

# DEFENCE WITHOUT EUROPE?

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For the past five years, the city of Lille and its “Mission Lille Eurométropole Défense” has organised an annual conference on European defense. The fifth edition of the “Ateliers de la Citadelle” was held on the 9 October 2014, in partnership with Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute and Toute l’Europe. We publish the initial intervention of the General Desportes, in the first round table dealing with the institutional and strategic challenges facing European defense.

Should we still be dreaming of a “European defence” or, by accounting for certain realities and postponing that vision to an increasingly vague future, should we not simply adopt a more responsible approach and rebuild our “Europe without defence”, safeguarding first and foremost whatever is left of our own defence system? This question is becoming less and less theoretical.

The summer of 2014 has revealed some truly horrible truths. Even the most short-sighted amongst us cannot help but see that the world all around us has caught fire: to the north-east in Ukraine, to the east with the conflagration raging in the Middle East, and to the south in Libya, in Nigeria and in the Sahel right down to Mali.

The most obscene savagery of all is being played out in Syria and in Iraq. It shows us that, contrary to our Western, Christian model, the world does not actually move forward in a straight line from evil towards good. It tells us that the post-modern world is a utopian vision only for the well-off. There is, and there always will be, radical backsliding: our approaches to war must prove capable of rediscovering their moral brutal characteristics when no compromise is possible.

Mr. Putin has reminded us that brute force can be a trump card as strategic as it is tactical when in the hands of a player who does not fear to use it. He has shown us, indirectly, that our strength, devoid of willpower and devoid of a vision, has nothing to do with power.

**Europe’s problem is that it killed the spirit of defence at the same time as it killed the spirit of war... on our own soil!** It has forced the mentality of the young European generations into denying the legitimacy of war as a tool for consolidating or defending a political undertaking, and thus also into denying the legitimacy of most of the expenditure earmarked for defence.

The truth of the matter is that the world around Europe today is aflame but neither Europe, nor France, are drawing any concrete conclusions from the situation regarding the need to strengthen their defence. The truth of the matter is that no one came to France’s assistance in its offensive phase when it deployed its forces in Mali in order to defend the European people’s security. It even proved difficult to set up the European mission to train the Malian Army. And the situation is identical, if not more dramatic, in the Central African Republic. In the struggle against the Islamic State, a struggle which concerns all of us Europeans, Europe as such is absent and the Europeans are almost as absent as Europe itself.

The French have been more pro-European than many others, particularly regarding military issues. The succession of disappointments, followed brutally by the succession of crises and military operations in 2013 and 2014, are forcing us to adopt a more realistic attitude. By all means, let us move towards Europe, but let us stop shedding the resources required to exercise our responsibilities and to safeguard our interests. Europe itself needs us to do this if it is to ensure the execution of missions which only the French Armed Forces are capable of undertaking.

**Defence can only be the defence of a shared vision and of common strategic interests.** Yet we have no choice but to note that both are in short supply. Unless and until there is a common strategic vision, a common strategic interest, a common perception of the threat, there will be no common defence because the sense of European solidarity in each member state will remain too weak to accept national political risks. And it is truer still that unless and until there is a shared operational vision, there will be no truly pooled forces. The example of armoured vehicles is absolutely striking: when Germany talks about light armoured vehicles, it is talking about the 30-tonne class, while France is dreaming of vehicles lighter than 10 tonnes!

For a long time to come, the only thing that it will be possible to share are the aerial and naval capabilities, whose deployment quite rightly entails no political risk: pooling and sharing only works when there is no political risk taken by the authorities of the countries taking part in common operations. The examples of Mali and of the CAR are striking in this regard: we can pool capabilities, but not forces. The intervention of troops on the ground is too risky to overcome national egotism. We must safeguard our boys if we wish to maintain control over our external action.

Today we have to apply the principle of reality: the “small steps” method does not work. In thirty years, the buildup of small fragments of European defence has not allowed us to create the vision we hoped for. Thus we need to start over again from scratch, from the bottom, demanding unity of vision and earnest commitment from all of those

countries that decide to coordinate their defensive efforts. We must stop using the European defence argument as a permissible excuse for slashing defence budgets.

This is no longer a time for risky chimeras, for a dream long nurtured but clearly in vain. **It is time to get back to the hard reality of the world around us and thus, first and foremost, to the reality of our need to rebuild our national defence capabilities.** As the dangers grow and the threats intensify, as the number of our military operations – often justifiably – increases, the first, immediate measure we need to adopt is a *moratorium* to stop the lethal spiral of deterioration that is undermining our military capabilities.

This is the decision – and it needs to be taken urgently – which will go the furthest towards safeguarding “European defence”.

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