

COALITIONS OF THE WILLING IN ACTION: THE ROLE OF NON-EU NATO MEMBERS IN EUROPE'S SECURITY AND DEFENCE

This is the summary of the online public event held on 16 May 2026.
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Contemporary Turkish Studies and the European Institute at LSE, in partnership with CIVICA (the European University of Social Sciences), hosted an in-person public event examining how Europe's security architecture is being reshaped in response to new collective threats and changes in US foreign policy. The discussion centred on the EU's pursuit of open strategic autonomy and the growing use of coalitions of the willing, with a primary focus on Norway, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Türkiye.

The speakers were **Ilke Toygür**, Director of the Global Policy Centre and Professor of Practice in European Politics at IE University Madrid, non-resident senior associate at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington DC, and elected board member of the Trans-European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA); **Pernille Rieker**, Director of the ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo and Research Professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), where she leads the RE-ENGAGE project on the EU's promotion of democracy and stability in neighbouring regions; and **Aaron McKeil**, Academic Director of the MSc International Strategy and Diplomacy programme at LSE IDEAS, whose research focuses on international order theory and the sources of international disorder.

Professor **Yaprak Gürsoy**, Chair of Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE, chaired the event.

In her introduction, Gürsoy welcomed the panellists and audience and outlined the purpose of the event: to examine how European non-EU NATO members could more effectively engage with EU security structures to build a unified and flexible European defence framework. The panel was structured to allow for initial presentations from each speaker, followed by a round of questions from the Chair and an open Q&A with the audience.

Coalitions of the Willing and the Rethinking of Wider European Security

Ilke Toygür opened by framing the current moment as the most significant security restructuring in Europe since the end of the Second World War, identifying two primary drivers. The first is Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which reopened fundamental questions about how Ukraine should be supported and how Europe itself should be defended. The second is Donald Trump's return to the White House, which Toygür described as qualitatively different from his first term in two key respects: the active ideological undermining of the European integration project, including direct support for far-right movements across Europe; and the threat to the territorial sovereignty of Greenland, part of European territory via Denmark. The latter has, for the first time, prompted serious European preparations for a possible confrontation with the United States. In this context, she argued, threats are evolving faster than institutions and formal EU and NATO structures are either too slow or constrained by unanimity requirements, and increasingly unable to accommodate non-EU member states.

Against this backdrop, Toygür introduced two new formats: security and defence partnerships (SDPs) and coalitions of the willing. Since 2024, the EU has signed twelve SDPs with partners including Norway, Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, Albania, Australia, India, Iceland, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Ghana. These agreements offer tailored, flexible engagement outside formal accession or membership structures.

Toygür defined coalitions of the willing as "flexible ad hoc groupings of states that cooperate outside or alongside formal EU frameworks, distinguished from established mechanisms of differentiated integration by their informality, speed, and purpose-driven nature." While the term has historical precedents, most notably the 2003 Iraq War coalition and the anti-ISIS coalition, it has evolved in the European context into a broader catchall for intergovernmental arrangements running in parallel with institutional structures. The most prominent current example is the Ukraine coalition, of which Türkiye is also a member. Key open questions remain around continuity, funding, and the long-term relationship between these groupings and the EU and NATO.

Toygür concluded by arguing that the security and enlargement conversations are not mutually exclusive. Since 2022, the EU has accelerated enlargement discussions, granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, deepening engagement with the Western Balkans, and reaching the point at which Montenegro has begun formal drafting of its accession treaty as a potential twenty-eighth member state. In her view, the intersection of security partnerships and enlargement will produce new and differentiated forms of engagement between EU and non-EU states going forward.

The Norwegian Perspective and the Case for Differentiated Defence Integration

Pernille Rieker began by affirming the event's central premise: European security can no longer be understood through any single institution. NATO remains indispensable, the EU has grown substantially more important, and yet many of the most relevant responses to today's security challenges take place in flexible formats, coalitions of the willing, minilateral groupings, bilateral agreements, and ad hoc support structures for Ukraine. The central question, she argued, is not only what Europe is doing but who makes the decisions, and how non-EU NATO allies can be integrated into a coherent yet flexible security architecture.

Rieker identified a persistent tension between expectations and capabilities. Expectations of the EU have increased dramatically since Russia's invasion, yet Europe's ability to act remains constrained by institutional politics, capability gaps, budget limitations, and national sovereignty concerns. The ambition is high; the urgency is real, but the institutional architecture is still under construction.



Her central argument was that European strategic autonomy, now a mainstream rather than controversial concept, is increasingly being built through differentiated defence integration, not uniform EU integration. Different countries participate in different ways and at different levels while still contributing to a broader European capacity to act. She contended that this model need not produce fragmentation; it may instead be the only realistic path to building strategic autonomy quickly enough. She identified three pathways for the future of European defence: a stronger European pillar within NATO; coalitions of the willing capable of moving faster in crises; and deeper cooperation inside EU structures through instruments such as PESCO, the European Defence Fund, joint procurement mechanisms, and SAFE. These pathways, she emphasised, are not mutually exclusive.

On the EU's growing importance as a security actor, Rieker pointed to its expanding role in industrial capacity, resilience, cyber security, critical infrastructure, energy, maritime security, and support for Ukraine, areas where the EU has, in some respects, become more central than NATO. She described the EU as an "enabling actor" for European strategic autonomy, working not through traditional crisis management alone but through its regulatory, financial, industrial, and infrastructural power.

Turning to Norway specifically, Rieker described it as a closely associated non-EU ally engaged across all three pathways simultaneously: a NATO member, a participant in flexible formats such as the Joint Expeditionary Force with the UK and Nordic Defence Cooperation, and a partner increasingly linked to EU defence, industrial preparedness, and space initiatives through the bilateral

SDP signed in 2024. However, Norway's deep integration via the EEA, which covers almost everything except voting rights, fisheries, and agriculture, also brings growing difficulties. Norway has struggled to access new EU initiatives, including the health union, and faces significant complications because it is outside the customs union at a time when trade is becoming securitised. In a crisis, there is no time to negotiate new agreements.

She concluded with three key points: European defence is not converging on a single model; differentiated integration may be the only realistic way to build European strategic autonomy at the pace required; but differentiated integration will always amount to less than full membership for non-EU allies, making it broadly good for European security while not always in the direct interest of the non-EU partners themselves.

Carney's Rupture Thesis and the Future of European Defence

Aaron McKeil opened by noting that the event's framing, the role of non-EU NATO members, implicitly sets aside the most important non-EU NATO member, the United States, in order to ask how other states might take a lead in defending their freedom and prosperity. This, he observed, represents a genuinely historical shift from the post-war and Cold War period, in which the question was always how European states would fit into a US-led framework.

His central argument was that Europe cannot become a genuine great power without an integrated coalition of like-minded power multipliers: it is too small and too vulnerable relative to other major powers. The EU's vision of open strategic autonomy is not itself an international order vision, it is a framework for internal coherence. Europe has an interest and a shared responsibility in rebuilding an international order, and cannot do so without its closest friends and partners.

McKeil then assessed Prime Minister Mark Carney's influential World Economic Forum speech, in which Carney argued that the international order is experiencing rupture rather than mere transition. McKeil acknowledged a grain of truth in this diagnosis, noting that the liberal international order had for some years been functioning largely as performance art, but urged caution about the full implications. US soft-quitting of Europe is not new; it goes back at least to the Obama administration and reflects structural changes in the balance of power rather than temperament alone. That said, genuine psychological damage has been done by the Greenland episode. The perception of a coercive threat from a closest ally is genuinely new, and the question of how the US will defend the free world has shifted from a question of how to a conditional question of if, when, where, and under what circumstances.

On rebuilding the international order, McKeil was sober. A coalition of intermediate powers, even if deeply integrated, is not equivalent in quantity or quality to a great power. Such a coalition could, with time and investment, be sufficient to deter Russia, the weakest of the great powers, showing clear signs of decline, but without deep integration between EU and non-EU states, a divide-and-rule strategy could easily fracture it. He also cautioned that restoring a liberal international order that was not fully working in the first place makes little strategic sense; what is needed is something new built from the old, grounded in honest political goals rather than nostalgia.

On Canada specifically, McKeil noted that Prime Minister Carney's strategy is oriented towards deepening long-term integration with Europe well beyond defence, including in critical minerals, space communications, and strategic supply chains. Canada is participating in SAFE, has contributed half a billion dollars to the European Space Agency, and since 2022 has committed €6.5 billion in military assistance to Ukraine. Canada's appearance as a guest country at the European Political Community was described as a historically significant step. The current Canadian strategy reflects deliberate hedging rather than bandwagoning with the United States, and McKeil assessed this as a durable posture rather than a passing response to one administration. He concluded that NATO should be updated and invested in even while the EU does more, and that a genuinely capable European geopolitical power with multiregional force capabilities is imaginable within a decade, provided investments are sustained.

Panel Discussion

Question 1: Where Does Türkiye and the EU's Security Relationship Stand and Can the EU Afford Not to Include Turkey?

Toygür argued that Türkiye's case is distinct from that of the UK, Norway, and Canada. She traced the growing divergence to 2022, when Türkiye adopted a position of strategic ambiguity in the wake of Russia's invasion, providing Ukraine with weaponry and defence industry cooperation while simultaneously refusing to join sanctions against Russia and, according to documented EU findings, facilitating sanctions circumvention. According to the latest European Commission reports, foreign policy alignment between Türkiye and the EU stands at approximately 17%, representing a substantial and well-documented gap. This poses a fundamental obstacle to formalising a security and defence partnership.

From Türkiye's perspective, Toygür acknowledged legitimate grievances, above all, the unresolved Cyprus problem, which has blocked progress in EU–Türkiye relations since Cyprus's accession in 2004 without the underlying territorial dispute being resolved. The structural deadlock persists: Türkiye cannot be excluded from any conversation about NATO's European pillar, it remains NATO's second-largest army, yet the Cyprus issue and questions of strategic alignment prevent deeper institutional engagement with EU frameworks.

She identified two realistic areas of engagement: the European pillar within NATO, where Türkiye's presence is unavoidable; and defence industry cooperation, where several EU member states have a genuine interest, and where Turkish production capacity for ammunition and weapons systems offers real value. The key unresolved question concerns standards; the purchase of Russian S-400 systems complicates interoperability with the Western defence ecosystem, and it remains open whether Türkiye's role would resemble that of a supplier like South Korea or whether EU-funded bilateral collaboration is possible. In any case, Toygür stressed, the lack of strategic alignment in threat perception and political orientation will continue to be the defining obstacle.



Question 2: Norway's Neighbourhood: Nordic and Baltic Cooperation, and the Iceland Question

Rieker reflected on the profound shift that Russia's full-scale invasion brought to the Nordic and Baltic region. Sweden's and Finland's decisions to join NATO were rapid and decisive. Sweden's shift was particularly striking: NATO support rose from very low levels to approximately 80–90%, a transformation for a country whose non-alignment had been central to its national identity. Finland's approach was always more strategically calibrated, making the change more predictable.

With all Nordic states now inside NATO, security and defence cooperation in the region has deepened considerably, especially in the area of military planning. However, as the EU has assumed a more prominent role, Norway has increasingly found itself the outsider within its own neighbourhood. Norway is integrated into the EU in virtually everything except defence decision-making and voting, yet it is unable to participate in several of the most important new EU security instruments, the health union, customs union-related economic security mechanisms, and new trade-linked security measures.

In Iceland, Rieker noted that a referendum on reopening EU accession negotiations is scheduled for late August 2026. Should Iceland proceed, Norway and Liechtenstein would remain as the sole EEA partners, with Norway overwhelmingly dominant in that arrangement. A Norwegian public debate on EU membership, effectively a taboo since the 1994 referendum, could be triggered as a result, particularly given that growing security concerns are making the costs of Norway's partial integration more visible. No major Norwegian political party has been willing to open the question, but Rieker observed that the pressure is gradually increasing.

Question 3: How Deep Should Canada-EU Relations Go?

McKeil acknowledged the normative dimension of the question. Carney has described Canada as "the most European non-European country", more so even than the United States, citing a triple

alignment of history, values, and trust. The current Canadian strategy aims to deepen integration beyond defence to include critical minerals, space communications, and strategic resources; Canada is already participating in SAFE and in the European Political Community. There is no formal process for EU membership, nor is one envisaged. But McKeil argued that any additional defence arrangements complementing NATO should consider Canadian participation, and that Canada intends to pursue long-term integration across multiple domains.

He was candid, however, about the limits of what a coalition of intermediate powers can achieve. The psychological damage from the Greenland episode has been severe. Canada is hedging, participating in North American defence while deepening European partnerships, and McKeil assessed this as a durable posture. He also noted that the US will remain relevant and that NATO should not be abandoned or left to atrophy, but Europe cannot count on US security guarantees as it once did, and a plan B is essential regardless of which US administration holds power.



Audience Q&A and Discussion

The audience Q&A generated a wide range of questions covering Türkiye's relationship with European security structures, including its exclusion from SAFE while Canada participates; the feasibility of reforming or replacing NATO; the sources of European internal fragmentation; funding mechanisms for defence cooperation; whether a coalition of the willing could persuade the US to re-engage; and the merits of the proposed European Defence Union advanced by European Commission President Karolos Papoulias.

A point raised was that Anglo-Turkish relationships predate NATO and the EU: the UK established diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire in 1583. Today, the UK and Türkiye are leading European NATO allies bound by a shared commitment to European security, prosperity, and regional stability. The UK's Strategic Defence Review identifies Türkiye as a key NATO ally and bilateral partner, with Türkiye's strategic position at the crossroads of the Black Sea, South Caucasus, Middle East, and Africa.

Three concrete markers of the deepening relationship was highlighted: Türkiye's participation in the Coalition of the Willing to support Ukraine, including its leading role on the maritime track; Türkiye's

exercise of the Montreux Convention in 2022 to close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to all military shipping, as having directly contributed to the functional defeat of the Russian Black Sea Fleet by Ukraine; and the landmark contract signed in autumn 2025 for the sale of Eurofighter Typhoon jets to Türkiye, an £8 billion deal bringing Türkiye into a flagship European defence consortium.

On the question of Türkiye and SAFE, Toygür noted that Canada's inclusion and Türkiye's exclusion reflect the broader problem of strategic alignment. This is not an abstract concern: it has concrete institutional consequences, and unless both the alignment gap and the Cyprus deadlock are addressed simultaneously, institutional progress will remain elusive, even though Türkiye cannot realistically be excluded from NATO-level conversations.

On whether the coalition model should replace or complement NATO, McKeil argued firmly for the latter. The goal should be to build a coherent European plan B within the existing alliance, a "NATO within NATO", rather than seeking to displace it. A fully integrated EU army may be too ambitious to achieve in any realistic timeframe; differentiated defence integration is more practicable. He added that bringing the United States back to its previous level of engagement in Europe is structurally unlikely regardless of which party holds the White House, as it reflects a long-term shift in the global balance of power.

On funding, Toygür argued that the shape of European security arrangements will ultimately be defined by who pays. Joint borrowing, joint procurement, and EU-linked institutional funding, on a scale considerably larger than the current SAFE instrument, would pull ad hoc groupings towards EU structures. If funding remains fragmented and nationally sourced, looser coalitions are likely to persist. She characterised the European Political Community and the proposals for a European Security Council as positive developments, but stressed that long-term sustainability requires both institutionalisation and stable financing.

Rieker and McKeil both acknowledged that internal European divisions, over the scope of defence integration, third-country participation, and national sovereignty, remain significant constraints. Both, however, argued that differentiated integration is better suited to managing these divisions than more ambitious, uniform treaty-based approaches, at least in the short term.

The session concluded with Professor Gürsoy thanking the panellists and the audience for a wide-ranging and timely discussion.