

European interview

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«There will be no credible European defence mid-term without a sound Franco-German base»

Interview with Jean-Paul Perruche, Lieutenant General (2S), Chairman of EuroDefence-France, member of the Scientific Committee of the Robert Schuman Foundation.

What do you think of Europe's geostrategic position as the number of conflicts within its neighbourhood increase?

I think it is quite worrying in that the nations of Europe seem powerless in the face of the growing risks and threats that surround them, against which they do not seem really determined to stand together. Europeans have continuously reduced their defence spending over the last 20 years whilst the rest of the world has been increasing military capabilities, and some countries (China, Russia, Saudi Arabia) have done so considerably. At present most European countries depend totally on the US for their security, whilst the strategic priorities of the latter are no longer focused on Europe, as confirmed by President Obama on several occasions and as illustrated by the Libyan crisis. Our powerful ally demands however greater investment by Europeans in their own security. The main threats of terrorism and mass migration do not affect the US in the same way as they do Europe.

Does Europe have global interests? Are they common to all Member States?

The European Union certainly does have global interests, but as the treaties stand right now it is unable to assert these as a political player. Common European interests are a result of the intersection of national interests, with each State defining its own interests at its own level. Only the interests granted to the Commission are really promoted jointly to Europeans but this delegation does not include defence. Since States are

very different, due to their geographic situation, their history and their power, the scope of common interests is therefore reduced.

The 28 heads of State and government are due to adopt a revised European security strategy at the end of June. What do you hope for and in your opinion what should the content of this be?

You have understood that the strength of the States of Europe that have become too small on a globalised world scale can only lie in their union. However the strength of this union cannot come just from the sum of heterogeneous, independent powers. We have to consider the European Union as it really is today: 500 million inhabitants, producing 23% of the world's wealth, living in a single geographical area demarcated by external borders as a framework for the definition of global ambitions and interests that include, and yet extend, beyond its Member States. This should not therefore weaken the power of the States, and on the contrary, this should strengthen it in a union based on their sum, and also their complementarity and solidarity. It is on this basis that a relevant, effective European security strategy must be founded, pinpointing all of the dangers and threats that the EU Member States have to face, then by putting forward collective European responses based on solidarity, complementarity and cooperation between the States, driven forward by true "European leadership." Based on this strategy we should achieve the necessary capabilities to guarantee the European Union true strategic autonomy to correspond with its security requirements and ambitions.

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Do you think that the European approach to the defence industry is effective?

The main problem with the European defence industry is that it was oversized in the post-Cold War period, in a context in which the defence budgets of the States of Europe were constantly declining and in which there was greater international competition on the "export" markets with the appearance of new industries in the emerging countries. At present costly national overlapping has to be remedied, we have to rationalise the defence industry's base so that it takes on a European dimension whilst investing significantly in research and also development. The goal is clear but the path is difficult. The prospects for European defence funding, notably with the Commission's "preparatory action" is rather encouraging but it is encountering reticence on the part of some States and industrialists.

The European Union is not engaged as such in the international coalition that is bombarding Islamic State. Why hasn't there been a joint European military response?

Given that the motivation, the interests and airstrike capabilities of the Member States were very different in this crisis, it was undoubtedly counter-productive to launch a debate on the outcomes, the results to be achieved and the distribution of roles in this extremely complicated situation, which would undoubtedly have lasted a long time and might not have come to anything. Moreover a wider coalition had already formed around the US within which modes of cooperation between the participating States are emerging. Finally as matters stand at present, in terms of its structure and capabilities, the EU is not really prepared to undertake coercive action that is generally NATO's reserve.

What might the military consequences of a potential "Brexit" be?

At first glance it would seem that the UK's withdrawal would cut seriously into European military capabilities, but the British in fact have never invested in CDSP

operations (apart from the provision of the OHG in Northwood for the Atalanta operation off the Horn of Africa) with it most often trying to reduce ambitions so as not to overshadow NATO. It is possible however that since the UK's obstruction to the development of the EU's autonomous military capabilities would be removed, some European countries would step up their cooperation and increase integration under the EU. In all events we can be almost certain that if there is a Brexit the British will be quick to join an EU operation as an external partner if there is an interest for them in it.

How might the Franco-German couple contribute in taking European defence forward?

There will be no credible European defence mid-term without a sound Franco-German base. The problem is that to date – and for historical reasons – security and the use of force in both countries' foreign policy have been quite different, likewise the political decision making process. Hence we have to do everything we can to bring the countries closer together in these areas. Perhaps thought about a Franco-German White Paper might work as a lever to trigger a virtuous process?

According to the EU's Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) the share of the GDP devoted by the Union's Member States to military spending was 1.28% in 2014. Do you believe that the increase in defence budgets is a prior condition to make real progress towards more pooling in terms of defence?

Yes, I believe that the inadequate level of financing of European defence budgets at present reflects a refusal to assume responsibilities in terms of security and defence and this is an extremely serious issue. Moreover, to think that via pooling and sharing, Europeans will be able to palliate their capability shortfalls is a delusion. Therefore we really need a rapid rise in efforts towards national defence and the goal of 2%.

But if we really want to move towards common European defence, we shall have to rapidly reach GDP percentage/

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defence spending ratio shared by all Member States, since this is the first criteria of solidarity and responsibility, and obviously this percentage should not be below 2%.

Several Member States have announced an increase in their military budget. At what point do you believe that this increase will constitute a satisfactory development?

Defence budgets must of course match security requirements which are inherently linked to the context of regional and world security. Moreover they must be calculated according to the development of security, since the money invested in arms in year A will only often become effective as of A+10 and even A+15. Budgets must not be below 2%, and this should be reassessed accordingly as threats evolve. I would like to recall that they were over 3% in most European countries in the Cold War period.

At the beginning of 2016 the Pentagon announced a four-fold increase in funds allocated to the US Army and NATO forces stationed in Europe. What do you think of this?

I believe that the use of force as part of foreign policy by President Putin since the annexation of Crimea,

together with an exponential increase in the Russian defence budget over the last 10 years has repositioned Russia as a possible competitor and adversary for the USA. The USA are naturally using the facilities offered to them by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which feel threatened and those offered by NATO to strengthen their hand in Europe. This is a "containment" strategy that aims to reassure its allies and to dissuade Russia from undertaking any further action in the region. The sense of this will become clearer in the future "deals" to be made between the Americans and the Russians in various crisis theatres around the world.

What are you hoping for from the NATO summit planned to take place in Warsaw in July next?

I hope that it will lead to greater involvement and therefore more responsibility taking on the part of the Europeans in terms of security. I would be sorry if it were to take us back to the time of the Cold War, and a culture of dependence which Europeans entered into at that time. The new NATO must define new transatlantic cooperation based on common interests and the complementarity of security responsibilities between Americans and Europeans.

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