



Universität
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The Münster
DIALOGUES

THE MÜNSTER DIALOGUES #2

**BOOTSTRAPPING EUROPEAN SECURITY
AND ECONOMIC STRATEGIC AUTONOMY:
DUTCH AND GERMAN PERSPECTIVES**

BERLIN, 3–4 MARCH 2026



Organised by:



DGAP



› The Münster Dialogues logo at the Dutch Embassy in Berlin

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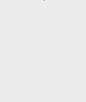
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FOREWORD

Dear reader,

The Münster Dialogues are conceived as a recurring Dutch-German platform for strategic exchange on key European challenges, with a particular focus on security. Initiated by the or ZNS Centre for Dutch Studies at the University of Münster, the format brings together policymakers, scholars, and practitioners from both countries to engage in open, binational dialogue. The choice for a Dutch-German setting reflects the uniquely close political, economic, and societal ties between the two countries, which are seen as a strong basis for mutual learning and joint contributions to Europe's future. The aim is not only to deepen understanding of shared challenges, but also to foster a sustained conversation that can inform policy and public debate.

Building on the first edition of The Münster Dialogues (TMD#1) in March 2025, for the second edition, in 2026, fortunately, ZNS was able to team up with the Europe Center of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). A second innovation came with the addition of an extra day of German-Dutch Youth Consultations. Inspired by the bilateral government consultations that since 2013 have been a regular format in German-Dutch relations, we invited twenty students from the *Germany Institute at the University of Amsterdam* (DIA), *Young DGAP* and the joint master's programme in European Studies of *Radboud University Nijmegen* and the *ZNS Centre for Dutch Studies of the University of Münster* to develop and discuss their views on Europe's security. In conclusion they formulated an ambitious German-Dutch Youth Agenda for the Future European Security Architecture.

TMD#2 continued the core idea underpinning the Münster Dialogues: that meaningful progress on European security and sovereignty depends on open, cross-border dialogue between closely connected partners such as Germany and the Netherlands. At the same time, it moved a step further by emphasizing the need to translate shared analysis into strategic orientation. Where the first edition mapped out key tensions—between NATO and autonomy, openness and resilience, internal cohesion and external pressure—the second edition ex-

plored how these tensions can be managed in practice, and what role European actors can play in shaping outcomes rather than merely reacting to them.

Keynotes by former Dutch foreign minister Ben Knapen and ASML Supervisory Board member Karien van Gennip set the stage by respectively addressing the need for Europe to dare to break free from outdated ideas about its geopolitical identity and the challenges in the field of economic and innovation policies and financial and social frameworks at the national level and within the EU. After that, participants, edged on by several impulses, debated at length, in three separate sessions, Europe's industrial base and innovative prowess, the institutional set-up and financial strategies, and the pace and scale of adjustments to defence organisation and military build-up. This booklet presents a concise summary of these exchanges.

In sum, TMD#2 reinforced the notion that European sovereignty is not an abstract goal, but a pragmatic response to a world in which traditional certainties can no longer be taken for granted. It underscored that strengthening Europe's capacity to act—economically, politically, and militarily—must go hand in hand with maintaining partnerships, particularly across the Atlantic, while also preparing for other scenarios. By continuing to bring together experts from politics, academia, think tanks, and society, The Münster Dialogues aim to consolidate their role as a platform where Dutch and German perspectives jointly contribute to shaping Europe's strategic direction in the years ahead.

16 April 2026,

PHOTO: ELSE HENKES



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PHOTO: ZSÓFIA PÖLÖSKE



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PROGRAMME

DAY 1

OPENING AT THE EMBASSY OF THE NETHERLANDS IN BERLIN

Welcome Hester Somsen & Keynote Ben Knapen



STANDING DINNER & DRINKS



DAY 2

SESSION 1

Draghi's Dance Macabre: Industrial Base, Innovative Prowes



SESSION 2

Holding the Centre: Institutional Set-up and Financing EU priorities



SESSION 3

Armies of the Future: Weapons, Strategies, People



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KEYNOTES

BEN KNAPEN (Former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands) – 3 March 2026

Ben Knapen opened TMD#2 with a forceful speech, in German, that he afterwards, on 21 March 2026, published in the Dutch daily *NRC* under the challenging title “*Europe must now become a geopolitical power – and thus dare to provoke.*” He argued that Europe is entering a fundamentally new geopolitical era marked by instability, accelerating crises, and the erosion of familiar certainties. What may appear as a series of unrelated shocks—conflicts, geopolitical tensions, and shifting alliances—signals the end of a historical phase in which Europe could rely on stability, soft power, and external security guarantees. Europe, long accustomed to seeing itself as a global norm-setter, now increasingly finds itself sidelined.

He noted that Europe’s self-image as a centre of economic strength and moral authority contrasts sharply with external perceptions. As he put it, critics now argue that “*the only power Europeans still have is the power to set up working groups.*” Such perceptions, whether exaggerated or not, have real consequences: they make it easier for external actors to challenge, pressure, and destabilise European societies.

Knapen identified three major threats: intensifying hybrid warfare, including cyberattacks and infrastructure disruption; the risk of a Russian advantage in Ukraine, potentially encouraging further destabilisation; and growing uncertainty about the reliability of the United States as Europe’s security anchor. While NATO cooperation remains operationally strong, political trust in the US has weakened significantly. Even beyond current leadership, structural geopolitical shifts—particularly

› Keynote-speaker Ben Knapen



the US focus on China—mean that European security may increasingly be seen as a regional responsibility.

He warned that Europe risks strategic vulnerability due to fragmentation, complacency, and overreliance on past assumptions. The fundamental choice facing Europe, he argued, is stark: “*national sovereignty and powerlessness, or deeper integration and the ability to act.*” Yet this choice is often postponed, either out of complacency or the hope that current tensions will fade.

To respond effectively, Europe must strengthen its economic and military capacity, deepen integration, and accept greater responsibility for its own security. This includes investing in defence, reducing dependencies, and reinforcing the Single Market and capital structures. Europe already possesses the necessary resources and capabilities—its wealth, industrial base, and technological expertise are not in question. What is lacking is political will and a shared sense of urgency. Without this, even well-known solutions will remain unimplemented.

KARIEN VAN GENNIP (Member of the Supervisory Board, ASML; former Dutch Minister of Social Affairs) – 4 March 2026

Van Gennip emphasised the urgency for Europe to step up in defence, competitiveness, and technology, while noting that national approaches still dominate. Fragmented defence industries, the absence of unified export controls, and limited consensus on EU-wide frameworks such as the “28th regime” continue to hinder progress.

Geopolitically, Europe faces a situation reminiscent of the Cold War, but without guaranteed US protection. This raises fundamental questions about unity, strategic vision, and the willingness of societies to make difficult trade-offs, for instance between welfare and defence spending.

Strategic autonomy also depends on the resilience of the middle classes. Declining upward mobility and growing distrust in elites risk undermining political cohesion. At the same time, Europe retains strengths in areas such as quantum computing, biotech, and AI adoption, but must reinforce its own technological base and startup ecosystem.

Key proposals included investing in future industries, using the energy transition as a growth driver, completing the capital market, removing internal Single Market barriers, building European digital infrastructure, promoting lifelong learning, and strengthening Franco-German cooperation with Dutch involvement.

**SESSION 1:
DRAGHI’S DANCE MACABRE:
INDUSTRIAL BASE, INNOVATIVE PROWESS
EVA VAN PELT (DNHK), WOLFGANG NIEDERMARK
(BDI), ANTONIA HMAIDI (MERICS), YOSHUA
WITTEVEEN (Draghi Report team).**

The session highlighted that the EU’s “Brussels Effect” is weakening: regulatory power alone no longer guarantees competitiveness. Europe is not facing a sudden collapse but a gradual loss of global relevance, which also translates into growing security risks. Strategic autonomy should therefore be understood as the capacity to act, not as isolationism.

A central concern is Europe’s dependence on external suppliers for critical inputs such as semiconductors and rare earths. If China succeeds in its industrial strategy, Europe risks a slow process of deindustrialisation. Strengthening supply chains and rebuilding industrial capacity are therefore essential.

At the same time, Europe lacks a clear strategic direction and implementation capacity. Compared to competitors, particularly China, European industrial policy remains insufficiently detailed and coordinated.

Key themes included the need for targeted deregulation/simplification, strengthening supply chains, deepening internal integration in capital markets, energy and digital sectors, and reducing dependencies while maintaining openness.

Proposals focused on joint hydrogen infrastructure, an integrated European energy grid, coordinated strategies for critical infrastructure, enhanced high-tech cooperation, cross-border regional partnerships, and building new alliances in the Global South.

SESSION 2:

HOLDING THE CENTRE: INSTITUTIONAL SET-UP AND FINANCING EU PRIORITIES

SHAHIN VALÉE (DGAP), **MEYNDERT VAN DER KOLK** (Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs), **WINAND QUAEDVLIEG** (VNO-NCW).

This session focused on the institutional and financial foundations of European strategic autonomy. The EU is preparing for enlargement without sufficient public debate or consensus at either national or European level, creating the risk of overpromising to candidate states. External interference further complicates this situation.

There has been a notable shift in EU priorities: competitiveness has moved to the centre of the agenda. Earlier approaches relied heavily on regulatory leadership and the belief in the “Brussels Effect”, but rising costs and the impact of successive crises have increased pressure on European industry.

Institutional fragmentation and unanimity requirements continue to hinder effective decision-making. New formats such as the E6 aim to facilitate progress among a smaller group of member states.

Key challenges include fragmented governance, lack of consensus on tariffs and industrial policy, and tensions between national interests and European coordination.

Proposals included temporary “European preference” for strategic industries, improved enforcement of Single Market rules, closer cooperation between innovation agencies, assessing a business case for legacy chips, and cooperate on improving the EU legislative process and good governance.

SESSION 3:

ARMIES OF THE FUTURE: WEAPONS, STRATEGIES, PEOPLE

PATRICK KELLER (DGAP), **HUIB ZIJDERVELD** (Netherlands Defence Academy), **BEATRICE DE GRAAF** (Utrecht University).

The *Zeitenwende* of 2022 is no longer sufficient in a new era of power politics. Europe must recon-

sider both the scale and speed of its defence capabilities, as well as the nature of future warfare.

Two contrasting perspectives emerged. One emphasised urgency: given ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, rapid procurement—including from outside Europe—may be necessary. The other stressed that increased defence spending should strengthen European integration and interoperability.

This reflects a broader tension between short-term readiness and long-term strategic autonomy. While NATO planning structures remain effective, Europe must decide how far it wants to rely on them versus developing its own coordinated capabilities.

Key challenges include balancing speed and scale in defence investments, aligning procurement with long-term integration goals, and ensuring interoperability between European armed forces.

Proposals focused on strengthening Dutch-German research and innovation cooperation, joint procurement and maintenance, mobilising venture capital for defence industries, developing operational plans for private sector involvement (“O-Plan”), creating a civilian counterpart, and preserving democratic legitimacy through local and cross-border engagement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

LINN SELLE (DGAP), **JACCO PEKELDER** (ZNS, University of Münster).

The concluding remarks emphasised the need to translate strategic ambitions into practical action. A central message across keynotes and sessions was that Europe must focus on what it can achieve itself, with German-Dutch cooperation as a potential driver.

Participants also highlighted the risks posed by declining public support. Concerns about the erosion of the social contract underline the importance of building a broad societal constituency for European security. Initiatives such as the German-Dutch Youth Consultations aim to involve younger generations in shaping future approaches and strengthening long-term support for European strategic autonomy.

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FLASHBACK TO TMD#1

The first edition, *The Münster Dialogues #1*, focused on the theme of European security between NATO and strategic autonomy. Moderated by Linn Selle, this first edition brought together experts from government, academia, think tanks, and media for an in-depth exchange at a moment of growing geopolitical uncertainty. The event opened with an informal dinner at the Embassy of the Netherlands, setting the tone for what became a frank and at times contrasting dialogue.

The conference began with opening remarks by Jacco Pekelder and Ambassador Hester Somsen, followed by a keynote address by Tom de Bruijn. Drawing on arguments he later elaborated in the influential Dutch daily *NRC*, the former Foreign minister warned against premature speculation about alternatives to NATO—particularly a European nuclear deterrent based on France. He argued that such debates risked undermining the credibility of the alliance and could even become self-fulfilling. While Europe should take greater responsibility for its own security, this, he stressed, must go hand in hand with preserving strong American guarantees.

The first session, *“European Political Strategies and Military Capabilities”*, addressed how Europe might balance this ambition for greater autonomy with its continued reliance on NATO. Anna van Zoest, Nicolai von Ondarza, Jörg Noll, and Gesine Weber explored questions of defence spending, institutional reform, and military coordination in light of Russia’s war against Ukraine and shifting U.S. priorities.

The second session, *“Economic Strength, Industrial Base, and Innovative Prowess”*, turned to the economic foundations of security. Sander Tordoir, Nils Redeker, Yoshua Witteveen, and Otto Fricke discussed how Europe could strengthen its resilience by reducing dependencies, investing in strategic industries, and fostering innovation—while maintaining its commitment to open markets.

The third session, *“Political Volatility, Societal Resilience, and Migration”*, brought together René Cuperus, Timo Graf, Remco Andersen, and Thu Nguyen, who examined the internal dimensions of security and the impact of political fragmentation, migration debates, and societal pressures.

› Jacco Pekelder, Ronald van Roeden, Hester Somsen and Ton de Bruijn during the opening of *The Münster Dialogues #1*





› A snapshot from Session 2 of The Münster Dialogues #1 2025



› Impressions from the three sessions of *The Münster Dialogues #1 2025*

The concluding plenary brought together these strands. It was opened by students of the ZNS Centre for Dutch Studies, who introduced questions developed during the day. Eckart Conze compared the current situation with earlier shifts in the global power system. Inspired by his call to fundamentally rethink Europe's security needs, the discussion returned to the central question of the conference: what impact can German-Dutch cooperation have on Europe's path towards greater strategic autonomy?

Reflections after the conference pointed to both convergence and tension. While some participants emphasized the continued centrality of the United

States, others argued that Europe must prepare for a future in which American guarantees are less certain. At the same time, the discussions underscored the often underappreciated potential of Dutch-German cooperation—particularly in the field of defence—as well as the need for greater ambition in shaping European security policy.

In this sense, the first Münster Dialogues not only highlighted the urgency of the issues at stake, but also demonstrated the value of sustained, binational exchange across sectors and generations. By combining strategic reflection with open debate, the format created a space for confronting difficult questions that are central to Europe's future.

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German Council on Foreign Relations

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PHOTO: ANNETTE HORNISCHER



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in foreign policy, has over 1,000 members who appreciate its networking and knowledge-sharing opportunities. Seven regional forums actively facilitate debate on current foreign policy topics throughout Germany and on to Brussels. In addition, DGAP publishes the bimonthly journal *Internationale Politik*, which features in-depth analyses of foreign policy.



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