



From European Coalitions to a European Security Council

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From intensifying hybrid attacks and Russia's continuing war against Ukraine, to Trump undermining the transatlantic alliance, migration crises and the hottest summer ever recorded: Europe is under threat. During her [State of the Union Address](#) on 17 September 2026, European Union (EU) Commission President Ursula von der Leyen responded by unveiling a series of proposals aimed to make the EU stronger and more independent.

Particularly von der Leyen's proposals to create a European Security Council, establish an Emergency Security Protocol and grant Canada an Associated Membership status were greeted with surprise and, unsurprisingly for many EU observers, scepticism. Critics, including off-the-record [member state officials](#), were quick to point out that foreign, security and defence policy remains a national prerogative, and that her proposals had not been consulted with EU member states. For any of these proposals to see the light of day, it would require unanimous support in the European Council.

It would be all too typical of Brussels to get bogged down in trench warfare on the design or mandate of a European Security Council, or the legal basis for a so-called associated membership. However, the EU and its member states still need to tackle the fundamental challenge in today's rapidly changing world: they have a vested interest in rallying likeminded powers and binding them together. The alternative is to continue to be under constant pressure and be bullied around in the neo-imperialist "[age of empires](#)" of Trump, Putin and Xi.

Von der Leyen may have put the cart before the horse, but her proposals aim to do exactly that: take the lead.

Focus on what matters

The idea of a European Security Council is [anything but new](#). It has been floated for years, but it has over the past year found a particularly staunch supporter in Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius [Kubilius](#). The diagnosis is always the same: security is a matter for heads of state and government – and requires an overarching strategy in today's volatile world. Yet, the current EU governance structure promotes lowest common denominator approaches and all too often stands in the way of rapid crisis response.

What form such a European Security Council should take is up for debate: proposals vary from creating a new body within the EU's institutional architecture (which would require Treaty change), to a dedicated European Council meeting. Von der Leyen remained – deliberately – vague about this as well, yet she clearly highlighted two important features. One key feature she foresees is that a European Security Council should be able to convene rapidly, after triggering the newly proposed Emergency Security Protocol – a European "Article 4" that would mirror NATO's consultation mechanism when a member state is threatened. The other key feature is that von der Leyen would like to see Canada, Norway, Ukraine and the United Kingdom involved in such a new leaders' format dedicated to European security.

The idea of granting Canada associated membership can therefore also be read from that perspective. The EU, Canada, Norway, the UK and Ukraine all face the same challenge of a crumbling alliance with the US, while sharing a commitment with each other to territorial integrity, human rights, and free trade. Above all, they are

natural partners facing – albeit to varying degrees – the neo-imperial tendencies of autocratic leaders. Partnering is logical; the question is how to do so effectively.

From coalitions to council

Over the last decade, Europe has increasingly relied on ad hoc coalitions when confronted with the need for rapid, coordinated crisis response. In its 2022 [Strategic Compass](#), the EU recognised the value of coalition-based governance to move forward when consensus is difficult to obtain. Beyond the EU, Mark Carney echoed a similar assessment, as he picked up the term of ‘variable geometry’ in his [speech](#) to the World Economic Forum in January this year. Carney referred to the need for a pragmatic foreign policy where middle powers come together in issue-specific coalitions, based on shared values and interests. In an [op-ed in The Economist](#) in June of this year, Carney together with Finnish President Alexander Stubb repeated the message: “The question is no longer whether to partner, but how fast we can build successful coalitions that scale across every region.”

Indeed, ad hoc coalitions have become an [increasingly popular](#) format for international crisis response, not only in the domain of security, but also in other domains where international institutions increasingly are gridlocked. They are generally perceived to be more relevant formats to address urgent crises than conventional international institutions, because of their flexible and low-cost design.

Faced with the triple pressure of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the rebalancing of the relationship with the US and sluggish consensus-procedures of the EU, Europe already saw a [mushrooming](#) of coalition formats on the continent over the past few years. The E3 – France, Germany and the UK – has met frequently, and the E5 – France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the UK – have arranged meetings at the Minister of Defence level and later also at the head of state level. The best-known coalition is the [Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine](#), initiated and led by France and the UK, shortly after Vice President J.D. Vance’s [speech at the Munich Security Conference](#) in February 2025. These coalitions have proved the usefulness of smaller formats to make critical decisions under time pressure, but also to establish dialogue on issues of common concern irrespective of EU or NATO membership.

However, ad hoc coalitions are mostly temporary solutions for what are essentially structural challenges. Coalitions align membership with self-interest and are easy to set up, but participants face low exit-costs and they are easy to dissolve, making cooperation more uncertain. Additionally, coalition formats often operate on a short-term logic, as members convene around a single crisis, which hampers longer-term strategic planning. And while the E5 is too narrow and has therefore limited agency beyond Brussels, the Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine is too large to effectively coordinate European security affairs. So, to instill critical decision-making on the future of European security with legitimacy, representation and accountability, a new institutional format may be needed. Ursula Von der Leyen has come to that conclusion and presses ahead.

Future-proofing Europe’s security architecture

The institutions that make up today’s European security architecture do no longer seem fit for purpose in a world that increasingly requires a capacity to respond with speed, unity and coordination. While coalition formats are useful tools to provide quick responses, they are no panacea. Europe and its closest allies therefore need to rethink the institutional architecture that allows them to come together and address the challenges it is faced with. The EU, and the E5 in particular, are in a position to take the lead in uniting with like-minded actors. A European Security Council, involving non-EU members with similar stakes such as Canada, Norway, the UK and Ukraine, can provide an institutional format to enhance the readiness of Europe and its allies. A European Security Council is a way to move beyond short-termism and build a future-proof European security architecture.

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