

ANALYSIS

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In search of efficiency and speed: understanding Coalitions of the Willing

Abstract

In this paper we examine the so-called ***»coalitions of the willing«****. This phenomenon is increasingly prominent in European governance in general, and in security and defence in particular. Such coalitions are defined as »flexible, ad hoc groupings of states that cooperate outside or alongside formal EU frameworks«. They are characterised by their informality, speed and purpose-orientation.*

Empirically, the analysis maps the use of the coalitions of the willing and other forms of differentiated integration and then focuses on recent responses to Russia's war against Ukraine as a case study. Here, coalitions of the willing have emerged in the form of capability coalitions, initiatives supporting Ukraine and aiming at building up European defence. In this context, operational effectiveness may come at the expense of long-term ambiguity. Analysis of this case may thus allow us to assess the impact of a crucial coalition of the willing on the future of European security and defence.

The paper then assesses the long-term implications of the use of coalitions of the willing for the European Union (EU). It questions their sustainability, legal grounds and democratic legitimacy, while also evaluating whether they may represent a way of increasing the EU's capacity to act in the long run. This links the analysis to another important point of discussion, European »actorness«. Here the distinction between the EU as a supranational institution, and Europe as a broader geographical constellation that includes the United Kingdom, Norway and others is also significant.

The paper concludes by arguing that the concept of coalitions of the willing offers short-term flexibility and an opportunity to act more swiftly and efficiently. However, its long-term contribution may depend on its ability to evolve into an inclusive and accountable framework aligned with a coherent vision of Europe's future security architecture[1]*.*

1 The authors have benefited from the invaluable contributions of many colleagues. They would like to thank the participants of the workshop organized in November 2025 at IE University that kick-started this research idea. In addition to that, previous drafts of this paper have received comments by Catherine de Vries, Alexandra Dienes, Sebastien Maillard, Manuel Müller, and Giovanni Grevi.

Introduction

Europe is facing a number of unprecedented geopolitical challenges[1]. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and the shift of the United States (US) away from its established role as security provider for Europe are the two most obvious developments. Russia poses the most existential threat to the European order while the US is switching to a backseat role in NATO. Despite continuing to maintain the nuclear umbrella over its allies, it has been reducing its conventional and, more importantly, political role considerably. A new security architecture (requiring an interconnected network of treaties, organisations and defence partnerships) is thus needed in Europe not just to help Ukraine in its current predicament, but to provide security moving forward.

The European Union alone has proven unable to fill that void. The mainly member-state driven Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) have been hampered by the unanimity principle. The result is a European Union in reactive mode, trying to cope with whatever comes, but unable to shape a future European security order. Calls for European »actorness«, in the sense of the ability to act efficiently towards a common aim, is still an unfulfilled promise.

In this political vacuum, coalitions of the willing seem to be the solution. Since February 2022 – the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – and also February 2025, the date of US Vice President J.D. Vance's openly Eurosceptic speech at the Munich Security Conference, we have witnessed increasing resort to coalitions of the willing. Minilateral cooperation or clusters have regained prominence because they offer flexibility and speed. They may also help to overcome or at least bypass decision-making deadlocks within the EU caused by unanimity requirements and political fragmentation. The creation of such coalitions of the willing thus comes with two mostly implicit hypotheses:

→ that they will contribute positively to European security

→ and that they will strengthen Europe's capacity to act.

These arrangements are not entirely new. Various forms of differentiation and differentiated integration have long been part of the EU's institutional DNA. For our analysis it is important to state that not all flexible formats of willing and able states are equal in scope, structure, ambition or function. Coalitions of the willing represent a more informal and politically driven variant. Even if they can enhance short-term effectiveness, particularly in areas such as foreign and security policy, their long-term implications are more ambivalent.

This raises two interconnected questions: Do coalitions of the willing represent an effective instrument of governance for European security and defence, and do they increase the EU's capacity to act? This paper tackles these questions in three steps. First it clarifies the meaning of coalitions of the willing. The paper thus establishes a solid understanding of the plethora of both concepts and terminology in the debate and the formats that have been established. This includes a mapping of coalitions of the willing and similar formats.

Second, the main empirical part of the analysis is focused, as a case study, on the recent European response to Russia's war against Ukraine. Here, coalitions of the willing have emerged in the form of capability coalitions and initiatives supporting Ukraine and Europe's defence build-up, highlighting both their operational effectiveness and their long-term ambiguity. This is why the case provides us with an opportunity to achieve some understanding of the impact of a prominent coalition of the willing on the future of European security and defence.

Thirdly, the paper assesses the implications of coalitions of the willing for the European Union in the longer run. It questions their sustainability, legal ground and democratic legitimacy, while evaluating whether coalitions of the willing might require some institutional anchoring in the future. This analysis is carried out with regard to both the general concept and its specific use in the case of Ukraine.

The paper concludes by reflecting on whether coalitions of the willing are a way of strengthening European actorness in the field of security. It also offers an assessment, arguing that while coalitions of the willing may offer short-term flexibility, their long-term contribution depends on their ability to evolve into inclusive and accountable frameworks aligned with a coherent vision of Europe's future architecture.

Reviving a tainted concept for good? A conceptual guide and map

The term »coalitions of the willing« was coined during the Iraq war in 2003. The US government used it to describe a group of states that supported the US even though a joint UN mandate was lacking. Both the term »coalition of the willing« and the concept have been highly contested ever since. However, the European security order is replete with different formats in which various groups of states work together in a variety of forms and with different aims (see table 1 for an exemplary overview).

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has helped to clear up the concept's negative connotations and turned it into one of the driving formats for structuring European support for Ukraine. While lead groups such as E3, E5 or Weimar+ try to make sure that the EU has a seat at the table in the case of future peace negotiations, the "Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine" also aims to tackle the provision of security guarantees.

Various forms of flexible or differentiated integration/coop-

Mapping differentiated cooperation within the European security order

Table 1

	Aim and function	Examples
Regional groups	Promoting political coordination, cultural and societal cohesion, security and stability and external outreach (geopolitical voice)	- Benelux - Baltic Defence Cooperation - EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) - Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) - Nordic-Baltic-Eight (NB8) - Visegrad - Bucharest Nine (B9) - Three Seas Initiative (3SI) - Arctic Council
Ad hoc (contact) groups	Tackling of international crises; single purpose format that dissolves once the crisis has been solved	- Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine - Ukraine Defence Contact group (Ramstein Group) - Czech-led ammunition initiative
Lead groups	Taking the lead on advancing foreign policy objectives in line with EU principles and strategies	- European Intervention Initiative (EI2) - E3 - E5 - Normandy format - Weimar Triangle and Weimar Plus - Framework Nations Concept - Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)

Source: Authors' own compilation using the conceptualization of Grevi et.al. (2020).

eration have always been available for shaping and driving European integration as the number of Member States has grown, together with the variety of their (political) preferences and capabilities. This means that such formats »allow states (members of the European Union and non-members) and sub-state entities [that are both willing and able] to work together in non-homogeneous, flexible ways« (Pirozzi/Bonomi 2022: 7). They can either be treaty-based – such as the common currency or enhanced cooperation (Art. 20 TEU and Art. 326–334 TFEU) and permanent structured cooperation (PESCO, Art. 42(6) and Art. 46 TEU) – formalised as international treaties with the aim of eventual integration into the EU treaty framework (Schengen area, Fiscal Compact) or informal formats of bilateral or minilateral cooperation, such as the E3, E5, Nordic-Baltic-Eight (NB8) or the Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine.

The latter formats are most prominent in foreign, security and defence policy. This can best be described as differentiated cooperation (Pirozzi/Bonomi 2022) rather than differentiated integration because a restricted group of member states (potentially joined by non-EU members) coordinate their national policies in the margins of or outside EU institutional structures or legal frameworks.

By definition, a coalition of the willing is formed by like-minded states that have the capacity and the political will to take joint actions. This broad understanding applies to all formats of differentiated cooperation. A narrower understanding of coalitions of the willing refers more exclusively to *ad hoc groups*, able and willing states joining forces to react to an international crisis. Coalitions of the willing are hence driven by an *urgent need* to react to a crisis while EU member states' preferences and abilities differ and the EU lacks the necessary structures of cooperation. They usually have a *short- or mid-term perspective*, depending on how rapidly the crisis comes to be solved and the operational purpose of the coalition of the willing dissolves with it.

It is difficult to conceptualise how a coalition of the willing may affect the EU as an international actor. This is mainly because a shared concept of actorness is still lacking. The basic definition is the »capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system« (Sjöstedts 1977). Building on the literature, three factors are relevant: legitimacy, governance and integration.

Like other formats of differentiated cooperation, coalitions of the willing operate on a performance basis (output legitimacy). Their governance structures tend to be loose for the purpose of flexibility. Finally, there has been no declared aim of transferring the format into the EU's legal (integration) framework. Hence, there remains a risk of undermining the cohesion of EU integration. This makes the questions of sustainability and inclusivity even more relevant. One of the key matters for the EU would then be to decide which areas would require supranational accountability (when using the EU's resources) and when cooperation between democratically elected governments would be the right way forward (pooling national resources). Before moving on to this discussion, it is important to understand the case of Ukraine, which currently is the most active and prominent use of this format. The paper will then come to the do's and don'ts of coalitions of the willing.

The next European litmus test? The Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine

We have already discussed coalitions of the willing as political solutions for emergency situations. This certainly applies to the challenges Europe faces as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. There is an urgent need to coordinate and cooperate in order to support Ukraine in its defence efforts. Early on, most of these tasks were facilitated by the United States. Specifically, the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (aka the Ramstein Group) coordinated material support for Ukraine under American leadership. Within this framework, subgroups or capability coalitions were formed to address Ukraine's specific needs, such as drones or artillery. Another issue-specific example of an informal coalition of states is the Czech-led ammunition coalition that to date has delivered around 4.4 million artillery shells to Ukraine.

Since the return of Donald Trump to the White House, however, Europeans have increasingly faced an additional challenge on top of Russian aggression: lack of leadership, the loss of a »natural« facilitator and doubts about subsequent American support for Ukraine. One European answer to this twofold challenge is the »Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine«, first convened in London in March 2025. The key aim was to produce rapid and visible results in terms of support for Ukraine, thus attaining »output legitimacy«.

Purpose and driving forces of the Ukraine coalition

The impetus for this cooperation format of likeminded states in support of Ukraine came from the French and British governments. President Macron and then Prime Minister Starmer invited a group of leaders, including those of Turkey and Canada, to a summit in London to discuss Ukraine's security under the headline »Securing our Future«.

The summit conclusions formulated four axes of action for Ukraine's supporters, specifying the desired outcomes. These included:

- → continued support for Ukraine in the negotiation process (diplomacy);
- → further steps to enhance military support for Kyiv and pressure Russia with ongoing and tightening sanctions;
- → building up Ukrainian military and border forces in order to facilitate continued deterrence of Russia when the fighting ends (industrial cooperation and training); and
- → a direct European contribution to Ukraine's post-war security with the deployment of military forces.

Only when describing the last task did (then) UK Prime Minister Starmer, as host of the meeting, use the term »coalition of the willing« explicitly: »we will go further to develop a ›coalition of the willing‹ to defend a deal in Ukraine«.

Although the group agreed on all the above tasks, the term »coalition of the willing« was applied mainly to the states willing to contribute support for a European reassurance force, which was later referred to as the »Multinational Force Ukraine«. The London summit was followed by a meeting of military planners from 31 states in Paris to discuss common positions on defending Ukraine. At the time of writing, the coalition of the willing has 34 members: in addition to 32 states, the EU and NATO are also members.

The format represents a political effort to establish a stronger European role in ensuring Ukrainian security and sovereignty. At the same time – and connected to this – it sends a signal in two different directions: first and foremost, to Washington, to the effect that Europe is determined to shoulder its share of the burden when it comes to guaranteeing Ukraine's security; and secondly, to Moscow, in an effort to get the message across that despite the ever-changing attitudes of the new US administration, support for Ukraine will not wane and Russia's aggression will continue to meet coordinated resistance. Thus, the format allowed participating states to rapidly come up with a response to a timely challenge, when both institutional avenues – EU and NATO – were blocked for political reasons. The summit was the first outcome of the format.

A coalition between ambition and political realities

The ensuing processes under the aegis of the Coalition of the Willing, however, show the pitfalls of rapidly throwing together groups of states with fuzzy targets. As the aim of the more narrowly defined Coalition of the Willing was to provide military support for Ukraine when the war ended, aimed at ensuring that any peace settlement would be secured against future Russian aggression, discussions in the group concentrated on the intricacies of this. Progress was achieved for example on the designation of headquarters (first Paris, then London) as command structures. Apart from that, it became clear that the coalition faced three main problems.

1. The scope and nature of a European assurance force was understood differently by different members of the group and needed a clearer definition.
2. The involvement of the United States in this assurance force – the technical term here is »US backstop« – was under a question mark.
3. Because European troops were to be deployed after a ceasefire, Russia's adamant opposition to the stationing of European troops needed to be considered.

The coalition has not yet agreed on a solution to these challenges. The scenarios outlined for a European multi-domain operation range from a small contingent of

10.000 up to 150.000, stationed either close to the frontline in Western Ukraine or right across the border on NATO territory. The political realities of limited capabilities as well as different degrees of political will in the coalition, however, have led to a more modest planning of smaller contingents. They would probably not be stationed close to the frontline and some air or maritime elements would be supported from NATO territory. US support is discussed in two dimensions. First as an operational aspect, providing strategic enablers such as ISR or air defence that Europe is lacking. Second, and more important for the willingness of the participating countries to provide troops, is US backing for this deployment in case of a Russian attack, meaning a US security guarantee for European forces.

It can thus be accounted a success for the coalition that in the conclusions of a meeting in Paris in early 2026, which included Ukraine and the US, there is specific mention of »the proposed support of the US« for the multinational force for Ukraine. As the whole idea of deploying European troops hinges on the agreement of a ceasefire, the third issue, Russian opposition, remains unresolved. As it seems clear that Ukraine would not agree to a ceasefire, even less a peace agreement, without credible guarantees for her security, however, the European assurance force is perceived as a possible element of a future agreement. That, however, entails potential Russian influence on the size, armament as well as positioning of the force. The actual »outcome« of the coalition of the willing is thus more political in nature than operational.

These three issues point to more fundamental questions facing the coalition. The first concerns the level of political will. The informal nature of the coalition and the lack of accountability mechanisms allow states to be part of the Coalition of the Willing merely by declaring their willingness in principle and adherence to the broadly defined aims. Additionally, the military capabilities of the various countries are also quite diverse. Both of these factors shape the intensity of their engagement. Observers have divided the states into three blocs: the leading nations, France and the UK, are referred to as the only »willing and able« states; a second bloc are called the »willing but constrained«, including for example Canada or Sweden; and a third bloc have been dubbed the »hesitant and doubtful«, including heavyweights Germany, Poland and Italy (Karlsrud / Reykers 2025: 1).

The Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine so far

Until now, it is fair to say that the Coalition of the Willing has managed to represent Ukraine's interests better in the US–Russian negotiations, which became particularly prominent after the presentation of the so-called 28 points Peace Plan in autumn 2025. Most members of the group have also continued their efforts to provide the Ukrainian armed forces with arms and training, as well as deepening defence industrial cooperation. The sanctions regime against Russia has also been tightened, which might be attributed partly to the Coalition of the Willing, showing its close coordination with the EU institutions. Concerning the provision of the assurance force, the coalition still hinges on the stalled negotiations. Because the necessary precondition for the deployment of European forces is yet unfulfilled, it would be unfair to judge the success of the coalition on this criterion.

Beyond that, the initiative had a less measurable but relevant impact. It filled the leadership vacuum left in the Ukraine support coalition by the US administration. The coalition quickly convened after the infamous scene at the White House involving the US president and vice president and the Ukrainian president, and prevented further erosion of the Ukrainian position. The European initiative provided President Zelensky with the domestic political capital he needed to continue standing up to Russia's maximalist positions. At the same time, it bolstered the Ukrainian position in relation to the United States. Specifically, after the Russian-American proposals were leaked, European support helped to balance the negotiations again. But it did not bolster only Ukraine's position in Washington. It also strengthened the European hand on European security vis-à-vis the US, whether inside or outside NATO. As the debates in NATO intensified on the rise of defence spending around the same time, the coalition was part of a bigger picture: a Europe that is responsible and does not shy away when it comes to its own security.

In a politically astute move, London and Paris jointly donned the coalition's leadership mantle. As Germany was still in the process of establishing a new government after the February 2025 elections, these two countries were the natural candidates to step into the vacuum left by the United States. The inclusion of the United Kingdom avoided the impression that this was solely an EU initiative, whereas the presence of France as co-leader made clear that EU Member States were on board with this endeavour. The leadership duo also avoided any institutional rivalries with the EU or NATO by inviting the heads of both institutions to the inaugural meeting. The use of the formula »coalition of the willing« also signalled to interested parties that they would not have to deal with less likeminded partners, such as Hungary under President Orbán in the EU, which were not always acting constructively towards the purpose of strengthening Ukraine. In this case, the informal nature of the coalition, situated outside EU and NATO, led by the United Kingdom and France, made it possible to alleviate other participating states' fears of exclusion or fragmentation. As the strength of the coalition was also counted in numbers, cohesion was maintained among the participating states.

When it comes to supporting Ukraine, the framework of »coalitions of the willing« serves the purpose, at least on a short-term basis. Its main features are continuity, flexibility, visibility and broad alignment with aims of the EU and NATO. The focus lies almost solely on output. Building on previous support mechanisms, longer-term projects such as

training and armament, as well as defence industry cooperation could continue smoothly. The Ukraine Defense Contact Group was the ideal starting point for this initiative. The flexible and politically agile coalition strengthened Ukrainian positions in the Russian-American negotiations that developed over the course of 2025.

The internal flexibility built on the joint leadership model (France and the UK) offered other actors – such as the new elected German government – sufficient room to shine and institutional openness for actors outside EU and/or NATO. This could be described as an element of »informal input legitimacy« as it remains open to a broad range of countries (Hungary might be a case in point under the new government). The focus on the »willing« made it possible to leave out difficult partners and reach clear conclusions at meetings. The third and perhaps most important effect of the coalition was the visibility it conferred on the countries supporting Ukraine. This served as a source of political capital for different actors and on different levels, not least at the negotiating table. Obviously, it has been unable to get Washington and Moscow to acknowledge the importance of the Europeans when it comes to achieving sustainable peace in Ukraine. Nonetheless, the coalition has made it very difficult for both to continue to overlook their positions. The moral case for supporting Ukraine against violent aggression could add a new element of »moral legitimacy« to the coalition of the willing that somehow substitutes for more rules-based sources of legitimacy.

Long-term implications for legitimacy, governance and integration

Legitimacy and Democratic Accountability

Output vs. input legitimacy

Coalitions of the willing are frequently justified on the basis of their capacity to produce timely and effective policy outcomes, thereby enhancing »output legitimacy«. In contexts in which the EU's formal decision-making procedures are perceived as too slow or prone to gridlock, coalitions of the willing offer a flexible alternative that may respond more rapidly to crises or politically sensitive issues. This performance-based justification is particularly salient in areas such as foreign and security policy that include considerations of urgency or emergency. Specifically, a sense of urgency justifies the establishment of a coalition of the willing and makes it even more difficult to include them in the integration structure.

However, this emphasis on output legitimacy comes at the expense of »input legitimacy«, which in the EU context is rooted in inclusive participation, representation and adherence to established treaty-based procedures. Coalitions of the willing by definition involve selective participation and are not subject to the same procedural safeguards as formal EU decision-making. As a result, they risk excluding certain member states.

As already mentioned, considered in terms of crisis and emergency, this flexibility and efficiency are characteristics that make coalitions of the willing essential for Europe in times of geopolitical strife. Nevertheless, decision-makers should be aware of shortfalls in democratic legitimacy and their overall impact on EU democratic governance. Having said that, it is important to underline that democratically elected national governments could indeed decide to pool their resources. The questions of informality and legitimacy would be more pertinent if the EU made fuller use of its common resources.

The double-edged sword of informality

The defining feature of coalitions of the willing, their informality, constitutes both their principal advantage and their most significant limitation. On the one hand, informal arrangements allow participating states to circumvent procedural constraints, enabling rapid coordination and responsiveness, particularly in times of crisis. This flexibility can be politically attractive in situations in which unanimity is difficult to achieve, leadership (as currently the case with regard to the United States and NATO) is doubtful, or where urgency precludes lengthy deliberation.

On the other hand, informality may come at the cost of legal certainty, procedural clarity and enforceability. Unlike formal EU instruments, coalitions of the willing typically lack binding commitments, clearly defined decision-making rules and robust monitoring mechanisms. This may limit their capacity to sustain long-term policy coordination, especially in domains that require high levels of trust, predictability and institutional continuity, such as defence cooperation, fiscal governance or migration management. This becomes particularly salient in the case of the Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine, which encompasses the intergovernmental sphere of security and defence, the building up of industrial capacity, long-term funding using EU resources and potentially even enlargement policy. This is an area in which the repercussions for EU governance should be discussed more profoundly.

Broader implications for EU democratic governance

The increasing reliance on coalitions of the willing has broader implications for the future architecture of the European Union. Most notably, it risks shifting political legitimacy away from supranational institutions and the EU27 framework toward groups of national governments acting in intergovernmental configurations. As decision-making migrates from formal EU formats in which the European Parliament, the Commission and the European Court of Justice play their Treaty-defined roles to more informal and selective settings, the visibility and perceived relevance of EU-level governance may diminish.

This shift may have important consequences for citizens' perceptions. If key policy decisions are increasingly taken outside the EU's institutional framework and by a plethora

of formations (such as coalitions of the willing, the E3 and the E5) to boot, citizens may find it more difficult to identify who is responsible for those decisions, thereby weakening democratic accountability.

The need for institutional anchoring: how to transform cooperation into integration?

Coalitions of the willing can, under certain conditions, act as catalysts for further European integration. As long as they remain substantively aligned with EU objectives and maintain functional linkages to the Union's institutional framework, they may facilitate policy innovation and consensus-building among a subset of member states. In such cases, coalitions of the willing can serve as arenas in which politically sensitive or technically complex initiatives are first tested, refined and subsequently »uploaded« to the EU level through formal legislative or treaty-based processes. This dynamic reflects a complementary relationship between differentiated and uniform integration, in which flexibility at the margins ultimately reinforces the core.

However, this positive dynamic is contingent on the existence of clear pathways connecting initiatives for coalitions of the willing to EU institutions. Where such linkages are weak, ambiguous or deliberately avoided, coalitions of the willing risk evolving into parallel governance structures that operate independently of, rather than in conjunction with, the Union's legal and institutional order. In these instances they may dilute the role of supranational actors, and erode the inter-institutional character of EU governance. The result may be a shift from a system grounded in commonly agreed rules towards one increasingly shaped by ad hoc political coordination among willing states.

Differentiated integration thus requires anchoring flexible cooperation mechanisms within the EU's institutional and legal framework (Pirozzi/Bonomi 2022). Such anchoring is intended to ensure that initiatives remain subject to common rules, oversight and accountability structures, thereby preserving both their effectiveness and their legitimacy. Mechanisms such as enhanced cooperation or initiatives such as permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) illustrate how differentiation can be embedded within the treaties, allowing for flexibility while maintaining coherence with the broader EU system.

Institutional anchoring also plays a crucial role in safeguarding cohesion among Member States. By situating differentiated initiatives within EU structures, it reduces the risk of exclusion and fragmentation, ensuring that non-participating states retain the option of future participation under transparent conditions. Conversely, the absence of such anchoring may contribute to disintegration. Coalitions that operate entirely outside the EU framework may lead to enduring parallel structures, weaken incentives for collective problem-solving, and undermine the authority of common institutions. Over time, this may result in a more segmented and less predictable system of governance.

Dos and don'ts when it comes to coalitions of the willing for a stronger European security architecture

Do's: coalitions of the willing are a good instrument for participating states for

- → *political signalling and visibility;*
- → *rapid reactions to urgent needs that may increase Europe's »actorness« in theatres of major interest;*
- → *military operations in which existing national capacities are brought together for a clearly defined and rather narrow purpose; and*
- → *actions whose main funding comes from participating states or specific institutional funds designed for the same or similar purpose (European Peace Facility).*

Don'ts: coalitions of the willing will be problematic or the wrong political option

- → *if democratic legitimacy is needed at supranational level (for example, long-term funding decisions, institutional change and so on);*
- → *if processes require stable legal grounds and/or clearly defined decision-making procedures to frame financial decisions with a long-term impact;*
- → *if they rely on institutional frameworks without having a clearly defined interface with the European Union; and*
- → *if the pursued aim is reliant on long-term European funding.*

This is why a conversation is needed on when to use coalitions of the willing – where speed, flexibility and a narrow objective matter – and where to move towards more formal institutional arrangements.

Beyond flexibility: conclusions and the way forward

This paper tests the implicit hypothesis that coalitions of the willing (i) may contribute positively to European security and (ii) will strengthen the European capacity to act. The findings are mixed. A clear understanding is needed of the risks and opportunities involved in this. Above we present a list of clear-cut do's and don'ts.

Coalitions of the willing have attracted attention as Europe's best bet in response to current geopolitical challenges. In addition to mobilising the willing and able states of the European Union, it also opens up the possibility of close collaboration with other actors across the continent. The United Kingdom has become one of the key players in coalition of the willing configurations aimed at supporting Ukraine. This approach contributes positively to European

security. At the same time, the participation of non-EU European states could hinder the institutionalisation of such initiatives. This is why the full potential of coalitions of the willing requires serious attention, accompanied by a clear understanding of the risks.

The increased use of differentiated cooperation reflects a structural tension at the heart of European integration: the need to reconcile decision-making efficiency with democratic legitimacy and institutional coherence. In the face of increasing heterogeneity among Member States and the constraints of unanimity in key policy areas, coalitions of the willing offer pragmatic, short-term solutions that enable progress where formal mechanisms may stall. Coalitions of the willing somehow bridge the need for more Europe despite fragmentation in the European institutions.

Differentiated integration risks a self-reinforcing vicious circle, however, in which initial use of flexible arrangements lowers the political costs of simply bypassing common institutions. Over time this may loosen incentives to pursue collective solutions at the EU level, thereby entrenching fragmentation and weakening institutional cohesion. As more policy areas become subject to ad hoc cooperation among subsets of Member States, the EU risks evolving into a more segmented polity, characterised by overlapping and potentially competing governance structures. For some of the participating governments, this might even be a desired outcome.

At the same time, the persistence – and likely expansion – of coalitions of the willing must be understood in light of the limited prospects for comprehensive treaty reform. Given the political difficulties of revising the EU's constitutional framework, flexible and informal formats are likely to remain an integral feature of European governance. The key challenge therefore is not to eliminate coalitions of the willing, but to manage and discipline their use in ways that preserve the Union's core principles of legality, accountability and solidarity.

This paper finds that coalitions of the willing risk undermining democratic legitimacy, weakening institutional coherence and reinforcing asymmetries between Member States in the case of their normalisation without institutionalisation. While their informal nature increases short-term effectiveness, sustainability may be limited, particularly in policy areas that require long-term financial commitments. Foreign and security policy is indeed a Member State competence, but building up long-term defence capability would require joint financing. All in all, the short-term goals of effectiveness and more rapid response should be rebalanced in the long term, moving the European project forward.

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