

European Security Challenges and the Case of Cyprus

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The Conference “*European Security Challenges and the Case of Cyprus*” was held on 6 October 2026 at the University of Nicosia. It was organized by the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs (CCEIA) in cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation. The event took place four weeks before the US midterm elections, at a time when the EU faces strains in its relations with the US, a security environment transformed by Russia’s war against Ukraine, and a weakened international legal order.

The event opened with a welcoming address by Professor Achilles C. Emilianides, Dean of the School of Law at the University of Nicosia. The speakers then addressed the central questions. Dr. Peter Walkenhorst, Senior Project Manager at the Bertelsmann Foundation, examined the future of transatlantic relations. Andreas Mavroyiannis, former negotiator of the Greek Cypriot community, discussed the evolution of relations between Europe and Russia. Professor Emeritus Andreas Theophanous, President of CCEIA, addressed international law and realpolitik, placing the Cyprus question at the centre of his analysis. Anthony T. Silberfeld, Director of Transatlantic Relations at the Bertelsmann Foundation, examined the domestic political pressures influencing US foreign policy and their implications for Europe.

The presentations exposed a structural tension at the heart of European security: the EU is under growing pressure to assume greater strategic responsibility while remaining dependent on external partnerships whose reliability can no longer be taken for granted. This raises concrete policy questions. Will the EU treat capability gaps in air defence, munitions and maritime surveillance as collective industrial priorities? Can a future settlement with Russia safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty and European security, including in the Eastern Mediterranean? And can the EU

sustain its credibility when the application of international law appears to vary according to geopolitical circumstances?

The Strategic Problem: Europe in the Interregnum

Europe's security predicament is no longer simply a question of burden sharing within the transatlantic alliance. It concerns whether the EU can preserve its freedom of action as the foundations of the existing order erode: transatlantic commitments become less predictable, Russia's war against Ukraine reshapes the European security environment, and the selective application of international law weakens confidence in the rules governing relations between states.

Antonio Gramsci, writing in the *Prison Notebooks*, described such moments as a crisis in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born". During this interregnum, he observed, "a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". This formulation offers a useful framework for understanding Europe's present predicament. It avoids treating current instability as a temporary disturbance after which the previous order will resume. It also avoids assuming that a viable successor is already taking shape.

The old order rested on three assumptions. The first was a reliable American security guarantee. The second was the expectation that relations with post-Soviet Russia would eventually evolve into a more stable and cooperative European security order. The third was that international law would be applied consistently enough to sustain the legitimacy of the wider order. All three assumptions are now under strain.

A Europe capable of acting independently on its security interests has yet to emerge. The EU remains dependent on the relationships it seeks to rebalance, while national governments disagree over priorities and the distribution of costs. The interregnum is visible in this gap between the need for greater European capacity and the limited means available to achieve it.

The problem is not simply that the established order is eroding. Europe's exposure to external developments is growing faster than its collective capacity to shape them. Strategic autonomy therefore extends beyond defence policy. It concerns the EU's ability to influence the political and economic conditions under which its security is secured. This is particularly important in the Eastern Mediterranean context, where territorial disputes intersect with energy infrastructure, maritime security and competing external interests.

A More Transactional Transatlantic Relationship

Dr. Peter Walkenhorst argued that relations between the US and the EU are becoming more transactional. Cooperation is increasingly conditional, while the continuity of American commitments can no longer be assumed. US policy is volatile, and the uncertainty extends beyond defence. American strategy now challenges aspects of the EU's regulatory model, migration policies and political direction. Security commitments themselves appear more conditional, complicating European planning.

Dr. Walkenhorst cautioned against either automatic alignment with or automatic opposition to Washington. Europe needs unity, collective red lines and the capacity to defend its interests. The single market remains a substantial source of economic leverage, but only if member states maintain a common position.

His account of the Arctic security agreement involving the US, Denmark and Greenland illustrated how European unity and firm commitments to sovereignty can create room for negotiation. The challenge is to sustain a partnership without accepting excessive dependence. The alliance persists, but the assumptions that once made its terms predictable are weakening. The resulting gap between institutional continuity and strategic uncertainty is central to Europe's present predicament.

Europe and Russia: From Pragmatism to Confrontation

Andreas Mavroyiannis traced the deterioration of relations between Europe and Russia to the period following the Soviet Union's collapse. Mutual suspicion had weakened the foundations of the relationship from the outset. Relations nevertheless retained a pragmatic and transactional character, particularly in the energy sphere. Russian hydrocarbons underpinned important economic interdependencies, but did not generate durable political trust.

Over time, the relationship became increasingly shaped by zero sum competition. Each side came to perceive the other's strategic gains as a potential loss. Russia's war against Ukraine has transformed this fragile relationship into a direct confrontation over European security.

The collapse of the expectation that economic interdependence would encourage political convergence has left Europe without an agreed framework for managing its relationship with Russia. The earlier basis of engagement has lost credibility, while the conditions for a more sustainable settlement remain unresolved. Europe must defend its security while recognising that a new *modus vivendi* with Russia will eventually be necessary. This cannot mean a simple return to earlier

arrangements. It requires a realistic assessment of the sources of mistrust and conditions that protect Ukraine's sovereignty, international law and Europe's security interests.

International Law and the Case of Cyprus

Professor Theophanous examined the tension between international law and realpolitik. He argued that states, particularly great and medium powers, frequently subordinate principles to strategic considerations. International institutions are similarly constrained by the balance of power. The result is a system in which international law is invoked selectively, raising fundamental questions about the credibility of its application and the principle of self-determination.

Professor Theophanous placed Cyprus within this broader contradiction. Referring to the 1974 events, he argued that the international community failed to contain Turkish aggression against Cyprus. He maintained that the UK and Greece failed to fulfil their responsibilities as guarantor powers, while the international community stood by. He also highlighted the tension between Turkey's status as a NATO member and an EU partner and its continued occupation of 37% of this island-state.

He subsequently questioned the disparity between the EU's response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its approach to the continuing occupation of Cyprus. He also expressed regret that Cyprus was not even mentioned in the European Commission President's State of the Union Address.

Lastly, he argued that the Cyprus problem cannot be understood solely through its bicomunal dimension, which he considered secondary to its wider geopolitical context. The UN-led negotiating process, in his view, does not adequately account for the interests and strategic calculations of external actors, including Greece, Turkey, the UK, the US and the EU. He concluded that the handling of the Cyprus question would serve as a litmus test for the credibility of both the EU and the UN.

The resulting gap between normative commitments and political practice is one of the more consequential symptoms of the wider crisis of European order. Cyprus raises the question of whether the principles underpinning the European project can retain their practical significance when their application carries geopolitical costs.

US Domestic Politics and European Security

Anthony Silberfeld opened with a telling remark: his presentation should be time stamped, since developments under President Trump could render his assessment outdated within an hour. The quip captured his central argument. The US has entered a period of heightened political and economic volatility, making its foreign policy increasingly difficult to anticipate.

Silberfeld situated the approaching midterm elections within a domestic climate of economic strain and political fragmentation. Citing Trump's 31% approval rating, weaker than expected job creation, rising fuel costs and mortgage rates; he highlighted the pressures confronting the administration. He also pointed to divisions within both parties, a changing media landscape and concerns over electoral practices.

The implications extend well beyond domestic politics. Silberfeld argued that Congress had ceded much of its foreign policy authority to the executive, leaving American international commitments increasingly exposed to shifts in presidential priorities. He highlighted military escalation involving Iran, uncertainty over military support for Ukraine and tariffs directed against allies including the EU and Canada.

The significance lies in the combination of economic strain, institutional erosion and policy volatility. For Europe and the wider international community, the resulting unpredictability creates vulnerabilities that extend from transatlantic relations to the Eastern Mediterranean. What makes the current situation particularly consequential is not simply the prospect of a change in American policy, but the difficulty of anticipating its direction, timing and durability.

Strategic choices ahead

The task is to shape the emerging security order rather than attempt to restore its predecessor. Four priorities follow.

First, turn strategic autonomy into collective capacity. The EU should use Readiness 2030, SAFE and the European Defence Industry Programme to close critical capability gaps through joint procurement, sustained industrial investment and more integrated supply chains. Priorities should include air and missile defence, ammunition, drones and counter drone systems, military mobility and maritime surveillance. The objective is to reduce dependence without duplicating NATO structures or fragmenting the European defence market. The same principle applies to economic relations with Washington: the EU's single market is a source

of leverage only when member states negotiate collectively and resist bilateral arrangements that undermine common positions.

Second, combine deterrence towards Russia with a strategy for eventual coexistence. Support for Ukraine and European defence must remain central, but permanent confrontation cannot substitute for a political horizon. The EU should work towards a new *modus vivendi* with Russia when conditions permit. This must not mean restoring prewar economic relations or treating interdependence as a guarantee of restraint. Any future framework should be grounded in verifiable commitments, respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, European security requirements and mechanisms for managing escalation.

Third, plan for reduced American predictability. European governments should prepare for changes in US military commitments, support for Ukraine, trade policy and engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean. Such planning should complement NATO's defence arrangements and include scenarios involving a reduced American maritime presence or diminished security assistance in the region. Engagement with Congress and other American institutions remains necessary, but cannot replace European capacity to act.

Fourth, place Cyprus within the EU's wider strategic approach to the Eastern Mediterranean. The bicomunal negotiations remain essential, but they cannot alone address the geopolitical dimensions of the conflict. The EU should sustain engagement with the relevant external actors and connect its political approach to Cyprus with its stated commitment to international law. This does not require identical responses to different conflicts. It does require consistency of principle and sustained political attention, including where doing so carries costs for the Union's relations with a NATO ally.

Conclusion

The discussions point to a crisis not simply of policy, but of the assumptions that have organised European security. The transatlantic partnership remains in place, yet confidence in its predictability has weakened. Relations with Russia have shifted from pragmatic interdependence to strategic confrontation, while the EU's commitment to international law is tested by the gap between principle and practice. Gramsci's notion of the *interregnum* captures this disjuncture: established institutions and relationships persist even as the foundations that sustained them erode, and the contours of a successor order remain unsettled.

Cyprus brings these contradictions into sharp relief. Its continuing division illustrates how geopolitical interests can constrain the application of legal principles and influence which security concerns receive sustained European

attention. The question is not whether Europe can restore the previous order, but whether the EU can retain political coherence and normative credibility as the conditions that once underpinned both become less secure. The choices made during this transition will shape not only Europe's international role, but also the principles and interests its emerging security order ultimately serves.