

# Cambridge Roundtable on European Order: Rome.

Roundtable Report

22 – 23 May 2025

## Rome

Europe is currently undergoing a process of transition characterised by political, economic, and social challenges. Religious and ethical dimensions are increasingly reflected in the political decisions of European states, changing the dynamics of diplomacy.

Rome, as the capital of Italy, plays a special role for the southern flank of the European Union and is a decisive, often underestimated, geopolitical player in the Mediterranean region and the Adriatic Sea, which this installment of the Cambridge Roundtable series aims to comprehensively reflect. In addition to that, Rome is the seat of the Vatican, not only a religious centre, but also a strategic place where important diplomatic initiatives and dialogues take place which have an impact on the Mediterranean region and where the UN organizations FAO and WFP are based to manage the world's food security.

The **Rome Roundtable** plays a unique role in placing discussions on the future of Europe in a larger, interdisciplinary context – and thus in shaping a forward-looking and stable security policy for a united and strong Europe. *The roundtable was held in a private, off-the-record setting (Chatham House Rules) 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, with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Like the flagship gathering, this more specifically focused Rome Roundtable will approach issues in a manner that moves beyond the grind of day-to-day politics and instead places value on **long-term strategic thinking**.

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





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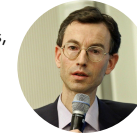
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## The Aim

The aim of the Roundtable is essentially twofold:

- 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,
- and to explore ways in which Italy can be involved in establishing and maintaining such a European sovereignty

The meetings are thus more than a mere academic exercise. They are geared towards furthering an inter-European dialogue on the prospects for stronger European unity and power projection abroad, as well as facilitating a substantive exchange between Europe and its western democratic allies.

## Panel 1: Defending Europe in a Shifting Global Order

Participants highlighted **three overarching challenges facing Europe today**. Together, these challenges test Europe's cohesion and strategic direction.

1. First, Russia's aggression, military in Ukraine, hybrid in other regions, remains an immediate and visible threat.
2. Second, the deepening anxiety about the United States as an unreliable partner, eroding confidence across NATO.
3. The most insidious threat was considered to be internal: the erosion of liberal democracy and the rise of nationalist populism within Europe itself.

There was a recognition that the **EU, shaped in a time of peace, is not structurally or psychologically prepared for a time of war**. While Eastern European states are more alert to the realities of conflict, many others remain politically reluctant to embrace a wartime footing. The EU's fragmented **defence landscape is still overwhelmingly national**, limiting its capacity to respond at speed. Yet, some participants expressed cautious optimism that crisis can still spur institutional adaptation.

Looking south, the Mediterranean was described not as a flank, but as a **central theatre of European interest**. The potential to stabilise Libya, re-engage diplomatically with Gulf states, and rethink Europe's posture in North Africa was widely noted. Some saw opportunity for the United Kingdom to re-anchor its relevance post-Brexit by contributing to Mediterranean security, especially through its enduring naval presence. The challenge lies in moving from fragmented national actions to coordinated strategic engagement.

## Panel 2: Security Architecture in the Mediterranean: Alliances, Threats, and Strategic Interests

The Mediterranean, speakers agreed, is becoming a pressure point for multiple powers. European attention has largely focused on Ukraine, but in the Gulf and Washington, the focus is increasingly on Gaza. Russia and Turkey remain active across the basin. Eastern Mediterranean energy potential is underexploited, due in part to political paralysis. In this evolving landscape, the absence of a coherent European vision was seen as a strategic liability.

Several speakers observed that **traditional alliance-building is giving way to deal-making**. Under a renewed Trump administration, it was suggested, diplomacy may prioritise short-term gains over long-term commitments. In this emerging order, allies must demonstrate immediate strategic value. This shift, already visible in US relations with the Gulf, demands that Europe reassess how it engages with partners, and whether it can adapt to this more transactional and less principled diplomatic climate.

Despite the growing instability, participants noted the potential for **creative diplomacy**. One idea discussed was a Mediterranean Stability Charter: a forum for states to collaborate on common concerns such as energy, climate, and migration. While scepticism remained about the feasibility of such an initiative, especially given divergent national interests, some felt it could provide a flexible, interest-based platform less constrained by the formalities of multilateralism.

## Panel 3: Food Security and Critical Raw Materials: Foundations of Global Stability and Security

Food security and access to critical raw materials were discussed as core security concerns, not just development issues. Europe's declining agricultural capacity, alongside its dependence on external suppliers for fertilisers and grain, was seen as a **vulnerability that adversaries could exploit**. Russia's increased dominance in global grain markets was cited as a worrying indicator. As one participant noted, whoever controls grain today holds a powerful lever in tomorrow's geopolitics.

Speakers reflected on the strategic consequences of rural underdevelopment, especially in Africa. In regions where the majority rely on agriculture for both food and income, rising food prices and land scarcity can quickly turn into political instability. The point was made that fragility is not a peripheral concern but rather often the spark for conflict. Investing in rural resilience, particularly in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, is therefore both a moral and strategic imperative.

Though food security now features more frequently on global summits' agendas, participants questioned whether this visibility translates into impact. Funding cuts across the UN system are leading to sharp reductions in food assistance. Meanwhile, actors with malign intent are exploiting **vacuums left by retreating humanitarian infrastructure**. Several urged Europe to bridge the growing gap between its expressed commitments and its actual investment in food systems and rural economies.

## Panel 4: Migration, Demographics, and the European Response: Crisis or Long-Term Realignment?

The discussion on migration moved beyond short-term crisis language, as contributors argued that Europe must recognise **migration as a structural reality**, driven by demographics, labour markets, and instability. Current approaches, built around border control and transactional agreements, risk being both ineffective and ethically questionable. A shift is needed towards **long-term planning**, focusing on rights, integration, and addressing drivers of movement, rather than just containing its symptoms.

There was particular concern about the potential resurgence of jihadist networks in the wake of Syria's unresolved conflict. While the immediate threat may seem diminished, participants noted the cyclical nature of radicalisation. One contributor warned that Europe is likely in a **"low-tide" phase**, where extremist groups regroup and adapt. The challenge, it was argued, is to avoid conflating migration with terrorism, while also remaining alert to long-term security risks emerging from marginalisation.

## Panel 5: A Westphalia for the Middle East? Sovereignty, Intervention, and the Search for Regional Stability

The Middle East, in the view of many participants, is not yet ready for a Westphalian settlement. The region lacks the foundations of balance, trust, and institutional resilience that such a model requires. Instead of abstract blueprints, what is needed is a **conflict management approach rooted in incrementalism and mutual recognition**. The idea of a regional charter or compact was discussed, but its viability hinges on a shared commitment to dialogue and coexistence.

Iran's regional role, Israel's political trajectory, and the absence of a credible Palestinian leadership were each identified as obstacles to peace. The issue of who might provide security in post-conflict Gaza was raised repeatedly. Egypt emerged as a likely candidate, but only if incentivised. Meanwhile, a return to the principles of the Abraham Accords was floated as a possible, if imperfect, starting point. The consensus was clear: peace will require uncomfortable compromises on all sides.

## Panel 6: Beyond Diplomacy and Defence: Development, Cultural Engagement, and the Role of Civil Society in Mediterranean Stability

Civil society, including religious institutions, universities, and think tanks, was highlighted as a crucial but underutilised player in geopolitical strategy. Their **ability to open dialogue where diplomats cannot**, and to convene actors outside formal political channels, is invaluable. One participant suggested that think tanks are increasingly becoming “do-tanks”, as they are stepping in to initiate conversations between adversaries and to ask questions that governments avoid. Their influence may be quiet, but it is increasingly essential.

Speakers reflected on the **moral dilemmas of neutrality**. In a world riven by polarisation – whether on Gaza, Ukraine, migration, or other – remaining silent can itself become a political act. Some argued that civil society must find a way to speak with moral clarity, even when consensus is impossible. The challenge is to bridge divides without erasing difference, and to build coalitions rooted in shared humanity rather than shared ideology.

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## Concluding Impressions

The Rome Roundtable underscored a shared understanding: Europe can no longer afford to think in silos. Defence must be linked with diplomacy, migration with development, and civil society with statecraft. **The Mediterranean is not a border – it is Europe's reflection.** If Europe is to remain a serious actor in a fragmented world, it must act with coherence, courage, and clarity. The time for strategic hesitation has passed.

## Organising Partners

**Alliance4Europe** is a nonprofit start-up providing digital intelligence for democracy, creating communities for action, and civic tech for impact.

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

The **Hanns Seidel Foundation** works to provide education for democracy.

**Commvisory** is 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.**

The Rome Roundtable is held with the support of **Norge Mining, Bayer AG, Palmarini Augusto & C. Srl, and the Conference of European Rabbis.**



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