

European interview

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“The day will come when Europeans, or at least a small group of them, will decide on a common budget together which will be devoted to certain aspects of the common defence policy.”

Interview with Nicole Gnesotto, Professor on the European Union at the CNAM

1. Just as the European Union seemed to be deeply divided over the situation in Syria it came to agreement on a joint position, what do you think about this? What impacts will the confirmation that chemical weapons were used have on the UN investigators, whilst the common position spoke of a “strong response” in cases like this: intervention or political action?

On an initial level we note once again the gap between the rhetoric and political action. Then we see how the use of force, even if a State crosses the red line, proven by independent investigators, is difficult for us to accept today – not only in Europe but also in the USA. The rise of strategic abstentionism on the part of the West is a major strategic novelty of globalization: crises are so complex that our values and interests are seriously blurred. I would even say that there is a growing gap between these two traditional engines of international action. Where do our interests lie and what are our values in Egypt, Syria and Libya etc ? There is no more difficult a question than this at the moment. Our values should have led to early intervention in Syria. Our interests however are not so easily identifiable – they may differ in the short and/or mid-term and this uncertainty leads to abstentionism, a wait-and-see attitude and collective inertia. Western public opinion is mainly against intervention, illustrating this “new confusion in strategic feeling” in a time of globalization.

2. What do you think of the House of Commons “no” in response to the motion put forward by David Cameron for intervention in Syria? How can it be placed in perspective with the common position which the UK also signed?

It was a surprise followed by another one on the part of the USA. Both of these countries, traditionally those which intervene the most, demonstrated via their elected representatives reticence regarding external intervention which the most neutral or pacifist amongst the Europeans would not have challenged. What is the explanation behind Britain’s sudden “Europeanisation”? It is in part the price of the successive failure of military action in Iraq and even in Afghanistan: What British and American public opinion has learnt from these external expeditions is ambiguous - 10 years on it is difficult to say exactly what benefit the US or the UK and even more generally the West and democracy have gained, not to mention the impact in the theatres of operation and in the region (the rise of Iran, fundamental radicalisation everywhere). What has the use of force achieved? If this strategic scepticism continues it will show that there has been a major development notably for the future of the USA as a power.

3. Does the agreement between the US and Russia turn Europe into a marginal player on the world’s geopolitical chess board?

This is not new. In major crises involving the US, the

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other great powers, Israel, nuclear issues or arms of mass destruction, Europe has always played a marginal role. Moreover it does not try to substitute the USA when the latter are directly involved; at worst the Europeans are divided (e.g. Iraq in 2003), at best they support American action (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). The European Union has only succeeded in playing a central role in the strategic game in some regional crises (Georgia, Balkans, DR Congo), most of the time in Europe and Africa. Its role, notably in terms of maritime security of the Somali coasts (the anti-piracy operation Atalante) is exemplary in this regard. However the marginal role played by Europe in the world strategic arena is neither surprising nor shocking. The important thing is for the European Union to be present in areas and be involved in crises in which it can really decide to act and be effective, where it can be determined and that its intervention makes a difference in a short space of time. However this is not always the case.

4. You were a member of the Committee on the French White Paper on Defence and National Security which was published on 29th April last. How is this new White Paper different from its 2008 predecessor? In what way is it European?

The new White Paper is a response to several major developments that have occurred since 2008 including the economic crisis and the extremely rapid development of the strategic context. The White Paper notably draws on the experience of the Arab Spring, the rise to power of China, the USA's new Asian priorities and above all the impact of the economic crisis on the hierarchy of power and the availability of financial resources. Regarding Europe it re-asserts a French ambition regarding common defence, together with real proposals involving capabilities and industry. Of course the 2008 White Paper was quite ambitious in terms of European defence but the policy did not emerge: the priority given to France's return to NATO led in a way to a freezing of European ambitions. The 2013 White Paper returns to France's political voluntarism as far as European defence is concerned.

5. Will it really be possible to draft a European White Paper? And to what purpose?

This is an old, on-going issue. In 2001 the Belgian presidency was the first to say that it wanted to do

this, obviously in vain. Today there is still no consensus between the 28 Member States to apply themselves to this kind of exercise which would not only involve a joint analysis of the threats – which is relatively possible – but also the definition of common security interests, strategic priorities, intervention scenarios, a doctrine governing the use of force, a model for an army or at least of the military capabilities available and the ensuing organisation of forces. This is a lot to ask. However since 2003 the Europeans have shared a security strategy, which was revised in part in 2008 and which is equivalent to the first chapter of a possible White Paper. Given that the world is rapidly changing it would be good if the European Council asked for a new security strategy adapted to the world of 2014. It would even be desirable, that every five years, with every change in the European legislature, for a new security strategy to be put forward: designed for all (Council, Commission and Parliament) it would describe the international context in which the European Union should be operating. It might be possible for the European Council to mandate several working groups for more specific research), notably on the terrorist threat, security in Africa, maritime security strategy etc ...

6. The heads of State and government will be meeting for the first time to discuss the Common and Security Defence Policy at the European Council of 19th and 20th December 2013 since the entry into force of the Lisbon Strategy. Will it be possible (has it been planned) to hold discussions on close, pragmatic cooperation such as capability pooling and sharing?

This European Council devoted to defence is a major political event. Undoubtedly it will not turn into the evening of European defence but it might be the start of the induction of the defence policy at the Union's highest political level. There might be immediate decisions and also the definition of successive stages and possibly even a political vision which citizens cannot see in the present European texts. Speaking of defence and security evidently means discussing the role of Europe in the world and it is high time for debate to start. The capability and industrial issue is also important because the defence industry involves nearly 900,000 jobs in Europe for a turn-over of 96 billion €: hence it is a possible engine of growth, a source of innovation and technological excellence, and also a

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venue for great European cooperation and even integration. In this regard the European Commission will become a major player, notably in terms of financing research and technological innovation which might lead to thought about traditional relations between the Council and the Commission over the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

7. The military programming bill (2014-2019) presented on 2nd August in France only makes a brief mention or makes an abstraction of European Defence. Is it because we are expecting conclusions from the European Council devoted to defence in December? Moreover what should we expect of this Council in view of strengthening European defence in your opinion?

By definition a military programming law is a national document, both from a legal and operational point of view. By definition it does not include details about European programming and financing since these, if they exist one day, involve agreements between all of the Member States. The European Council of December 2013 will be a major event in terms of European Defence – from the point of view of political voluntarism, collective ambition and impetus given to some more technical issues such as in-flight refuelling planes or the manufacture of European drones. But that is a totally different exercise. The day will undoubtedly come when Europeans, or at least a small group of them, will decide on a common budget together which will be devoted to certain aspects of the common defence policy. But we’re not there yet.

8. Moreover the military programming law highlights Franco-British defence industry

cooperation (continuation of the Lancaster House Agreements). In what way is it possible to plan for this type of cooperation?

From France’s standpoint the UK is dual edged: it is a vital defence partner, but from a European point of view it has to be ruled out. The conclusion of this contradiction is self-evident: the bilateral Franco-British relationship is vital from a military point of view but it is neither the embryo nor the engine and above all it is not the condition for the success of European defence. Over the last ten years this has developed via 28 military and civilian operations without British participation – except in two cases: the maritime operation Atalante and the take-over of the NATO operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This does not mean excluding the UK from European defence in the future but it does not mean that we have to wait for the British either in order to continue making progress. Every core proposal in terms of European defence with the UK simply leads to stalemate.

Nicole Gnesotto

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