

Cambridge Roundtable on European Order: Rome.

Roundtable Report

18 – 19 June 2026

Rome

Europe is undergoing a process of transition marked by political, economic, technological, and social challenges.

Rome, as the capital of Italy, plays a special role for the southern flank of the European Union and is a decisive – and often underestimated – geopolitical player in the Mediterranean region and the Adriatic. It is also the seat of the Vatican: not only a religious centre but a strategic place where important diplomatic initiatives unfold, and the home of the UN agencies FAO and WFP, which manage the world's food security.

The **Rome Roundtable** places discussions on the future of Europe in a larger, interdisciplinary context, helping to shape a forward-looking and stable security policy for a united and strong Europe. *It was held in a private, off-the-record setting under the Chatham House Rule, in the heart of Rome.*



The Roundtable Format

The Roundtable is an offshoot of the Cambridge Roundtable on European Order, an annual meeting hosted at Peterhouse, Cambridge's oldest college. Like the flagship gathering, the Rome Roundtable moves beyond the grind of day-to-day politics and places its value on **long-term strategic thinking**.

It is an **exercise in applied history**, seeking to illuminate current challenges and choices by analysing historical precedents and analogues. It is an explicit attempt to break, in both form and content, with the typical conference format so familiar to policymakers and academics alike.



The Aim

The aim of the Roundtable is to examine past, present, and future concepts of European order, in an effort to develop a European sovereignty capable of addressing our continent's greatest challenges;

The meetings are more than a mere academic exercise. They further an inter-European dialogue on the prospects for stronger European unity and power projection abroad, and facilitate a substantive exchange between Europe and its democratic allies.



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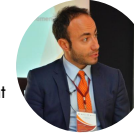
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Session I – European Order, Power and Responsibility

The security order that held Europe together for decades is no longer self-sustaining. With the United States recalibrating its commitments and Russia's war redrawing the strategic map, Europe faces the unfamiliar task of authoring order rather than inheriting it. Participants framed the moment around five simultaneous challenges: an unreliable America, a revisionist Russia, a rising China, energy dependence, and migration.

The post-Cold War order was described as effectively dead – and participants stressed that this must be acknowledged before any rebuilding can begin. NATO remains the framework that works, its core function collective defence; the task is delivery of capabilities at scale, not the design of new structures. A central debate weighed Russia against China as the deeper threat: Russia 'on its way out', China 'on its way in' and driving European deindustrialisation.

Energy and migration were treated as structural vulnerabilities, and Ukraine was judged as an asset – home to Europe's most dynamic and innovative defence industry. Its integration is the solution, not the burden.



Session II – Technological Sovereignty: Space, AI & Strategic Infrastructure

Artificial intelligence, advanced computing, satellites, and secure digital infrastructure are now decisive factors of competitiveness, security, and influence – yet **Europe remains heavily dependent on non-European providers**. The session asked how Europe might build sovereign AI, computing, and independent access to space.

Space defence is seriously underestimated: Europe plans major orbital infrastructure but has no strategy to defend it, and building launch capability from scratch takes a decade. Critical infrastructure is a battlefield in waiting, with much of Europe's 5G built on Chinese equipment. On AI, Europe was charged with having 'surrendered its technological agency', and its strength in standard-setting still not sufficient. A proposed approach to AI as a utility is an opportunity for European form of investment. A 'Federation of AI as Utility' with like-minded allies point to a distinctive role.

The technology resource gap is stark – **the US outspends Europe many times over** – so Europe should build up energy independence and investment, and then compete as a trend- and standard-setter rather than dollar for dollar. As one participant put it, this is the equivalent of the moment electricity generation was invented.



Session III – The Future of Middle East Security Architecture

The Middle East's balance of power is being recast by war, shifting alignments, and the partial retreat of external guarantors. The session looked past immediate crises to ask what order is emerging on Europe's southern doorstep – and what role Europe can credibly play.

Europe risks remaining a marginal actor as the US, the Gulf states, and Turkey shape the region. European policy has long been fragmented, lacking a clear objective, and a politically weakened European External Action Service limits the EU's reach. Two paths were sketched: doing more with existing tools, or expanding engagement with regional partners such as Turkey – NATO's second-largest army, yet outside the EU.

Islamism was discussed as a hybrid threat distinct from Islam, and the regional order described as increasingly transactional, with states striking deals that bypass Europe entirely. On Iran, the EU should hold a clear position of its own regardless of whether it joins US initiatives. The session endorsed the idea of an EU Security Council.



Session IV – Europe's Hamiltonian Moment and Fiscal Integration

Alexander Hamilton's assumption of the states' debts forged a union; Europe has flirted with its own version for decades. With common borrowing now financing recovery and defence, and efforts under way to mobilise the continent's private savings, the building blocks of a genuine fiscal capacity are visible – if politically unfinished.

History offered three lessons: subsidiarity, functionalism (markets first, then defence and foreign policy), and never wasting a crisis. The US began with fiscal union, Europe with monetary union – and the sequence matters. Banking union and capital-markets union must be made synergistic, and policymakers need public opinion behind them, given the deep cultural link between debt and 'sin'.

The scale of relative decline was set out plainly: a roughly \$9 trillion GDP gap with the US, China approaching 20% of world output, and a German car industry in retreat. The unifying argument: Europe's problem is the fragmentation of its industrial chains, not their national character. **What is needed is a common European defence budget – financed by one European debt instrument, to initiate fiscal union.**



Session V – Europe's Defence Architecture

From the Weimar Triangle's emerging 'plus X' coalitions to Italy's pivotal role on the southern flank, the session mapped how Europeans are clustering to generate real military capability – and confronted the financing question beneath it all. Europe's drive to rearm has outpaced its ability to organise and pay for it.

Eastern and southern flanks must never be played against one another. Russia remains the most immediate threat, even as the US downgrades Europe in its priorities and signals a reduced NATO commitment. Defence-industrial fragmentation was illustrated by the troubles of major Franco-German programmes against a more successful trilateral model, with critical raw-material dependence on China a neglected vulnerability.

A Ukrainian perspective reduced every proposal to one denominator: time – the variable that cannot be manufactured. What Ukraine does in weeks, the EU takes years to deliver.

Proposals included Ukraine as the first pillar of European defence, and a joint EU–Ukraine framework.



Session VI – Food, Energy & Resource Security

Track 1 – Energy Security

Energy security is a question of geopolitics and raw materials, not commodity markets alone. Europe faces a double dependency – on the US, which replaced Russian supply, and on China, which controls critical minerals. Diversification is essential (Churchill, 1912: 'safety and certainty in oil lie in variety'). The watchwords: pragmatism, and the three Ds – decentralisation, digitalisation, democratisation. Europe's natural diversity is an asset; the obstacle is cultural. Ukraine has the best energy potential in Europe.

Track 2 – Food security

Acute hunger has risen since the pandemic while assistance has fallen and the WFP budget has declined. Five major food crises in two decades – each time, the response comes too late, despite well-understood causes: fragile supply chains, energy costs, and extreme concentration. The principle pressed was development over rescue. The note of optimism: the technology, knowledge, and money already exist – the world spends some \$2 billion a day on active wars, a fraction of which could transform food security.



Session VII – How to Fund the Shield?

Europe has declared the defence of its democracies a strategic priority – through the Democracy Shield and a growing counter-disinformation architecture – but ambition has outrun the money and the mechanisms. **The question is how to ensure European leaders fund democratic resilience effectively.**

The Democracy Shield is a non-legislative umbrella covering media literacy and freedom, journalist protection, countering foreign information manipulation, and a new Centre for Democratic Resilience; The European Parliament wants more ambition than the Commission proposed. The uncomfortable problem named directly: much of the most damaging manipulation now originates domestically, where the EU's tools are limited.

A percentage of defence spending invested in democratic resilience should be set, Proposed mechanisms ranged from citizen investment funds to a European Democracy Investment Ban - ambitious ideas that would need to gain political traction. In the meantime, the key is mainstreaming democracy resilience across EU funds. Questions raise around the level of confidence in democracy which would necessitate defence - with a response that any critical infrastructure in society that comes under attack would merit ambitious defence.



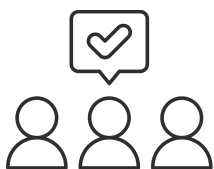
Concluding Impressions

The Rome Roundtable underscored a shared conviction: Europe can not afford to think in silos. Defence must be joined to diplomacy, fiscal capacity to industrial strategy, energy to geopolitics, and the defence of democracy to the defence of territory itself.

One thread bound the sessions together. Europe's deficits are increasingly in delivery, speed, and political will rather than of analysis or resources. Ukraine has moved from a question Europe debated to a source of answers it now needs — in defence industry, battlefield innovation, energy, and the discipline of acting before it is too late.

There is no time for strategic hesitation.

Key Recommendations (1/2)



Democracy Shield

A stronger mandate: more robust coordinated funding, a fully resourced Centre for Democratic Resilience.

Confront information manipulation through long-term resilience, not only foreign interference; fund AI trust systems via innovative solutions, including impact funds and more.



Defence

A common European defence budget and one debt instrument; act through 'Weimar plus' coalitions where consensus is too slow.

Make Ukraine the first pillar; cut industrial fragmentation; reduce critical raw-material dependence on China; open the nuclear question.



Fiscal integration

Pair joint debt for European public goods with a completed Capital Markets Union, synergistic with a banking union.

Build public consent for common borrowing — the politics is a precondition, not an afterthought.

Key Recommendations (2/2)



Technological sovereignty

Start with fundamentals: control electricity, data, and the orchestration of information; invest in sovereign AI, computing, and independent space capability. Lead on standards, compete as a standard-setter, and secure or remove Chinese 5G and critical-infrastructure dependencies. Treat AI as a utility, and act accordingly.



Energy & resource security

Diversify energy sources and supply chains; integrate Ukraine into the EU energy market. Protect humanitarian data funding to keep food aid targeted; prioritise development over rescue, and integrate this into overall thinking about resilience and preparedness.

Organising Partners

Alliance4Europe – a nonprofit providing digital intelligence for democracy, building communities for action, and civic tech for impact.

The **Cambridge Centre for Geopolitics** – an interdisciplinary space created by leading academics to consider the world's most pressing geopolitical questions within their historical contexts.

The **Hanns Seidel Foundation** – working to provide education for democracy.

COMMVISORY – a partner-led strategic communications consultancy providing trusted guidance in times of continuous change.

In partnership with the **Atlantic Council**, **Centro Studi Americani** and the **Istituto Luigi Sturzo**.



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IABG and **PolicySonar**



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