



Geopolitics, worldwide elections and Europe as a whole

The war of aggression waged by Russia since 24 February 2022 by invading Ukraine, with no apparent reason other than the annexation of this country and its submission to Russian central power, has awakened people's consciences in Europe and prompted the EU to take action, as COVID had done previously. The scale of the health crisis prompted the Member States of the European Union to take exceptional measures. This time, the conflict in Eastern Europe has prompted European countries to reinvest in security and defence and to redefine capabilities for high-intensity conflicts in a hybrid environment. The EU's neighbourhood is ever increasingly unstable, with Russia's war in the East intensifying and an ongoing Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah conflict in the South. The US and China are more and more engaged in a great power competition, fragmenting the global economy. As a consequence of the global economic, social, geopolitical and climate change challenges, the EU will have to navigate in a threatening strategic environment. Russia, North Korea, Iran and China are seemingly lined up for a possible extension of the use of force. Unity of effort, deterrence and strategic autonomy are needed for a safer and secure Europe, as well as to be a trustable strategic partner in the world. As members of the EuroDefense network, we are convinced that the *"European cooperation is the only effective way in which Europe can be a significant strategic player in years to come"*, to quote our network's ambition.

Since 3 years, our EuroDefense national presidents' meetings, successively in Paris (spring 2022), in The Hague (autumn 2022) and in London (autumn 2023) have stressed this necessity. Our work can be monitored through these events and the joint resolutions, summaries and position papers, made available or sent to our decision-makers. EuroDefense Belgium agreed, in the wake of the 3 previous president's meetings, to take on again the yearly EuroDefense presidency and to organise a national president's meeting in Belgium, from 21st to 23rd May 2024. This happened during Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the EU (from January to June 2024), while 2024 was expected to be a pivotal year for the EU, with Europeans and a large portion of the world population going to the ballot box, not at least the US.

Both the Belgian Permanent Representation at the EU and the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID Brussels), our EuroDefense Belgium's primary supporting and hosting facility, as well as the Belgian Navy helped us in framing and co-organising the meeting. We took advantage of the Belgian Presidency's

programme, broken in three concepts (protect, strengthen, prepare) to set up a 3 days' event. In parallel with the formal presidents' meeting, this was balanced in 3 parts:

- The classical social meetings, as the icebreaker in Brussels, the historical visit in Ostend on the occasion of 300 years of the General Indian Company, better known as the Ostend Company, and the official dinner at the end, hosted by Belgian flag officers and representatives of industry;
- A visit to industry, Exail Robotics in Ostend, a brand new plant assembling the drones (surface and subsurface) for the new mine countermeasures vessels of the Belgian and Royal Netherlands navies, and,
- Half a day seminar at the RHID on cognitive warfare, a chosen topic also related to the possible cyber interferences during the (numerous) upcoming elections.

The principal takeaways of this spring 2024 EuroDefense national presidents' meeting are:

- **The meeting in itself** with 2 Brief notes to Mr Charles MICHEL, President of the European Council, Mrs Ursula VON DER LEYEN, President of the European Commission and Mrs Roberta METSOLA, President of the European Parliament: one note on proposals for implementing the "European Defence Industrial Strategy", with an attached document resulting from an EURODEFENSE (EWG 30) study of the Joint Communication by the Commission and the High Representative on a new European Defence Industrial Strategy, and another agreed note on exports, resulting from the dedicated Working Group (EWG 35).
- **The visit to EXAIL Robotics Belgium**, where the operational concept for the renewal of the mine countermeasures capabilities was explained. The project developed is a world first and revolutionary in many ways. It shows that cooperation, solidarity and innovation are key values for our shared security. Both countries can be proud of their contribution to innovation in defence, to meet the security challenges of the future.
- The seminar "**Securing the future in the age of cyber and cognitive warfare**": Cyber defence is now at the heart of security concerns. The space domain, once reserved for scientific research and exploration, is now a national and European security issue. Hybrid warfare, for its part, represents a complex mix of conventional and unconventional means, including military operations, espionage, disinformation, and cyber terrorism, used synchronously to destabilize a country without formally triggering a war. The conference addressed also the importance of societal resilience, combating disinformation campaigns, and strengthening cooperation at both the intra-European level and with international allies.
- The signature of a **cooperation agreement with the EPIS** Think Tank.
- The **movements** up and down from Brussels to Ostend, done **by train** in a reserved train carriage for the whole group instead of by car, to avoid the motorways with traffic jams.

We look forward to the next EuroDefense meeting on 18 November 2024 in Berlin and the follow-on yearly presidency of EuroDefense. More importantly, at the end of this short introduction for the Fourth quarter, fall 2024, Newsletter, it is a wonderful opportunity to thank heartily EuroDefense France, who provided the secretariat for the international network since 2003. We all are grateful for their friendly and efficient work and also for their deep engagement in EuroDefense matters. EuroDefense Portugal is ready to take over. We wish them fair winds and following seas with the network helm.

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