

HUNGARY'S EVOLVING DEFENCE POLICY: FROM SECURITY CONSUMER TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY WITHIN NATO

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Abstract: Hungary's post-Cold War security trajectory has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a security consumer dependent on NATO guarantees to an increasingly autonomous actor within the Alliance. This paper examines the strategic recalibration of Hungarian defence policy, focusing on military modernisation directives, preparation for hybrid security threats, and the underlying geopolitical balancing. Through an analysis of Hungary's National Security and Military Strategies, its updated legal framework about the operational principles of the armed forces and semi-governmental documents, this study explores how Budapest has pursued a dual-track approach – strengthening its NATO commitments while simultaneously enhancing national defence capabilities, especially in the face of non-conventional threats and engaging in strategic hedging. Key drivers of this shift include geopolitical instability, energy security concerns, and the securitisation of migration. The findings highlight Hungary's attempt to navigate the constraints and opportunities of middle-power status in an era of growing strategic competition, offering insights into the challenges of balancing Alliance commitments with national strategic autonomy.

Keywords: Hungary in NATO; military modernisation; strategic autonomy; defence policy; regional security.

Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the United States' growing focus on emerging Asian threats force European society to rethink its approach to its security frameworks. The paper explores the shifts in Hungary's policy documents amidst its aim to change from a security consumer to a security provider with an increasing level of strategic autonomy. Within this study, a security consumer refers to a state or entity that primarily relies on external actors for its security rather than independently providing for its defence. In contrast, security producers contribute to regional or international security through military capabilities and strategic commitments. Strategic autonomy is defined as the capacity of the state to independently make decisions and act in matters of defence and security, without being dependent on external actors. This concept encompasses both the ability to set priorities independently and the means to implement these decisions, whether alone or in cooperation with partners. The study identifies the sections in recent updates in the Hungarian security, defence and foreign policy documents that mark this definitive shift.

1. Historical Background

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally reshaped Hungary's strategic orientation, transforming the Central European state from a Warsaw Pact satellite into a prototypical "security consumer" within the Western liberal order. Joining NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994 and among the earliest Warsaw Pact members admitted to full NATO membership in 1999,

Hungary's trajectory offers critical insights into the opportunities and constraints facing mid-sized states navigating post-bipolar security architectures. The nation's experience exemplifies how the historical memory of repeated foreign domination – from Ottoman incursions to Soviet tank treads on Budapest streets in 1956 – continues to inform contemporary security calculations.

Hungary's security consumer status emerged from the ashes of the Soviet collapse as policymakers in Budapest confronted the dual challenge of institutional decolonisation and strategic realignment. The 1990 National Assembly declaration terminating Hungary's Warsaw Pact membership marked not merely a legal separation but a psychological break from four decades of Soviet-dominated security policy. This radical shift required building entirely new institutional relationships while managing residual economic dependencies on Russian energy supplies – a balancing act that continues to shape Hungarian foreign policy.

The "Europe Agreement" with the European Union about economic cooperation and membership aspiration, signed in 1991 and coming into full effect in 1994 (Batory 2002) and subsequent accession negotiations into the North Atlantic Alliance revealed Budapest's strategic calculus: embedding the nation within Western multilateral structures would both guarantee security against potential Russian revanchism and accelerate economic modernisation as a treatment of the failing Soviet economic model, neglect in research and development and general technological lagging behind the Western world. However, this approach carried inherent contradictions. One way to put it is that Hungarian leaders pursued NATO membership not primarily to enhance national defence capabilities but to obtain security guarantees against external threats. This free-rider mentality became institutionalised, as defence spending steadily decreased from 1988 until 2014 to 0.9%, with a value of 1.3% in 1995 (World Bank 2025).



Figure no. 1: Hungary's defence spending as % of GDP (World Bank 2025)

1.1. The Psychology of Security Consumption

Hungary's historical experiences created a security consciousness much like that of the rest of the countries of the post-Soviet space; these continue to influence policy decisions even today. The trauma of the 1956 Soviet invasion, crushing the short-lived attempt at creating a social democracy, or in other words a type of socialism with a human face left deep psychological scars, manifesting as

a permanent sense of geopolitical precariousness – something worthy to mention here is that the idea of potential Western betrayal also appears in later discussions regarding the '56 events, as despite strong American rhetorical support at the time, military help at any capacity was never provided, as the US did not consider confrontation with the USSR desirable at the time (Landa 2017). Hungary's Cold War-era vulnerabilities resurfaced during the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, exposing its ongoing regional security challenges. However, it has also shown Hungarian policymakers that successfully navigating the emerging challenges can potentially solidify Hungary's place in the post-Cold War world order and even draw benefits.

The security consumer paradigm allowed Hungarian leaders to externalise defence responsibilities while focusing resources on economic transformation. Minister of Foreign Affairs Geza Jeszensky declared in 1991 that: Hungary's contribution to European security lies in maintaining political stability through successful democratic transition (Pinter 2008). This framing positioned Hungary not as a frontline state but as the newest member of the circle of winners of the unipolar world order – a narrative justifying limited military investments during the 1990s that could have been critical for significant reforms.

1.2. NATO Membership: Asymmetric Benefits

Hungary's 1999 NATO accession marked the culmination of its Western reorientation but also institutionalised dependency patterns. The Alliance's Article V guarantee became the cornerstone of Hungarian security policy, enabling successive governments to prioritise fiscal austerity over military modernisation. Between 1990 and 2010, Hungary reduced its active-duty military personnel from 130,000 to 30,000 while decommissioning entire armoured divisions. (Berzsenyi and Csiki 2014).

Paradoxically, NATO membership increased Hungary's strategic value as a logistical hub while decreasing its combat capabilities. The establishment of NATO's Heavy Airlift Wing at Papa Air Base in 2009 exemplified this dynamic – Hungary provided infrastructure and airspace access while allies supplied strategic airlift capacity. This symbiotic relationship was highlighted at its apogee during NATO's 1999 Kosovo intervention when Hungarian bases supported the Alliance operations despite Budapest participating only in peacekeeping under KFOR rather than engaging as a direct combat force.

1.3. EU Accession: Comprehensive Security Redefined

The 2004 EU membership expanded Hungary's security concept beyond military defence to encompass economic stability and institutional resilience. Brussels' Acquis Communautaire provided a legal-administrative framework for combating corruption, reforming judiciary systems, and securing energy infrastructure – all classified as soft security priorities in Hungarian accession documents. EU structural funds, totalling €35 billion between 2004 and 2020, underwrote critical infrastructure projects with security dimensions, including cross-border energy interconnectors and transportation networks.

However, EU integration introduced new dependencies. The 2008 global financial crisis exposed Hungary's vulnerability to capital flight and currency volatility, forcing an IMF-EU bailout that constrained national policymaking. This economic shock and mounting migration pressures after 2015 fuelled a political backlash against perceived EU overreach. This dynamic would later complicate Hungary's security consumer status under Viktor Orbán's consecutive leadership cycles.

1.4. Security Consumption in Hybrid Regimes

A hybrid regime is a political system that combines elements of both democratic and authoritarian governance, existing in a grey zone between full democracy and complete authoritarianism. These regimes maintain the formal institutions of democracy, such as elections and parliaments, while simultaneously undermining democratic principles through various informal mechanisms. The Hungarian case, which is often cited as having transformed into a hybrid regime

after 2010 (when the Orbán government secured a 2/3 majority of seats in the Parliament), challenges conventional assumptions about security consumers as passive policy-takers (András Bozóki 2021). Since 2010, PM Viktor Orbán's illiberal democracy project (explained in detail in Chapter 3) has demonstrated how mid-sized states can attempt to leverage institutional memberships while resisting normative convergence. Hungary's continued NATO and EU membership coexists with an increasing strategic partnership with Russia and China, who are seen as challengers to the very same institutionalised memberships of which Hungary is a part. These partnerships include but are not limited to the controversial Paks II nuclear plant expansion, the (since then forcibly cancelled) presence of the sanctioned Russian International Investment Bank and Budapest's role as a hub for Chinese investment in Central Europe.

This dual-track approach could be described as *calculated free-riding* – exploiting collective security guarantees while cultivating alternative patrons. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine tested this strategy, forcing Hungary to walk a tightrope between solidarity with the rest of the members of the Alliance and energy dependence on Moscow. Prime Minister Orbán's resistance to EU energy sanctions and refusal to permit weapons transfers through Hungarian territory revealed the limits of security consumption in crisis conditions. However, the PM's political course is more and more shaped by path dependency.

2. Methodology and Chapter Overview

This study employs a qualitative analysis, focusing on policy documents. Updated policy documents are contrasted to old ones to highlight changes and are put into the framework of contemporary domestic and foreign policy orientation. The research paper differentiates three distinct periods of post-Cold War Hungarian defence policy phases, ranging from 1991 to 2022:

- Transitional Dependency (1991 - 2004): post-communist institution-building and NATO/EU accession negotiations;
- Consolidated Consumption (2004 - 2010): mature membership in Western structures with a growing economic security focus;
- Illiberal Reconfiguration (2010 - present): strategic diversification under Orbán's Eastern Opening policy.

From this, the Illiberal Reconfiguration phase forms the primary base of investigation in this paper.

2.1. Research Questions & Objectives

The research aims to answer the following questions: How has Hungary's defence policy evolved from a security consumer model to a more strategically autonomous position within NATO, and what geopolitical, economic, and military factors have driven this transformation? What is the political context of such a shift? Which shift in policies and strategies underpins this change? The objective is to explain the identified behaviours and build a theoretical framework that provides a contextual understanding of the policies taken.

2.2. Methodology & Structure

This study employs a qualitative research design, primarily utilising document analysis to assess the evolution of Hungarian defence policy. In Chapter 3, Hungary's internal political landscape is described, highlighting the primary political narratives that have shaped the country's defence and foreign policy environment. In Chapter 4, the main sources of information include Hungary's National Military Strategies (2012, 2021) and National Security Strategies (2012, 2020). These documents are supplemented by an analysis of Hungary's updated legal framework, government resolutions, and defence policy decisions, as well as semi-governmental publications that provide insights into strategic thinking within policymaking circles. The study follows a structured

comparative analysis method, systematically contrasting policy documents to identify key shifts. Special attention is given to doctrinal changes, shifts in threat perception, and the incorporation of hybrid security concerns, such as energy security, migration, and cyber threats. Furthermore, the research integrates process tracing to examine causal mechanisms driving Hungary's evolving defence policy. By mapping changes in strategic documents against geopolitical developments – such as the annexation of Crimea (2014), the migration crisis (2015), the war in Ukraine (2022 – present), and growing tensions within the EU and NATO – this study contextualises Hungary's defence policy shifts as a response to external and internal pressures.

The concluding chapter assesses whether Hungary's model remains sustainable amid renewed great power competition and the erosion of liberal international norms. By examining Hungary's complex navigation of recent security architectures, this study contributes to broader debates about middle power agencies in an era of institutional fragmentation and authoritarian resurgence. The findings carry implications for NATO and EU policymakers grappling with member states that simultaneously benefit from and challenge the liberal security order they helped create.

3. Hungary's Strategic Security Environment. Geopolitical Position & Security Challenges

Hungary's geographical landscape, characterised by wide, open plains make it, from a geopolitical point of view, an ideal staging ground for potential challengers or a setting that would (and does) easily allow potential instabilities to flow from across borders. Hungary shares borders with Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Its geopolitical strategies have often involved leveraging its position within the Visegrád Group, a regional alliance with Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, to exert influence within the EU and promote regional cooperation (Varga 2023). Relatively unique to Hungarian politics is the large Hungarian minority in the neighbouring countries, which is a testament to the troubled history of the region. How to handle the Hungarian minority has been an ambivalent political issue for consecutive elected governments. Starting from 2010, with the second overall term of PM Viktor Orbán and with the start of his first 2/3 parliament majority, voting rights have been extended to ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries, a move which has heightened tensions, particularly with Romania and Slovakia, where the most significant Hungarian minority population resides (Lendvai 2012). Normalising these relationships to boost regional cooperation ended up being a vital interest of the consecutive cabinets of Viktor Orbán, as this was seen as a pivotal step towards forming such a coalition of like-minded countries that can actively shape and form Central and Eastern Europe's geopolitical landscape.

The Orbán governments have capitalised on nationalist rhetoric, positioning the ruling party as a defender of Christian (or conservative) Europe against perceived threats from liberalism, globalism and migration. Since 2010, Hungary has experienced a shift towards illiberal democracy, characterised by centralisation of power, restrictions on media freedom, and erosion of judicial independence. While this has most likely emerged initially as a political or rhetorical trick to keep party popularity high, path dependency gradually seems to have reinforced internal divisions and thus shaped Hungary's geopolitical identity (Varga 2023). These changes have sparked tensions with the EU, which has criticised Hungary's democratic backsliding and thus created an exponential downward spiral of increasingly anti-West and anti-EU rhetoric (Müller and Slominski 2024).

This focus is evident in Hungary's stringent migration policies and its resistance to EU-wide refugee relocation programs. The government's fear of migration is largely driven by a combination of populist rhetoric and a desire to maintain cultural homogeneity. These elements have been instrumental in shaping Hungary's security policy, emphasising the protection of national borders and the exclusion of migrants. The Hungarian Government has securitised migration by portraying it as an existential threat to national identity and culture, with governmental speeches and policies reflecting this securitisation, legitimising strict measures like border fences and anti-migrant

legislation (Kerner 2025). The framing of migration as a security threat resonates with populist ideologies, creating a dichotomy between "us" and "them" (Yukaruç 2024). There is a lively discussion among Hungarian scholars about whether migration as a security issue first emerged only as a Machiavellian tool that synergises well with pre-existing right-wing populist panels to garner political support or whether the fears articulated by policymakers were sincere. It is an especially interesting question when we contrast the topic of Middle-Eastern and African migration as a security threat and migration from South-East Asia as an economic advantage (Pálos 2023). Nevertheless, migration being treated as the main security challenge determines both the main geographical axis and the *modus operandi* of Hungarian security policy.

The Balkans, especially the Western Balkans, is an area of special interest to the Hungarian defence policy. It is seen as the primary staging ground or “entry point” for harmful (uncontrolled) migration, which therefore should be monitored and controlled by all means. Interestingly enough, countries that are seen as challengers to the institutional allies of Hungary (NATO and the EU) and yet with whom Budapest pursues closer economic bonds – Russia and China – also aim to increase their influence among unaligned Balkan states. Therefore, even NATO and the EU consider the region's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures crucial for regional and European security – something that Hungarian policymakers can easily get behind (Tahirović 2024).

The other primary source of regional instability for Budapest is, of course, the Ukrainian border. With Kyiv-Budapest relations entering a downward spiral since around 2014 over minority rights, the diplomatic situation has been steadily declining. For Ukraine, issues with the significant Russian (or Russian-speaking) minority have extensively shaped overall minority policy, and the treatment of ethnic Hungarians is most likely largely a side effect of the comprehensive approach. While this serves as an explanation for the diplomatic interplay at hand, it did not and does not negate the negative effects on the relations (Sadecki and Iwański 2018). Further complications include the question of energy transport. Hungary has relied on Russian energy imports for a long while, with some of it being delivered through Ukraine, although since the full-scale invasion, it has been importing much less than before (Arató 2024). Since the escalation of the conflict, Hungary has been exposed to an elevated level of both conventional threats and security issues such as smuggling, weapons influx, human trafficking and migration. This creates a secondary axis for security operations, although the securitisation on the Ukrainian border has not hit the expected levels. One prominent case was when a Tu-141 drone, modified into an ad hoc missile cruiser, could fly through Romania's, Hungary's, and Croatia's airspace while not undetected, but also not interrupted (Rogoway 2022). This would underline either the fear of further escalation or overflowing of the war into the EU and NATO, or the inability or unwillingness to engage in the interception of direct military threats originating from the active fights.

Another open security issue characterising the Hungarian geopolitical sphere is the matter of Russian hybrid warfare. Russia employs hybrid and sub-threshold operations against NATO countries, including Hungary, by leveraging a combination of military, information, and economic tactics that remain below the threshold of conventional warfare. These operations are designed to create ambiguity, destabilise target nations, and exploit vulnerabilities without provoking a full-scale military response from NATO. The strategic use of hybrid warfare allows Russia to achieve its geopolitical objectives while maintaining plausible deniability and avoiding open confrontation. Below are the key elements of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy against NATO countries, with a focus on Hungary.

- **Information Warfare and Disinformation:** Russia uses disinformation campaigns and misinformation (when internet users themselves start spreading false narratives that they sincerely believe to be true, originating from the aforementioned disinformation operations) to create confusion and undermine trust in NATO institutions. This involves spreading false narratives and manipulating public opinion to weaken the cohesion among Member States. Polls have shown that Hungary has been especially affected by such influence (Németh 2024).

- **Cyber Operations:** Cyberattacks are a critical component of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy, targeting critical infrastructure, government institutions, and private sectors in NATO countries. These attacks aim to disrupt operations, steal sensitive information, and sow discord. For example, the servers of Hungary's Ministry of Foreign Affairs are known to have been exploited by Russian hackers (Panyi 2022) and threats of terror bombing in the first part of the year 2025 also seem to have originated from Russian servers (Zubor 2025).

- **Political Subversion and Influence:** Moscow engages in political subversion by supporting pro-Russian political parties and movements within NATO countries. This includes funding political campaigns, influencing elections, and fostering divisions within societies. In Hungary, Russia has been accused of supporting political actors who are sympathetic to its interests (Patrick Müller 2023).

- **Economic Leverage:** Economic tactics, such as energy dependency, are used by Russia to exert influence over target countries. By controlling energy supplies (or posing as controlling), Russia can pressure countries like Hungary to align with its geopolitical interests. Hungary's reliance on Russian energy resources makes it susceptible to economic coercion, which Moscow can exploit to achieve its strategic objectives

- **Military Posturing and Covert Operations:** The Kremlin employs military posturing, such as deploying troops near borders. While Hungary is not directly threatened by Russian military forces, the presence of Russian troops in neighbouring regions serves as a constant reminder of its military capabilities and intentions.

The abovementioned concerns mark significant modern challenges for European nations antagonistic to Russia's intentions of creating an international security environment where it can interact vis-à-vis smaller nations. The handling of these cannot be left to chance.

Now that the main geographical axes of the challenges, the reasons for the securitisation of certain issues and the nature of the threats have been described, we will commence to analyse how the defence and military policies attempt to react to them.

4. Hungary's Strategic Shift – Doctrinal and Policy Foundations

Hungary's primary defence documents are National Security Strategy and the National Military Strategy. There have been two of each mentioned documents during the examined period set out in this paper. The National Security Strategies, which outline a general moral approach to security matters of the Republic of Hungary, were issued in 2012 and 2020, updating the previous document from 2004.

Focusing especially on military matters and issues of the Armed Forces, the governments of Hungary issued the National Military Strategies in 2012 and 2021. Previously, the basic principles of security policy and homeland defence were adopted in 1993, therefore, an update was long due. Moreover, the legal changes concerning the usage of the armed forces of Hungary will be analysed, as they also reflect a key shift in the strategic thinking of the Hungarian government.

Besides official government documents, additional non-scientific texts created by and for party hardliners will also be showcased. These are important because as a result of the hybridisation of the regime described in Chapter 3, the lines between state apparatus and party functionaries become more and more blurred, and party policy documents may have a much higher influence on government policy than before.

4.1. Hungary's 2012 National Security Strategy

Hungary's 2012 National Security Strategy (NSS) was formulated in a period of relative geopolitical stability, with a strong Euro-Atlantic orientation, but it still recognises significant changes in Hungary's security environment due to globalisation and uneven development, leading to new power centres and the emergence of weak or failing states (The Government of Hungary 2012). It emphasises that these factors have made certain regions' security situations more unpredictable.

The strategy embraced a comprehensive security approach, acknowledging that modern security challenges extend beyond military threats and include economic, social, environmental, and human rights concerns. While traditional military conflicts were considered unlikely, the document emphasised the importance of responding to transnational risks such as financial crises, weak states, and emerging global power shifts.

As such, a key aspect of the 2012 strategy was its commitment to multilateralism, with NATO and the EU identified as the fundamental pillars of Hungary's security policy. The document reaffirmed Hungary's dedication to the Alliance's collective defence (Article 5) and emphasised the importance of European integration for stability. This alone testifies to how Hungary viewed itself as primarily a security consumer. Additionally, the OSCE and the UN were regarded as essential platforms for international conflict resolution, and regional cooperation, particularly within the Visegrád Group (V4), was highlighted as a means to strengthen Hungary's position in Central Europe. This can be regarded as a hint or a precursor to the later desired focus for heavier local regional cooperation to deter threats and shape the multilateral organisations' security direction by amplifying Hungary's voice using regional cooperative platforms.

The strategy also addressed terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and organised crime, viewing them as growing threats in an interconnected world. Recognising the impact of globalisation, the document stressed that Hungary's security does not begin at its borders, as crises in distant regions could have swift and unpredictable repercussions at home. Additionally, energy security was identified as a key concern, focusing on reducing dependency on external energy sources and diversifying supply routes to enhance national resilience.

In terms of global actors, Russia and China were not explicitly mentioned. The 2012 NBS ultimately reflected Hungary's strong reliance on its NATO and EU alliances, positioning the country as a cooperative but largely dependent member of the Euro-Atlantic security framework.

4.2. Hungary's 2020 National Security Strategy

By 2020, Hungary's security landscape had evolved considerably, leading to a more assertive and strategically autonomous approach. The 2020 National Security Strategy reflected a world where geopolitical competition, hybrid warfare, and regional instability had become dominant, overarching concerns (The Government of Hungary 2020). Compared to 2012, when security was framed through a broad multilateral lens, the 2020 document placed greater emphasis on Hungary's independent security interests, signalling a shift from pure reliance on NATO and the EU toward a more pragmatic and flexible security policy. A key addition to the 2020 Strategy was the recognition of hybrid threats, cyberattacks, and foreign interference as pressing security risks. While cybersecurity and disinformation had been minor concerns in 2012, the new strategy explicitly acknowledged them as major challenges, aligning with broader global trends of state-sponsored cyber operations and digital warfare. Similarly, strategic autonomy was a recurring theme, reflecting Hungary's increasing willingness to pursue bilateral partnerships outside of NATO and the EU, including with non-Western powers. This is most likely an expression of the desire for the preservation of national sovereignty and the wish not to just consume security, but to actively shape it.

Another major shift was the explicit recognition of China as a strategic partner. Unlike 2012, when China was only implied as part of ongoing global transformations, the 2020 strategy acknowledged China's growing economic influence in Hungary, particularly through infrastructure investments and trade agreements linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, while China was viewed as an important economic player, it was not categorised as a security concern, demonstrating Hungary's increasing engagement with Beijing. In contrast, Russia's role was reassessed, with the 2020 NSS taking a more cautious stance, yet still not openly hostile. This is a stark contrast to other regional players, like Poland or the Baltic states, who have been wary of Russian revanchism since 2008. This difference in the strategic perception would eventually return

to haunt as it facilitated the disintegration of the V4 cooperative platform (Boyse 2023). Although the document did not label Russia an outright threat, it recognised Moscow's influence in regional instability, particularly through energy dependence, hybrid tactics, and military power projection.

In domestic security matters, migration and border security emerged as top priorities. Whereas the 2012 strategy had framed migration in a human security context, emphasising integration and international cooperation, the 2020 document explicitly defined migration as a security risk, linking it to organised crime, terrorism, and social instability. This shift mirrored the broader political changes in Hungary's security discourse, as described in Chapter 3 and placed border protection at the centre of national defence. Another significant addition was the inclusion of pandemics and climate change as security concerns. While environmental security had been acknowledged in 2012, the 2020 strategy significantly expanded its scope, incorporating pandemics, resource scarcity, and the impact of climate change on global stability. This change was largely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the vulnerabilities of national health and crisis management systems.

Finally, the 2020 strategy placed greater emphasis on military modernisation and self-reliance. While Hungary was largely dependent on NATO's collective defence framework in 2012, unofficially labelling it as a security consumer, the new strategy promoted domestic arms production, increased defence spending, and the development of independent military capabilities. This reflected Hungary's broader effort to strengthen its national security posture while maintaining its commitments to the Alliance and even ramping them up.

Overall, the 2020 National Security Strategy marked a considerable departure from the 2012 document, signalling a move toward a more self-reliant, geopolitically flexible, and security-conscious Hungary. While NATO and the EU remained key players, the strategy de-emphasized multilateralism, prioritised hybrid threats and border security, embraced China as an economic partner, and adopted a more cautious stance on Russia while still promoting economic cooperation and partnership. In Table no. 1, a synthetic comparison of the key aspects is given.

Table no. 1: Comparison between 2012 and 2020 National Security Strategies of Hungary.
(Concatenated by the author)

Aspect	2012 National Security Strategy	2020 National Security Strategy	Key Changes
Security Approach	Comprehensive security (political, military, economic)	More focus on hybrid threats, cyber, and strategic autonomy	Shift from broad security to targeted emerging threats
NATO & EU Role	NATO (collective defence) and EU (multilateralism) as cornerstones	NATO remains central, but greater emphasis on national defence and bilateral partnerships	Less dependence on EU frameworks
Hybrid Warfare (including cyber)	Minor concern in the 2012 strategy	A major priority in 2020, with a focus on foreign interference	Acknowledges Russia and China's cyber influence
China's Role	Implicitly mentioned in terms of global shifts, but not a key actor	Strategic economic partner, especially in infrastructure & trade	Increased economic alignment with China

Aspect	2012 National Security Strategy	2020 National Security Strategy	Key Changes
Russia's Role	Only implicitly mentioned, as in terms of geopolitical shifts, not independently	Recognised as a geopolitical actor with hybrid capabilities, but not explicitly outlined as an immediate direct threat	More caution on Russian influence
Migration & Border Security	The human security aspect is emphasised	Treated as a direct security threat linked to crime and terrorism	Hardened stance on migration
Energy Security	Focused on diversification and alternative sources	A geopolitical aspect is added, emphasising energy independence	More explicit mention of Russia's role
Climate Change & Pandemics	Environmental concerns are secondary	Expanded to include pandemics and resource conflicts	COVID-19 impact reflected
Defence & Military	NATO-dependent, limited domestic capabilities	Stronger push for military modernisation & strategic autonomy	Commitment to higher defence spending

4.3. Hungary's National Military Strategy in 2012

The 2012 National Military Strategy was developed in a security environment that, while not devoid of challenges, remained relatively stable in a regional and global sense (The Government of Hungary 2012). It reflected Hungary's commitment to NATO and EU security structures while acknowledging the need for a more self-sufficient and modernised national defence force. A key theme was the redefinition of military self-reliance, as the strategy explicitly rejected the passive approach of relying solely on solidarity of the members of the Alliance for national defence. Instead, it stressed the importance of maintaining credible military capabilities while reinforcing regional cooperation, particularly through the Visegrád Group (V4) and NATO partnerships. The document emphasised that Hungary's military security is now deeply embedded in the transatlantic alliance. Article 5 remained the cornerstone of national defence, and Hungary's participation in missions of the Alliance were seen as both a duty and a necessity. However, it was also noted that Hungary's military had suffered from years of underinvestment, and a key objective was stabilising and enhancing defence capabilities within a limited budgetary framework. The strategy acknowledged that Hungary's military was still transitioning from a post-Cold War downsized force into a more professional and flexible army, capable of contributing to collective defence and international crisis management.

Hungary's military outlook in 2012 was threat-agnostic, meaning it did not define any state as an enemy. It recognised that while traditional interstate conflicts were unlikely, threats such as regional instability, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and organised crime posed increasingly complex security challenges. In line with the 2012 National Security Strategy, the military document also emphasised energy security, particularly concerning Hungary's dependence on foreign energy supplies. The limited diversification of energy sources was

considered a vulnerability that could be exploited geopolitically, highlighting the need for increased defence preparedness in protecting critical infrastructure.

A final key aspect of the 2012 strategy was the importance of military-civilian cooperation. It stressed that Hungarian society must be more engaged in national defence, both through the volunteer reserve system and a wider defence awareness campaign. The goal was to strengthen the link between the military and civilians, ensuring greater societal support for defence initiatives.

4.4. Hungary's National Military Strategy in 2021

By 2021, Hungary's security environment had significantly changed, leading to a more assertive and comprehensive military strategy. The 2021 National Military Strategy was strongly shaped by the National Security Strategy from 2020, and it emphasised a major military transformation through the Zrínyi 2026 Modernisation Program (The Government of Hungary 2021). The goal was to create a modern, self-reliant, and technologically advanced military force that could act as a regional security provider while continuing to meet the obligations of both NATO and the EU. A central theme of the 2021 strategy was Hungary's ambition to become a regional military power by 2030. While the Alliance remained the foundation of national defence, the document redefined military self-sufficiency as an essential component of security. The strategy declared that Hungary must not only rely solely on the collective defence mechanism of the Alliance but also be capable of independent deterrence. This self-reliant defence approach manifested in increased defence spending, military-industrial development, and the expansion of Hungary's domestic arms production.

Compared to 2012, the 2021 strategy identified hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and disinformation campaigns as primary security risks. These asymmetric threats were recognised as a direct challenge to Hungarian national security, which represented a major shift from the previous strategy, which had been relatively neutral on foreign interference. The new document stressed the need for greater cyber capabilities, counterintelligence operations, and strategic resilience against external manipulation and influence operations. Another significant change was the explicit military role in border security. While the 2012 strategy had discussed migration within a human security framework, the 2021 version framed migration as a military challenge. The strategy linked mass migration to national security risks, stating that the Hungarian military must be prepared to support law enforcement in border protection and crisis response. This shift aligned with the 2020 National Security Strategy, which redefined migration as a primary security concern.

The 2021 strategy also introduced climate change and pandemics as security challenges, integrating lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The document stated that the military must be prepared to assist in national emergency responses, particularly in cases of public health crises, environmental disasters, and infrastructure collapses. This demonstrated broadening the military's role in domestic security affairs, which was still absent from the 2012 version.

Finally, the 2021 strategy placed unprecedented emphasis on modern military technologies, including autonomous weapons, drone warfare, space-based systems, and artificial intelligence (AI) in defence. The document noted that future conflicts would likely involve automated and high-precision warfare, requiring Hungary to adapt its military doctrine accordingly. The focus on technological innovation aligned with the broader NATO and EU defence modernisation efforts, but it also highlighted Hungary's desire to reduce dependence on foreign suppliers by developing its military-industrial base. This is underlined by the overall governmental desire to invite foreign weapons manufacturers and co-develop weapons systems with them for both domestic and international production. As per our evaluation, this also underlines the desire for strategic autonomy. Per the view presented in Table 1, a similar comparison table was also assembled in Table 2 to highlight the key shifts.

Table no. 2: Comparison of 2012 and 2021 National Military Strategies of Hungary.
(Concatenated by the author)

Aspect	2012 National Military Strategy	2021 National Military Strategy	Key Changes
Security Approach	NATO and EU as primary pillars, limited self-reliance	NATO remains central, but there is a strong focus on national defence autonomy	Greater emphasis on self-reliance and independent deterrence capabilities
Hybrid Warfare (including cyber)	Minor concern	Major priority: addressing foreign interference and cyber threats	Recognition of Russian and Chinese cyber influence
Migration & Border Security	The human security aspect emphasised	Military role in border defence expanded	Hardened stance on migration as a security issue
Defence Modernization	Limited budget	slow modernisation	Major rearmament and military-industrial development
Pandemics & Climate Change	Not a focus	Explicit recognition of pandemics and climate risks	COVID-19 impact integrated
Energy Security	Dependence on foreign supplies is seen as a vulnerability	Linked to geopolitical risks and military strategy	More explicit concern over Russian influence

4.5. Legal Framework and Updates to the Operational Model of the Hungarian Army

The legal changes affecting the Hungarian army stem from modifications to the Fundamental Law of Hungary (Constitution of Hungary – Alaptörvény) and the 2021 Defence Acts. These legislative amendments aim to enhance the country's defence administration, ensuring a more structured and centralised approach to military and national security matters. The Fundamental Law of Hungary, particularly through its ninth amendment, reorganised the legal framework for states of emergency and special legal orders. It distinguishes between three states of emergency: state of war, state of emergency, and state of danger. This change was designed to streamline governmental responses in crises and to clarify the distribution of authority among state institutions. The legal modifications also emphasise that national defence is not solely the responsibility of the military but a collective duty of all Hungarian citizens.

The 2021 Defence and Security Coordination Act (The Government of Hungary 2021) was introduced to modernise and synchronise Hungary's defence and security measures. This act defines the scope of defence administration as an integrated system that involves not only military and law enforcement agencies but also various governmental institutions and civil sectors. The law establishes a centralised defence administration body, ensuring that crisis response measures are executed efficiently and proportionately to the threat level. It also integrates Hungary's defence strategy with its international commitments, particularly within NATO.

The 2021 Act on national defence and the Hungarian Armed Forces (The Government of Hungary 2021), which governs the Hungarian Defence Forces, underwent significant changes. One of the most notable reforms is that operational control of the military was transferred from Parliament to the Government, effectively placing the Hungarian Defence Forces under direct executive control.

The act specifies the role of the President of Hungary as the Supreme Commander of the military, while the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Defence hold operational authority. This shift reflects a broader effort to centralise military decision-making within the government, enabling a more rapid and coordinated response to crises.

In addition to restructuring command authority, the legal changes introduced a more comprehensive mobilisation framework. The legislation defines the responsibilities of civilian organisations, local governments, and private entities in supporting defence efforts during emergencies. It mandates national defence education programs, the development of cybersecurity capabilities, and the establishment of military-related research initiatives. A particularly significant amendment is the enhancement of Hungary's military preparedness. The new legal framework allows for the expansion of military forces, including the recruitment of volunteer and reserve units. It also introduces clearer procedures for emergency military deployments, both domestically and abroad. In the case of unexpected attacks or security threats, the government now has greater flexibility to deploy military assets without requiring prior parliamentary approval. Further provisions address Hungary's international defence obligations, reaffirming the country's participation in NATO operations, international peacekeeping missions, and joint defence initiatives. The legal basis for foreign troop movements within Hungarian territory has also been clarified, granting the government broader discretion in approving allied military operations on Hungarian soil. Finally, the legislation incorporates measures for protecting national security infrastructure, including critical energy resources, communication networks, and transportation hubs. It reinforces the military's role in safeguarding Hungary's borders in the event of mass migration or other security threats.

In summary, the legal changes affecting the Hungarian Armed Forces are characterised by a shift toward stronger central control over military operations, enhanced emergency preparedness, greater civilian involvement in defence efforts, and a streamlined legal framework for crisis management. These reforms reflect Hungary's strategic focus on rapid response, cybersecurity, and alignment with NATO's defence objectives while simultaneously reinforcing the military's role in safeguarding national sovereignty. The legal changes pave the way for the military to be involved in handling non-conventional threats as well and make sure that the military has the legal capability to react to the threats outlined in the National Security Strategy of 2020. This can be regarded as a 360-degree approach to security.

4.6. Semi-Governmental Documents

In addition, as outlined at the beginning of Chapter 4, besides the official government documents, we can observe the trickling down of alternative policy directives onto the governmental policy level. We can sometimes even witness these non-official sources overwriting the main government policy recommendations on the practical level of foreign and security policy. Balázs Orbán, advisor to PM Viktor Orbán is an important figure in Hungarian politics, who has written such books about the general direction of Hungarian foreign policy and Hungary's strategic interests. Balázs Orbán's primary position is Political Director to the Prime Minister. In this capacity, he advises Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on political, social, economic, and public policy matters, and he coordinates the work of the Prime Minister's advisers and assists in decision-making processes. Since April 25, 2023, he has been appointed to oversee the Institute of International Affairs, which supports strategic decision-making in Hungarian foreign policy, additionally he is chairman of the Advisory Board of the National University of Public Service since 2018, and he is also chairman of the Board of Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) since July 2020, which is Hungary's biggest think tank and an unofficial education centre for replenishing the Fidesz party's elite. These roles collectively position Balázs Orbán as a key figure in shaping Hungarian government strategy, foreign policy, and public administration education, and as such, his impact should not be underestimated.

He has released two books about the modern Hungarian national strategy: *The Hungarian Way of Strategy* (2021) (Orbán, A magyar stratégiai gondolkodás egyszeregye 2020) and *Hussar Cut*:

The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity (2023) (Orbán, Huszárvágás: A konnektivitás magyar stratégiája 2023). Both books, while not being written from a scientific perspective, provide insight into Hungarian politics, geopolitical strategy, and the government's vision for the country's role in the international arena. They offer a perspective on Hungary's approach to navigating global challenges while maintaining its national identity and interests. The first book, *The Hungarian Way of Strategy* tries to explain how the country's unique geography and history shape national policy and advocates for governance based on national history and values. One of those values is, of course, sovereignty, and the biggest threat is migration. The book states that the mission of the modern Hungarian state is to find the balance between concepts described as *Western modernisation* and the so-called *Eastern nomadic desire for freedom*. The book essentially suggests that Hungary's role is to connect the political and economic blocks of East and West, thus re-discovering the *bridge* concept that determined the foreign policy ambitions of Slovakia's Mečiar government in the 1990s and that of Belarus under the early presidencies of Lukashenka. The second book, *The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity*, explores Hungary's role and place in the new global landscape and amid a changing geopolitical world order, where the concept of a *hussar cut* – a swift, well-executed, professional strike – is a metaphor for Hungary's strategic approach. This book outlines Hungary's strategy of connectivity to mitigate the effects of geopolitical confrontations. The goal is described as avoiding to become a periphery of one singular geopolitical superblock; instead, the author proposes simultaneously retaining economic and political manoeuvrability with multiple forming or solidified geopolitical spheres. In IR terms, the hussar cut practically means hedging – a strategic approach that involves balancing between competitive and cooperative policies to manage uncertainties in global power distribution. It is considered an intermediate strategy, neither fully aligning with nor opposing major powers, allowing states to maintain strategic autonomy. Unlike strict bandwagoning (aligning with a dominant power) or balancing (actively countering a threat), hedging keeps options open. States engage diplomatically, economically, and militarily with multiple great powers to avoid overdependence on one. Governments may engage in security cooperation with one power while simultaneously strengthening ties with their rivals. The eventual goal is to reduce vulnerabilities by preparing for multiple future scenarios (Pujol 2024). The strategic cooperation with a rival power is underlined by Hungary's Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, having participated and also held a presentation at the Minsk Conference on Eurasian Security in Belarus. The event is seen as a rival to the Munich Security Conference, according to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) (Körömi 2024). Mostly, Southeast Asian States (e.g., Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia) adopted the doctrine of hedging, maintaining economic ties with China while also deepening security relations with the United States to prevent over-reliance on either, but India's foreign policy and Turkey's under Erdoğan also have elements of hedging. The practical behaviour of Hungarian diplomacy seems to indicate that the general principles outlined in the two books aforementioned are more characteristic of the Hungarian foreign policy than those expressed in the National Security Strategy.

Conclusions

Hungary's transition from a security consumer to a more strategically autonomous defence actor reflects broader geopolitical shifts and domestic recalibrations in its national security outlook. Initially content with the Alliance's collective security guarantees, Hungary has since recognised the need to enhance its own military capabilities, navigate hybrid threats, and assert greater strategic flexibility. This shift, while aligning with broader NATO objectives, also demonstrates Hungary's ambition to balance its alliance commitments with national sovereignty. Key policy documents – such as the National Security Strategies of 2012 and 2020 and the National Military Strategies of 2012 and 2021 – illustrate a gradual but significant departure from an overreliance on multilateral security structures towards a more self-reliant, proactive defence posture. The Zrínyi 2026 modernisation program has played a central role in this evolution, continuously equipping Hungary's armed forces

with more advanced capabilities, expanding domestic arms production, and reinforcing deterrence measures. Hungary's strategic autonomy can be interpreted as a general increase of available modern, versatile military equipment, departure from the Alliance's general outlines for strategic objectives and the nurturing of the expansion of domestic military-industrial complexes. However, Hungary's defence policy remains shaped by complex geopolitical realities. While reinforcing its role within the Alliance through troop contributions, military modernisation, and strategic partnerships, Hungary has simultaneously sought to maintain strong economic and political engagements with Russia and China. This dual-track approach highlights the balancing act Budapest is pursuing – leveraging institutional membership in NATO and the EU, while cultivating alternative security and economic relationships outside the Western bloc. However, this transactional hedging behaviour is increasingly seen as a betrayal of the primary, already established Western order, thus undermining the very concept of *hedging*, which lies in maintaining balanced relations with all influential actors, not just the challengers to the primary one. While the overall increase in the defence budget and the nature of the evolving capabilities align with the overall strategic objectives of the Alliance in Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary's dual-track game can undermine overall credibility of the Alliance and can alienate Hungary from the other members of the Alliance, damaging its reputation along the way. Overall, this uncertainty, generally inherent in Hungary's divergent behaviour disrupts a synchronised Alliance response in the region, posing an acute challenge.

Moving forward, Hungary's ability to sustain this evolving defence posture will depend on several factors: its capacity to maintain military investment, its ability to navigate internal and external political pressures, and its management of strategic relationships with both allies and competitors. As the Alliance faces mounting global security challenges, Hungary's defence trajectory will serve as a case study in how mid-sized states seek to reconcile alliance obligations with national strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar world.

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