model. The goal of this research is not to reach a final answer on why political willingness is achieved to the extent found, but rather to determine the level at which it is evident and how this has changed or remained the same over the examined period. Factually, the research employs a grounded theory testing approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) in a case study. The data-gathering method is primarily archival research. Reports from the government, such as commission reports and general consultations, serve as the main sources of data, as these provide the most transparent means of analyzing the actions of the cabinet. A list of the analyzed documents can be found in Chapter 3.1.1, or more specifically, in Appendix A.

3.3 Method of data analysis

This research will apply a qualitative content analysis to systematically evaluate policy documents, parliamentary debates, and media coverage. This method allows for the identification of patterns, dominant narratives, and underlying themes in Dutch security policy discourse. Furthermore, the analytical techniques will be discussed to identify neo-realistic and neo-functionalistic language.

To assess political willingness to enhance military interoperability within the European Union, this thesis adopts a comparative time frame of eight years, divided into two distinct periods: 2018–2021 and 2022–2025. The first period (2018–2021) analyzes political discourse in the pre-Ukraine War context. The second period (2022–2025) analyzes political discourse in the Netherlands after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, the time frame overlaps with major institutional developments within the European Union, such as the adoption of the EU Strategic Compass in 2022 and renewed investment in PESCO and EDF frameworks between 2018 and 2025. Comparing these two periods allows the research to identify significant discursive shifts, changes in institutional behavior, and the emergence of new political drivers. It ensures the analysis is sensitive to context, avoids overgeneralization, and captures the evolving nature of Dutch political willingness in response to internal and external pressures.

Domestically, this timeline also coincides with the rise of a more flexible governance structure, illustrated by the Extra-Parliamentary Cabinet in the Netherlands enabling potentially faster shifts in strategic posture (Nederlandse Grondwet, 2025). The EPC allows for a further justification of the research, as the whole political position of the Netherlands is included in the coding process, thus of all parliament members, since the EPC allows for a flexible cabinet position. Thus, the EPC highlights the importance of analyzing political discourse as it offers a more flexible institutional structure.

3.3.1 Consulted documents

The documents analyzed in this thesis include reports from the Defence Commission of the Tweede Kamer, the 'DefensieNota', plenary debates, press sources, and parliamentary discussions related to political willingness. The Defence Commission primarily oversees defence-related matters concerning material and personnel, while also involving the Minister of Foreign Affairs in deliberations on international defence cooperation (Defensie Commissie,

2025). The 'DefensieNota' serves as the principal policy document outlining national defence strategy and is therefore essential for this study. Additionally, the 'Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen', an annual parliamentary debate in which political parties reflect on the government's policy agenda and respond to the national budget, are included in the analysis (Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen, 2024).

This research incorporates press sources such as NRC, De Telegraaf, and Algemeen Dagblad, which provide an external validity check by assessing whether parliamentary discussions and political intentions are translated into practice. Furthermore, plenary debates, where all members of Parliament are present, are included to ensure a comprehensive and rigorously sourced analysis (Wat Is Een Debat, 2025).

These materials were selected because they reflect the most representative expressions of political intent through the policy papers, democratic scrutiny through parliamentary debate, and public framing through press coverage. Together, they offer a triangulated view of political willingness across different institutional contexts.

In conclusion, this selection of diverse sources enables the study to capture the most relevant and representative expressions of political willingness. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that a broader range of documents exists beyond the scope of this thesis.

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3.4 Data collection

Followed by the selected reports and documents from the designated periods, the documents are separated and ordered openly in Atlas.ti, according to the coding scheme which is found in Tables 2.0 & 2.1.

The codes of each period are separated in Atlas.ti, where each period is labelled. Each code is listed and connected to its explanation based on the hypotheses made in Chapter 2, as seen in Table 2.0, 2.1 & 2.2.

Table 2.0, codes related to H1.

Codes H1	Coding
H1_NatoPreference	Nato-Preferring statements over EU-joint initiatives.
H1_ThreatResponse	Framing of security threats as requiring traditional alliances.
H1_EUUnreadiness	Criticism towards EU readiness in military crises.

H1_NationalReadiness	Readiness on crises, but an emphasis on self-reliance/national military preparedness.
H1_AmericanReliance	Referring to the US as essential in defence.
H1_BilateralPreference	Advocating bilateral alliances over EU-wide integration.

Table 2.1, codes related to H2.

Codes H2	Coding
H2_SovereigntyConcern	Fears of losing national control over military operations or defence policy.
H2_RelativeGainConcern	Statements on other states gaining relatively more from EU defence projects.
H2_EU-BureaucracyCritique	Framing EU initiatives as too inefficient or overly bureaucratic.
H2_BudgetBurdenCritique	Complaints about unfair contributions to EU defence funding.
H2_Oppose_JointBorrowing	Opposition to joint EU borrowing (Eu bonds i.e.)
H2_NationalBudgetPriority	Statements emphasizing domestic fiscality or budget sovereignty.

Table 2.3, codes related to H3.

Codes H3 (2018-2022)	Coding
H3_Spillover	Argument where defence cooperation is seen as a natural next step within the EU
H3_SupportJoint	Endorsements of on EU-level procurement.
H3_Integrationmomentum	Trust in EU institutions to organize deeper cooperations.
H3_EfficiencyFraming	Defence cooperation is framed as effective and efficient.
H3_Support_JointBorrowing	Support for joined borrowing.
H3_Multilateralism	Advocacy for multilateralism under European defence structures.

3.4.1 Prevalence criteria

Listed below are the prevalence criteria crafted to translate the codes to the level of political willingness. Note that in the period 2018-2021, 125 quotations were made. Whereas in the period of 2022-2025, a total of 115 quotations were made. Therefore, this research presents the interpretations of the coded segments relative to the number of quotations made. Based on the coded indicators, the hypothesis with the most presence, as listed in the thresholds in Table 3.4, will be interpreted as the most accurate explanation for current Dutch political willingness, thus answering the research question. However, findings may also reflect degrees of mixed assumptions or a hybrid model if multiple indicators from different theories are found. Additionally, quotations made by parties that are present in the coalition at their given period are highlighted, double-checking validity for possible policy implications.

3.4.2 Translating codes to conclusions

To answer the research question, *'To what extent is there political willingness in the Netherlands to enhance EU military interoperability?',* the number of proposed indicators serves as a pathway to answer the research question. The total number of coded indicators per hypothesis will then be aggregated into the interpreted support score as seen in Table 3.4, reflecting the level of theoretical support in the political discourse. The results of the two different periods will be assessed through a comparison of these results.

Table 3.4 – Interpretation of Quotations

Hypothesis	Number of coded segments	Interpreted support
H1	Number of H1 related codes	Low
H2	Number of H2 related codes	Moderate
H3	Number of H3 related codes	Strong

In Table 3.5, a visualization of an example of how codes are translated to results.

Table 3.5 – Operationalization of Codes

Quote (NL)	Code	Hypothesis	Interpretation

"De NAVO blijft voor ons de hoeksteen."	H1_NatoPreference	H1 (neo-realism)	Low willingness for military interoperability within the European Union.

The thesis assumes that a domination of codes related to a certain hypothesis provides more theoretical support for the interpretation of the findings.

The next section, Chapter 3.5, will highlight the limitations of the thesis.

3.5 Limitations

While the research process applies a systematic and theory-guided approach to examine political willingness, several limitations must be acknowledged that affect the scope, generalizability, implications, and depth of the findings.

First, the analysis is based exclusively on publicly available documents, as listed in the appendix. Therefore, this thesis only captures the political discourse reflected in public documents. Behind-the-scenes negotiations, classified defence planning, and internal policy coordination are not included. These institutional layers may hold additional information that influences the direction of political discourse within the Netherlands.

Second, although the coded documents were selected to represent variation across political actors and time, the sample does not encompass the entire archive of relevant materials.

Third, the coding process was conducted by a single researcher. While the coding categories are clearly defined and theoretically grounded, the lack of inter-coder validation poses a risk of interpretive bias. To mitigate this, codes were systematically linked to theoretical assumptions and applied consistently across both periods. Although the discourse analysis inevitably involves interpretive judgement of the coding framework, consistency was ensured through a predefined codebook based on theoretical assumptions. Coded segments are traceable to original Dutch quotations and categorized by theory, providing analytical transparency. Nevertheless, the subjectivity inherent in qualitative discourse analysis must be acknowledged.

Fourth, it is important to note that this thesis conducts a discourse analysis, coding according to the operationalization of the codes provided in Chapter 3. The focus of the research is to identify dominant discursive logics in political discourse in the Netherlands. The thesis highlights whether coalition parties align with the general analysis. If a coalition party

deviates from the general findings, this could indicate that the distribution of discourse across the analyzed documents may not accurately reflect parliamentary direction. Finally, the findings are time-bound. The political willingness expressed between January 2018 and May 2025 may evolve rapidly in response to future security shocks, shifts in coalition dynamics, or institutional reforms at the EU-level. As a result, the findings represent a snapshot of political discourse rather than a static or predictive model. Moreover, the interpretation of the data should account for the flexible nature of the EPC structure.

Given these limitations, the conclusions of this research should be interpreted with these factors in mind. They provide a valid and transparent account of discourse-based willingness, but they do not claim to capture the full spectrum of political behavior or strategic intent in Dutch defence policy.

With the case study framework and coding structure given, the next chapter presents the empirical findings across both periods.

4. Analysis

This chapter presents the results of the analysis conducted across 52 documents, divided into two periods (2018–2021 and 2022–2025). First, the general findings of the discourse analysis are presented, providing an overview of the quotations made in this dedicated period. Afterwards, quotations from each party in the overlapping coalition are provided. Subsequently, a similar process will follow for the period from 2022-2025: A general overview of the quotations and their distribution, followed by quotations of the overlapping coalition parties.

4.1 Results from 2018–2021

This section outlines the empirical findings from the content analysis of Dutch political discourse during the 2018–2021 period. A total of 125 quotations were derived from 23 documents from January 2018 until December 2021. In these documents, of which the data can be retraced through the appendix, political discourse was coded based on the operationalization of three hypotheses grounded in the theoretical perspectives of neo-realism/neo-functionalism, derived from Chapter 3.

Of the 125 quotations made in this time frame:

- <u>68</u> quotations were attributed to hypothesis 1 (H1), which reflects neo-realist assumptions of external balancing, where national security is prioritized through traditional alliances such as NATO;

- <u>17</u> quotations corresponded to hypothesis 2 (H2), reflecting neo-realism but focusing on sovereignty concerns and relative gains, suggesting cautious behavior when EU cooperation threatens national autonomy or fiscal burden sharing.

- <u>40</u> quotations were associated with hypothesis 3 (H3), representing the neo-functionalist perspective, where institutional spillover and incremental integration encourage support for EU-level defence cooperation.

To assure the reader an understanding of the distribution of the quotations, their frequencies are presented in the subsequent pie chart, Figure 1:

Figure 1 – Distribution of coded quotations by hypothesis, 2018–2021.
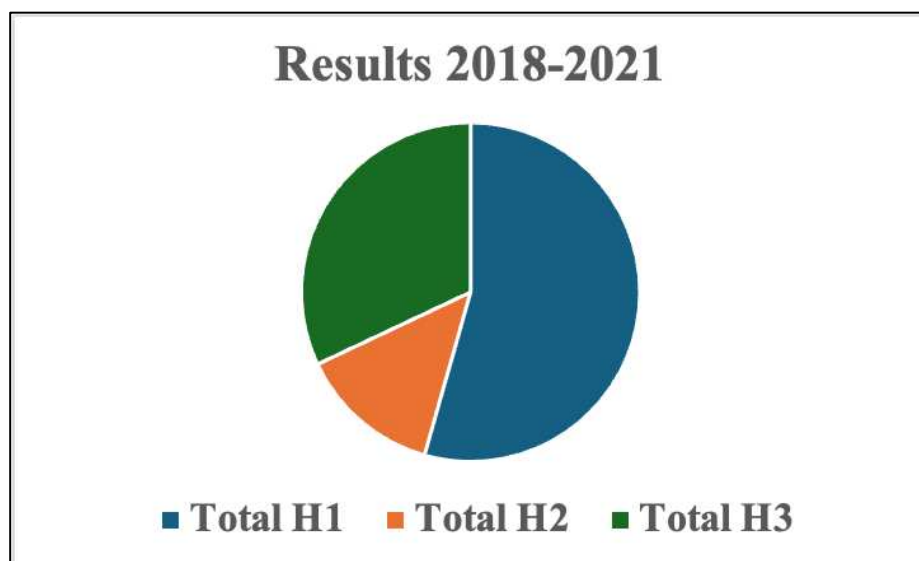
Figure 1, Pie chart illustrating distribution of quotations (Appendix A)

As seen in the pie chart, H1-related quotations were the most prevalent.

When analyzing by individual codes, *H1_NatoPreference* was the most frequently applied code, appearing 41 times, capturing instances where NATO was explicitly preferred over EU defence mechanisms. This was followed by *H3_SupportJoint* with 28 instances, reflecting discourse that endorsed EU-level joint procurement or defence cooperation.

H1_ThreatResponse, which denotes framing of external threats as justification for relying on

NATO or national capabilities, was applied 14 times. Notably, two codes were absent from the discourse during this period: *H2_RelativeGainConcern* and *H3_EfficiencyFraming*. This indicates that neither concern about unequal benefits among member states nor the framing of EU cooperation in terms of operational efficiency appeared in the analyzed political texts. The absence of *H2_RelativeGainConcern* quotations, based on the operationalization of the theoretical framework in Chapter 3, indicates that 'Statements on other states gaining relatively more from EU defence projects' were not a concern among politicians within the Netherlands in the given time frame. Moreover, the absence of *H3_* indicates that defence cooperation in Europe was not discussed as efficient.

While the three hypotheses are analyzed separately to preserve theoretical clarity, the data shows that the combined frequency of H1 and H2 codes amounts to 85 out of 125 coded segments. Although these categories cannot be methodologically merged due to distinct theoretical assumptions (external balancing vs. sovereignty preservation as listed in Chapter 3), their joint dominance (68% of the total quotations) underscores the salience of neo-realist logic in this period's political discourse.

By contrast, codes linked to neo-functionalist assumptions (H3), while present, occurred with lower frequency. This suggests that, in terms of coded discourse volume, neo-realism in its two variants (H1 and H2) was considerably more prominent than the neo-functionalist framework during the 2018–2021 period.

4.1.1 Representative Discourse Illustrations: 2018–2021

The following quotations illustrate how each hypothesis is manifested in the political discourse of coalition member parties during the 2018–2021 period. This section aims to complement Figure 1. This time period overlaps with the cabinet of Rutte 3, which lasted from 26 October 2017 until the 10th of January 2022.

The following quotations are highlighted for the reader to understand how the process of the coding framework has translated into results. Note that to retrace the origins of the quotation, the Dutch text must be copied, as the available data is registered in Dutch, as seen in the appendix.

# Table 4.0, Quotations from coalition member parties under Rutte 3.

Hypothesis	Quote (NL)	Party	Actor	Code
H1	''Natuurlijk is de NAVO de hoeksteen van de veiligheid.''	VVD	Minister of Defence from 17-09-'21 & state-secretary of Defence	H1_NatoPreference
H1	''De NAVO is voor het CDA de hoeksteen van ons veiligheids- beleid.''	CDA	Minister of Defence until 17-09-'21.	H1_NatoPreference
H1	''Tegelijkertijd blijft de NAVO het fundament van onze veiligheid. Synergie en eenheid zijn wat D66 betreft het uitgangspunt.''	D66		H1_NatoPreference
H1	''De NAVO en de VS zijn onze belangrijkste bondgenoten voor vrede en veiligheid.''	CU		H1_NatoPreference & H1_ThreatResponse
H2	''Die autonomie is datgene wat mij triggert. In het kader van de veiligheid zeggen wij «de NAVO», maar we willen wel graag autonoom onze eigen veiligheid garanderen.''	VVD	Minister of Defence from 17-09-'21 & & state-secretary of Defence.	H2_SovereigntyConcern
H3	''D66 staat erg voor de Europese defensie-samenwerking, naast een Nederlandse krijgsmacht.''	D66		H3_SupportJoint

The quotations provided in Table 4.0 illustrate an alignment with the results as seen in Figure 1. The quotations in Table 4.0 thus verify that the coalition member parties align most with H1 in this given period.

4.2 Results from 2022–2025

This section presents the results of the qualitative content analysis conducted across Dutch political documents from 2022 to 2025. A total of 115 coded quotations were made over 29 documents[1], which are assigned to one of three theoretical hypotheses as mentioned in Chapter 4.1.

Figure 2 – Distribution of coded quotations by hypothesis, 2022–2025.
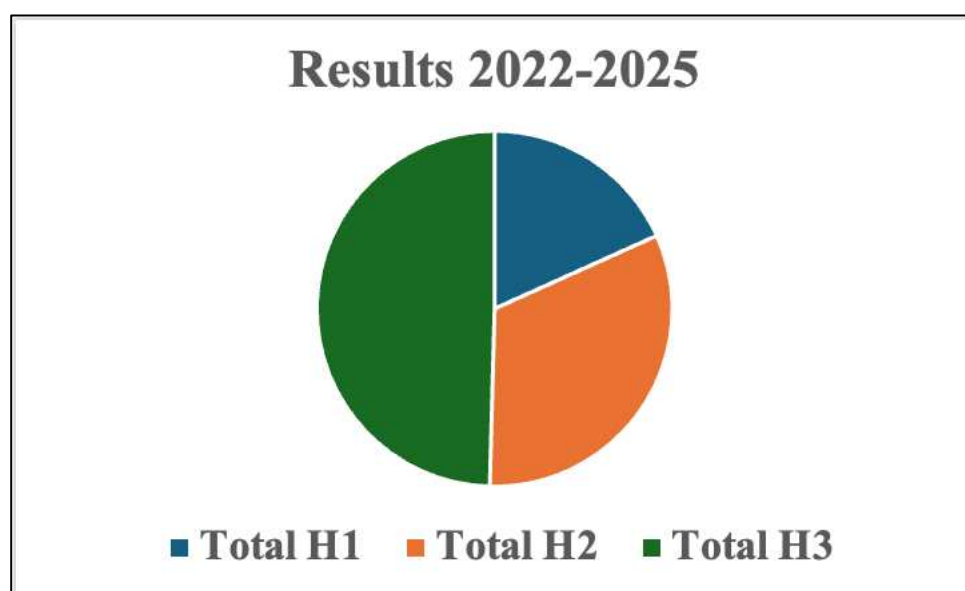
Figure 2, distribution of total coded quotations by hypothesis from 2022 until May 2025 (Appendix B)

Across this period, the dominant trend in political discourse is quotations based on H3. Out of the 115 quotations coded, 57 were assigned to H3, making it the most frequently referenced theoretical explanation. This was followed by H2 with 37 codes, and finally H1 with 21 codes. These results are demonstrated in Graph 4.2

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[1] Each document, its reference label and quotation can be found in the Appendix.

The most frequently applied code across all hypotheses was *H3_SupportJoint* (42 quotations), which appeared prominently throughout the dataset and is linked to discourse surrounding joint defence procurement and operational collaboration within the EU framework. This was followed by H2_SovereigntyConcern (17 quotations), reflecting notable concern over national decision-making autonomy. The third most frequent was H3_Multilateralism (10 quotations), indicating recurring references to broader European cooperative efforts.

Note that the quotations *H1_AmericanReliance, H2_RelativeGainConcern, H3_Spillover & H3_SupportJointBorrowing* were not quoted in the documents in this period. The absence of these codes suggests that these narratives are not dominantly featured in the analyzed discourse between 2022 and 2025.

4.2.1 Representative Discourse Illustrations: 2022-2025

Similar to Chapter 4.1.1, the quotes below exemplify how coalition parties express theoretical reasoning towards military interoperability. Note that this cabinet spanned from January 10, 2022, until July 2, 2024.

Table 4.1 – Quotations under coalition parties in Rutte 4

Hypothesis	Quote (NL)	Party	Actor	Code
H1	''Vandaar ook dat de NAVO de absolute hoeksteen is en moet blijven van ons veiligheidsbeleid.''	VVD	State-secretary of Defence	H1_NatoPreference
H2	''Ook dit keer doen de Verenigde Staten weer het grootste deel van het werk door duizenden militairen in een verhoogde staat van paraatheid te brengen. Er moet een einde komen aan onze verslaving aan Amerikaanse militaire hulp.''	VVD	State-secretary of Defence	H2_SovereigntyConcern
H3	''Laat ik daaraan toevoegen dat dit allemaal wel hoort bij de echt noodzakelijke onafhanke-lijkheid van Europa als het gaat	D66	Minister of Defence	H3_SupportJoint

Hypothesis	Quote	Party	Actor	Code
	om het kunnen garanderen van de eigen veiligheid.'''			
H3	''Met het Strategisch Kompas ligt er een stevige basis om de komende jaren toe te werken naar een slagvaardige Europese Unie. Het CDA is, net als het kabinet, erg blij met de ambitieuze plannen.''	CDA	-	H3_SupportJoint
H3	''We verdiepen de samenwerking met omringende Europese landen. Om onze kerntaken goed uit te kunnen blijven voeren zetten we een langjarig traject in van intensieve samenwerking en versterking van onze specialismen. Dat vergroot de kwaliteit, kwantiteit en doelmatigheid van onze krijgsmacht. Zo zetten we in op gezamenlijk inkopen, vergroten we de interoperabiliteit en zetten we verdere stappen met de Duitse landmacht door eenheden samen te voegen. Ook in onderhoud werken we samen met omringende landen.''	CU	-	H3_SupportJoint

Table 4.2, EPC Cabinet Schoof-1 and allocated quotes (2 July 2024 – May 2025)

Hypothesis	Quote	Party	Actor	Code
H1	''Ik denk dat we die Europese pijler ook binnen de NAVO moeten bouwen, maar wel op basis van het	BBB	State-secretary of Defence	H1_NatoPreference

	NAVO-gedachtegoed en de filosofie die daarin zit.''			
H2	''De PVV vindt het onvoor-stelbaar dat dit zo gemakzuchtig uit handen wordt gegeven aan Brussel.''	PVV	-	H2_SovereigntyConcern
H2	''Op het moment dat we met z'n allen toch verdergaan met eurobonds, ziet de BBB gewoon grote risico's als het gaat om het gezamenlijk lenen.''	BBB	State-secretary of Defence	H2_SovereigntyConcern
H2	''We willen geen eurobonds.''	NSC	-	H2_SovereigntyConcern
H3	''Het hoofddoel hiervan juichen we absoluut toe, namelijk een sterker, onafhankelijker, zelfredzamer en weerbaarder Europa.''	BBB	State-secretary of Defence	H3_SupportJoint
H3	''Als ik in EU-verband ben, pleit ik daar dus voor. Maar ook als ik bilaterale overleggen heb, met Duitsland of met andere landen, komt dat steeds op tafel: Zijn er dingen die we samen kunnen doen? Zijn er bepaalde behoeften die we met elkaar delen? Daarmee kunnen we een grotere vraag bij de industrie neerleggen en de industrie wat dat betreft ook meer zekerheid kunnen bieden.''	VVD	Minister of Defence	H3_Multilateralism

H3	''We pleiten er ook voor dat Europa extra inspanningen pleegt om een gelijkwaardige partner in de NAVO te worden.''	NSC	-	H3_SupportJoint

While this study does not aim to quantify the influence of individual parties, it is notable that the discursive trends identified, particularly the rise in H3-coded statements after 2022, are not only present across the political spectrum but also reflected within the discourse of coalition parties. This alignment strengthens the argument that the increase in political willingness towards EU military interoperability is not purely rhetorical or oppositional, but resonant within governing frameworks. Party affiliation is therefore used here not as a weighting factor, but as contextual grounding to validate the discursive developments seen in the general analysis.

4.3 Comparative analysis of trends

This section presents a comparative analysis of the coded political discourse on EU military interoperability in the Netherlands over two periods: 2018–2021 and 2022–2025. A total of 125 quotations were coded for the first period, and 115 quotations for the second. Each quotation was categorized according to one of the three theoretical hypotheses outlined in Chapter 2.

The relative frequencies of each hypothesis per period are shown below.

Table 4.3 – Relative Frequency of Hypothesis Codes by Period

Hypothesis	2018–2021 (n=125)	2022–2025 (n=115)	Change in %
H1	54%	18%	↓ –36%
H2	14%	32%	↑ +18%
H3	32%	50%	↑ +18%

During the 2018–2021 period, most of the political discourse was explained by neo-realist assumptions, particularly H1, which alone accounted for over half of all quotations (54%). When combined, H1 and H2 accounted for 68% of the total coded discourse, establishing neo-realism as the dominant explanatory logic for political willingness during that period.

In contrast, the 2022–2025 period marked a shift, although constructive, in discursive patterns. While H2 increased in relative presence with 18%, the most significant change was the number of quotations based on the premises of H3, which became the most frequently coded hypothesis, accounting for 50% of the discourse. The relative presence of H1 dropped substantially, from 54% to 18%.

In sum, the empirical trend points to a clear but cautious discursive shift. During the first period, from 2018 until 2021, political discourse was predominantly shaped by neo-realist logics, with H1 alone accounting for over half of all statements. Combined, H1 and H2 made up 68% of the discourse, confirming the dominance of external balancing and sovereignty concerns in how Dutch political actors framed military interoperability. In the second period (2022–2025), this dominance eroded: H1 decreased sharply (–36%), and H2 rose (+18%), while H3, representing the neo-functionalist logic, became the most prevalent discourse strand, rising from 32% to 50% of all quotations.

At the same time, the presence of H2-coded discourse (32%) highlights concerns about sovereignty and embedded concerns of autonomy in the political context of the Netherlands. The result is a discourse that is hybrid: An increasing towards EU-level collaboration (H3), yet still shaped by realist concerns (H2), particularly in areas related to control, command, and national prerogatives.

The following chapters will examine these developments in greater detail, exploring their theoretical implications and the degree to which they reflect structural shifts in Dutch political willingness towards EU military integration.

5. Discussion

Based on the results and methodology chapter, this section streamlines the results by answering the research question and compares it to existing literature.

Based on the discourse analysis between 2018 and 2025, supported by quotations of coalition parties in the given period, the results show empirical evidence of increasing political willingness in the Netherlands to strengthen EU military interoperability. However, this willingness is conditional and nuanced, as there are concerns about sovereignty and fiscal burden sharing, as seen in Chapter 4 through the rise of H2-related quotations. More specifically, political actors increasingly frame interoperability within a neo-functionalist

logic by expressing a willingness to engage in EU-level procurements since 2022 (H3), yet they do not abandon their realist concerns about sovereignty and fiscal sharing (H2). Consequently, the extent to which the Netherlands is prepared to enhance military interoperability is considered moderate. These findings, a growing support for EU-led procurements, but constrained by fiscal burden sharing and sovereignty concerns, align with existing literature (Truchlewski & Schelkle, 2024; Matthijs & Merler, 2020; Beetze, 2019; Knapen et al, 2011). More specifically, political willingness of the Netherlands towards EU military interoperability within the European Union is best described as constructive but cautious: it reflects a discursive readiness to move towards EU-level cooperation, as long as it does not come at the expense of sovereignty, fiscal burden sharing within the European Union, nor a divergence from NATO. It is worth noting that while the overall discourse in the Netherlands has shifted towards greater support for EU military cooperation, particularly through increased H3-coded statements after 2022, this trend is not uniform. Notably, the PVV, in the EPC cabinet of Schoof-1, stands out as the only parliamentary party that consistently rejects EU-level defence procurements altogether. This exemption highlights that, although political willingness has increased at the discursive level, it remains contested and conditional.

Following this, with the main research question addressed, this section continues to explore the underlying mechanisms that have shaped Dutch political reasoning towards EU military interoperability. These mechanisms are grounded in the theoretical assumptions outlined in Chapter 2 and build further on the premises of neo-realism and neo-functionalism that underpin this thesis. The findings indicate that the dominant mechanism guiding political discourse in the Netherlands was the external balancing mechanism from 2018 until 2021. This mechanism can be traced back through the strong rhetorical and institutional emphasis on NATO, particularly as the primary framework for collective defence. In line with Waltz's (1979) balance of power theory, the Netherlands sought to maintain 'strategic survival' by aligning itself with NATO as a counterweight against perceived external threats. This effort aimed to prevent any state power from disrupting an international equilibrium of power. Furthermore, a consistent rise in H2-coded discourse between both periods aligns with a mechanism rooted in the protection of sovereignty and fiscal restraints. As outlined in Chapter 4, Dutch political actors repeatedly express concerns about the erosion of national autonomy in the context of deeper European Union defence integration. This mechanism aligns with Walt's (1987) balance of threat theory, which posits that states form alliances based on the

perceived threats they perceive from other states, including mechanisms such as the loss of sovereignty and entrapment. Accordingly, Dutch political actors reveal this mechanism through resistance to supranational defence cooperation when it is seen as undermining national sovereignty or exposing the Netherlands to disproportionate fiscal responsibilities. It can be argued that mechanisms of H1 (external balancing) and H2-discourse (sovereignty and fiscal concerns) cause a reluctance towards EU-level procurements. These mechanisms appear to be structural to the Netherlands in comparative literature (Knapen et al, 2011). Moreover, a historical North-South divide suggests that northern EU member states are structurally more cautious about supranational commitments (Matthijs & Merler, 2020).

Finally, the emergence and growing prevalence of H3-coded discourse after 2022 can be attributed to the mechanism of functional spillover, as outlined in Chapter 2. This mechanism posits that cooperation in one policy area generates interdependence in adjacent areas. Thus creating pressure to integrate into other areas. (Niemann et al, 2018). While this thesis acknowledges that addressing the specific causes and mechanisms that initiated the shift towards EU-level procurements is complex, it can be suggested that the geopolitical impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, combined with the reinforcement of pre-existing EU defence instruments like PESCO and the EDF, created an opening for actors to support EU-level procurements (Capati, 2024). Furthermore, as highlighted in the introduction, political uncertainty regarding NATO's reliability under Trump's second term may have contributed to shifting perceptions, further enabling H3-coded discourse. In sum, Dutch political willingness towards EU military interoperability has evolved into a more supportive, though still cautious, stance. While neo-functionalist logic and mechanisms have gained prominence, it remains constrained by existing neo-realist concerns.

5.1 Sub-questions

To comprehensively address the main research question, the following sub-questions were developed. Subsequently, the sub-questions are answered.

5.1.1 What structural or institutional challenges impact the Netherlands' interoperability with European partners?

The analysis shows that from 2018 to 2022 no structural or institutional challenges that impacted interoperability. At this time, the focus was not on EU-level procurements, as

NATO was seen as the cornerstone of defence. In contrast, in the period from 2022-2025, structural/institutional problems found in the political discourse of the Netherlands related to EU-level military procurements were concerns about the loss of sovereignty and fiscal burden sharing. These challenges are derived from the presence of codes under neo-realist logics of sovereignty concerns and fiscal burden sharing. While H2 was not the main occurring coding logic in this period, it can be highlighted that these factors, derived from sovereignty and fiscal concerns, limited the position of the Netherlands towards military interoperability. Moreover, these concerns form persistent structural constraints on deeper engagement, even when functional benefits are recognized by all coalition members in Rutte 4 and Schoof-1, except the PVV. It is to highlight that the perceived limitations coexist with existing literature where sovereignty and fiscal burden sharing concerns limit EU member states towards EU military interoperability (Wasserfallen, 2021; Matthijs & Merler, 2020).

5.1.2 How does the Netherlands' political discourse compare to that of other EU member states?

While this thesis did not conduct a systematic cross-country comparison, the findings from the research can be compared to existing literature to understand how the Netherlands' political discourse compares to other EU member states. The presence of H1-coded discourse from 2018 to 2021 is consistent with existing literature. Bond and Scazzieri (2022) argue that NATO has remained the primary framework for deterrence and defence. The Netherlands' reliance on NATO structures, preference for U.S. leadership, and hesitations towards supranational EU defence authority in this period are therefore not unique but align with most European member states and follow a historic path dependency (Knapen et al., 2011). This reinforces the findings of H1 between 2018 and 2021, showing that not only the reasoning behind the external balancing rationale of H1, but also suggests that even though support for EU interoperability in this period is present, it remains strictly contained reliance to NATO. Based on the findings of this thesis, it is observed that the Netherlands increased its support for EU procurements after 2022, together with the growth of sovereignty and fiscal concerns. Moreover, these findings align with comparative literature which indicates that northern EU member states, such as Finland and Belgium, exhibit a higher level of attachment to national sovereignty following the Eurocrisis (Matthijs & Merler, 2020). It is important to note that while H2-related codes were not dominant after 2022, the relatively high presence of these codes indicates significant concerns about sovereignty and budgeting within the EU, similar

to those of other northern/central European countries like Poland, Hungary or Denmark (Beetz, 2019). Furthermore, the rise of H3-related codes after 2022, as discussed in Chapter 5, shows an increase in Dutch political willingness to enhance EU military interoperability. This increase aligns with broader developments in EU security policy of member-states and reflects a change wherein the EU is undergoing a geopolitical shift (Raik et al, 2024). Raik et al. (2024) further describe this shift as a response to the war in Ukraine, which has prompted EU member states to support the EU in taking a larger role in shaping the European security order. The increased presence of H3-coded discourse indicates that the Netherlands is aligning with this shift. However, as noted in Chapter 5, this support is not unconditional and certainly constrained. As highlighted in Chapter 4, the PVV under cabinet Schoof-1 opposes EU-level procurements based on fiscal and sovereignty concerns. Thus, while H3-coded language has gained more prominence, it coexists with H2-related concerns, particularly in discussions regarding autonomy concerns and fiscal burden sharing. Importantly, the H3-coded discourse in the Netherlands is not merely rhetorical. It aligns with a broader strategic re-evaluation of the EU, in which the EU is no longer viewed solely as a regulatory or economic actor but increasingly as a necessary geopolitical player (Raik et al, 2024).

5.1.3 Has political willingness for military interoperability changed after the war in Ukraine?

Yes, the discourse analysis clearly shows a discursive shift post-2022, with a substantial increase in quotations aligned with hypothesis 3. A transition from reliance on NATO, based on the premises of H1, towards greater openness to EU-level defence cooperation, as seen in the analysis. However, the thesis notes that this shift is not absolute; it coexists with sovereignty concerns related to H2, indicating a move towards a more hybrid logic of willingness.

5.1.4 What future scenarios for military interoperability are suggested by the political discourse and empirical findings?

The observed discourse indicates a trend towards a selective deepening of EU defence cooperation. This thesis acknowledges that further research is needed to be able to predict how future scenarios may turn out. However, the recurring logics for national autonomy and anti-fiscal burden sharing will not suddenly disappear. During the writing of this thesis *(13-*

06-24), cabinet Schoof-1 had fallen over migration issues. It is to say that these developments make it hard to suggest future scenarios for military interoperability.

However, based on the findings, it can be said that a fully federalized defence union is not likely to be supported in the Dutch discourse due to the prevalence of H2-related concerns, but neither is disengagement; the preferred model, based on the findings, suggests a flexible integration under pragmatic conditions.

6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to address a gap in the literature regarding the political willingness of a midsize member state, namely the Netherlands, towards military interoperability in the European Union. More specifically, the analysis examined the political discourse within the Netherlands, applying a theory-testing approach. Through a systemic coding framework, this study offers empirical insights into the theoretical logics that shape the extent to which the Netherlands is willing to position itself regarding military interoperability within the European Union. This thesis contributes to and underlines existing literature, as Mathijs and Merler (2020) argue that the North-South divide in the EU influences the integration positions of member states, where it is observed that northern member states, including the Netherlands, display strong attitudes towards sovereignty concerns. These conclusions are underlined by this thesis. While sovereignty-based logic was not the leading logic, it can be said that the findings, specifically the notable presence of H2-related codes, confirm the pattern of concern for sovereignty. However, this thesis adds granularity to that picture by demonstrating how multiple discursive logics can coexist and compete within one national context, depending on the political issue, institutional actor, or moment in time.

Furthermore, the rise of H3-related codes that support EU-level procurements aligns with existing literature. More specifically, as Raik et al. (2024) note, the EU's increasing involvement in defence reflects a broader shift towards geopolitical actorness. The Dutch discourse analyzed here aligns with this trend, as evidenced by the rise in H3-coded neo-functionalist discourse after 2022.

Concluding, as Europe's security architecture evolves, understanding the conditions under which political willingness emerges will be critical for the future of European strategic autonomy.

6.1 Practical implications & suggestions for future research

- The study shows that political willingness in the Netherlands to strengthen EU military interoperability has grown since 2022 but remains constrained by fiscal and sovereignty concerns.

- NATO remains a foundational pillar in Dutch defence discourse.
  Even as EU cooperation is increasingly accepted, the analysis shows that it is not seen as a replacement for NATO. Future EU strategic initiatives should, therefore, consider the internal politics of the Netherlands.

- While this thesis incorporates the discourse of coalition parties and situates findings within the context of Dutch cabinets (Rutte III, Rutte IV, and the Schoof-1 EPC), it does not formally weigh or quantify political discourse according to institutional power structures. The primary focus remains on mapping dominant discursive logics within the broader Dutch political landscape. Future research could therefore focus on examining only the discourse of executive actors, such as cabinet ministers and state secretaries, to assess how political willingness is expressed at the level of formal decision-making. This would offer a more targeted view of policy-authoritative discourse, distinct from parliamentary deliberation or party messaging. Moreover, future studies could explicitly investigate the bureaucratic filtering of political willingness. A dedicated inquiry into how defence policy is shaped by ministerial hierarchies, interdepartmental negotiation, and procedural inertia would offer valuable insights into the practical implementation gap between discourse and action.

- Another direction for future research could be an analysis of the role of public opinion in shaping or constraining political willingness. While this thesis focused on political discourse within public debate, a recommendation can be made towards future studies, as they could investigate how public opinion towards EU defence integration influences parliamentary positioning or party rhetoric. For instance, are discursive shifts toward H3 logic mirrored by public support? A mixed-methods design combining discourse analysis with public opinion data could illuminate the extent to which political willingness aligns with public opinion.

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Appendices

A list of the appendices, listed in alphabetical order from A to C.

Appendix A: A list of the consulted documents, used for the coding, referenced by source, date of publication, type of source, and reference label.

Date	Name of the Document	Source	Source Type	Reference Label
12-11-2019	Nederland heeft altijd een voorspelbare positie in Brussel	NRC Handelsblad	Newspaper	na
16-11-2018	Bijleveld: Nederland tegen EU-leger	Reformatorisch Dagblad	Newspaper	na
06-11-2019	Begroting Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Plenary Debate Report	35300-X
10-10-2017	RegeerAkkoord 2017-2021	Rijksoverheid.nl	Government Agreement	na
26-04-2018	Defense Note 2018	Defensie.nl	White Paper	na
27-09-2020	Defense Vision 2035	Defensie.nl	White Paper	na
14-11-2019	Geen Visie Maar Een Gapend Zwart Gat	de Volkskrant	Newspaper	na
07-11-2019	Motie De Roon Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Motion	Nr 19
27-08-2020	Ambtenaren: 'Nederland moet meer invloed uitoefenen op Europees defensiebeleid'	NRC Handelsblad	Newspaper	na
02-11-2021	Brief Ministerie van Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Annotated Agenda	21 501-28 & Nr 226
05-02-2020	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676 & Nr. 336
15-11-2018	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	21 501-28 & Nr 182
16-10-2019	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, Nr 327
19-06-2019	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	21 501-28, Nr. 177
19-06-2018	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, Nr. 322

24-01-2019	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	21 501-28, Nr. 185
25-04-2018	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	21 501-28, Nr 174
27-09-2018	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, Nr. 305
30-05-2018	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, Nr 292
06-11-2019	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	21 501-28, Nr. 195
07-02-2019	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie, NAVO ministeriele	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, Nr. 316
08-02-2018	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, 284
20-05-2021	Rapport algemeen overleg vaste comissie defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	21 501-28, Nr. 221
15-dec	CoalitieAkkoord 2021	Rijksoverheid.nl	Coalition Agreement	na
05-09-2024	DefensieNota 2024: Sterk, Slim en Samen	Defensie.nl	White Paper	na
01-06-2022	DefensieNota 2022: Sterker Nederland, Veiliger Europa	Defensie.nl	White Paper	na
14-11-2024	Plenair Debat: tweeminutendebat Nederlandse en Europese defensie-industrie	Tweedekamer.nl	Plenary Debate	CD d.d. 15/10
19-09-2024	Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen	Tweedekamer.nl	General Public Consideration	TK 3
17-03-2025	Hoe Nederland het Emmen van Europa kon worden; Machtige tijden	NRC Handelsblad	Newspaper	na
12-04-2025	Kamer: EU-plan defensie voldoet aan eisen	Leeuwarder Courant	Newspaper	na
19-01-2022	Brief van de Minister van Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Annotated Agenda	21 501-28, Nr 234
14-04-2025	Brief van de Minister van Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Annotated Agenda	24202, Nr 47
16-05-2024	HoofdlijnenAkkoord 2024-2028	Rijksoverheid.nl	Coalition Agreement	na

04-12-2024	Begroting Defensie 2025	Tweedekamer.nl	Plenary Debate	(36600-X), TK 32
18-02-2025	Uitspraken van president Trump over Oekraïne en de gevolgen voor de veilig- heid van Europa	Tweedekamer.nl	Plenary Debate	Tk 55
22-12-2022	Tweeminutendebat Defensienota 2022 - sterker Nederland, veiliger Europa	Tweedekamer.nl	Plenary Debate	CD d.d. 14/09
20-03-2025	Premier Schoof verwacht Trump bij naderende top: 'Zonder Amerika, geen NAVO'; 'Thuisfront snapt nog steeds niet hoe Den Haag werkt'	De Telegraaf	Newspaper	na
10-09-2024	Tweeminutendebat Ruimte voor Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Plenary Debate	CD d.d. 19/06
08-06-2023	Verslag comissiedebat Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Navo Ministerial	28676, Nr. 438
10-02-2024	Verslag comissiedebat Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Navo Ministerial	28 676, Nr. 389
12-05-2022	Verslag Comissiedebat Defensieraad	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	21 501-28, Nr. 242
15-03-2022	Verslag Comissiedebat Defensieraad	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	21 501-28, Nr. 239
15-10-2024	Vaststelling van de begrotingsstaten van het Ministerie van Defensie (X) voor het jaar 2025	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	36 600 X, Nr. 31
17-03-2022	Nota over de toestand van 's Rijks Financiën	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	35 925 X , Nr. 63
25-03-2025	Verslag overleg vaste commissie defensie en buitenlandse zaken	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission & Foreign Affairs	21501-28, Nr. 282
27-03-2024	Verslag comissiedebat Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, Nr. 458
05-02-2025	Verslag comissiedebat Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, Nr. 487
08-06-2022	Verslag comissiedebat Defensie & Buitenlandse Zaken	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission & Foreign Affairs	28 676, Nr. 413

			Report Defense Comission & European Affairs	21 501-28, Nr. 248
08-11-2022	Verslag comissiedebat Defensie & Europese Zaken	Tweedekamer.nl		
08-10-2024	Verslag comissiedebat Defensie	Tweedekamer.nl	Report Defense Comission	28 676, Nr. 473
31-08-2024	Waarom de coalitie belang heeft bij een zege van Kamala Harris in de VS	NRC Handelsblad	Newspaper	na

Appendix B: Overview of exact code distributions

Frequency Distribution Quotations (2018-2022)

Frequency Distribution Quotations (2022-2025)