CLUB OF THREE DINNER AND SESSION ON EUROPEAN DEFENCE AND SECURITY

Berlin, 25/26 September 2025

INTRODUCTION

Some 40 senior figures from business, politics, diplomacy and thinktanks in France, Germany and the UK gathered in Berlin in September to discuss prospects for strengthening European defence and security at a critical time for Europe. The particular focus was the underlying societal and political issues in the current debate on defence - and ongoing efforts to improve the resilience and preparedness of our respective countries.

The meeting in Berlin took place as Europe was facing an unprecedented surge in so-called grey-zone, sub-threshold attacks, many apparently by Russia, described by many participants as a quasi or even de factor state of hybrid warfare. Following the incursion by Russian drones into Polish airspace on 9 September, several major airports across Europe had been severely disrupted by cyber-attacks, and unidentified drones had been seen near critical infrastructure at different locations. Other cyber-attacks, such as that on the UK car manufacturer Jaguar Land Rover, had caused significant damage.

The event, organised in partnership with the Hertie Stiftung, began with a traditional Club of Three dinner hosted by the French Ambassador to Germany, François Delattre, at his residence where the Parliamentary State Secretary for Defence, Sebastian Hartmann, gave the keynote address.

Left: Defence State Secretary Sebastian Hartmann (Dinner, French Residence)

Right: Elisabeth Braw (speaking), Friday session (Adlon Kempinski)

THURSDAY DINNER WITH STATE SECRETARY SEBASTIAN HARTMANN

During dinner, participants observed that relations between France, Germany and the UK were at their best, following the Kensington Treaty signed by the UK and Germany in July; the Lancaster House 2.0 agreement between France and the UK; and the August Franco-German Defence and Security Council in Toulon. Each side of the triangle was strong.

Generally speaking however, Europeans were still in shock, and sometimes in denial, about President Trump's ideological alignment with Vladimir Putin's Russia, despite a recent hardening of the US position vis-à-vis Moscow. Many were having difficulties coming to terms with a future in which American protection could no longer be assumed. However, time was not on Europe's side and in order to guarantee its security and prosperity, it needed to quickly regain its self-confidence and defend its interests by engaging much more willingly in power play.

The first imperative was to maintain European cohesion in the face of acute pressure from both the Trump administration and dangerous escalations by Russia. Another priority was to strengthen the European pillar of NATO. As one of the participants noted, growing European power within the Alliance was not taboo in

Top left: Major General (Ret.) Jean-Marc Vigilant (Dinner); **Top right**: Tobias Cremer MEP (Friday sessions)

Bottom left: Florian Bochert (speaking); **Right:** French Ambassador François Delattre (welcome speech)

Washington D.C. The Americans had always seen NATO as primarily a gathering of European allies. For one of the French participants, the Europeans would eventually need to develop an independent command and control structure that could be detached from the NATO command chain in the event that U.S and European interests diverged significantly in future.

Given its geographical location at the centre of Europe, Germany was taking steps to update its infrastructure in order to facilitate the movement of troops and military equipment. Military mobility could not be an after-thought. Much infrastructure in Europe was no longer army-compatible and Russia was aware of this.

One of the German participants asserted the need to advance European sovereignty, which meant not just assuming greater responsibility on defence but also having the freedom to shape Europe's own path based on its own interests. This included strengthening the independent European defence industry.

The view from Britain was that France, Germany and the UK had a historical responsibility to drive Europe forward to protect itself but without driving the US away. Whatever America could not or would not to do, the three countries should step up. Several participants also stressed the role of Poland as a significant defence actor. Poland had a moral authority to sit at the top table of European security and defence. It had invested in this field more than any others, was acting with a great sense of urgency, and understood better than anyone else the existential threat posed by Russia – with the exception of Baltic and Nordic countries.

FRIDAY MORNING SESSIONS AT THE ADLON KEMPINSKI

SESSION I: FINDING COMMON GROUND IN POLARISED POLITICAL LANDSCAPES

Chair: John Kampfner

Speakers: Tobias Cremer MEP, Nathalie Vogel, Nick Coleman

SESSION II: EUROPEAN DEFENCE, RESILIENCE AND PREPAREDNESS

Chair: Rebecca Harding

Speakers: Elisabeth Braw, Evie Aspinall, Sarah Kirchberger

Dinner at the French embassy was followed by two sessions at the Adlon Kempinski on Friday 26 September. The first focused on the socio-economic context in which Europe was stepping up its efforts to defend itself against Russian aggression. Across Europe, polls and surveys on public support for Ukraine and more defence spending presented a mixed picture. Russia was increasingly perceived as a major threat but in countries such as the UK which were under severe fiscal pressures and had significant budget deficits, younger people did not see Ukraine as a top priority.

Session II: Rebecca Harding (speaking) with Sarah Kirchberger and Elisabeth Braw

According to a survey of UK public opinion on foreign policy released in July by the British Foreign Policy Group, the main concerns for people between 18 and 25 were climate change, trade wars and the Trump presidency. Only 17% of them viewed Ukraine as a major concern compared with 46% for people over 60. Regarding Britain as a whole, 71% were in favour of increased defence spending but 60% opposed it if it meant cutting spending in areas like healthcare.

For one of the participants from Germany, pitting defence spending against social welfare was a false narrative, and one that played into the Kremlin's hands. The same animosity that was allowed to fester among parts of the European population a few years ago against the energy transition risked taking root in the debate about defence spending if left unchallenged. Germany had shown the way on how to address this risk by connecting increased defence spending to a €500bn investment infrastructure and climate neutrality. However, there was a recognition that countries like France and the UK had very little capacity to increase investment massively at present. A week before the Berlin meeting, France's credit rating had been downgraded to a mere A+ following prolonged political instability and strained public finances.

Reflecting on the political backlash against the energy transition in the UK, and particularly the so-called Low Emission Zones (LEZs) implemented at local level, one of the participants pointed to behavioural science as a research area to invest in, so as to help preserve social cohesion, especially as AI had the potential to cause a new wave of major disturbances in our societies.

The Nordic model was often presented as an example to follow when it came to social cohesion. In the Nordic countries, people had a much higher consciousness of the risks they faced as a group, as a society. But Western Europe countries like France, Germany and the UK had very different histories and cultures. According to one of the German participants, Western Europe was undergoing a crisis of identity and purpose that fuelled populism. Traditional engines of cohesion, such as religion, social class and trade unions, were all disappearing fast, and there were no new institutions to replace them yet. In the meantime, politics was becoming a way of relating to an identity with all the extremism and violence that came with it.

The legacy of globalisation, which remained a fundamental aspect of Europe's world view, was giving people a false sense of security. Governments needed to be much more transparent about the attacks perpetrated by Russia on Europe on a daily basis. Lessons on preparedness could be learnt from earthquake zones. Areas like San Francisco had shown that people could fully prepare for potential disasters if given agency and total transparency. In Finland, adults from various professional groups received refresher training aimed at updating them on current threats. In Germany, the military had traditionally not been painted in a positive light in the curriculum but this perception was starting to change among

Session I (Adlon Kempinski): Nathalie Vogel

young people. There was also a sense that the leniency towards Russia shown by parts of the German elite was confined to the past.

A participant with a military background remarked that the armed forces never approached the topic of defence from a pure military angle. Instead, they spoke of national defence, which involved action by all citizens in defence of their country in different ways: through the armed forces or social cohesion and resilience at home. A recent example of unity as a nation was the 2024 Olympics in Paris. Because France had come together as one, it had successfully fought off countless 'cognitive attacks' (aimed at disinformation and discouraging belief in real facts) during the games. In the event of an armed conflict, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the Europeans would take action and flight back, which had always been the case historically.

Regarding attacks on industry and commerce, governments tended to treat this as a 'private sector problem'. Some companies like the global shipping company Maersk had been taking action by investing massively in cybersecurity. But others, especially SMEs, were only slowly awakening to the reality of these risks. Given the scale of the disruptions and damage caused by strikes deep within companies' complex supply chains, the public and private sectors needed to work much more closely together on cyber defences.

One participant from Britain called for the deployment of cyber reservists at company level. Another participant pointed out that, in the Czech Republic, the National Cyber and Information Security Agency was regularly conducting war-gaming exercises with strategic companies to test and improve their response to cyber threats.

Two comments made by participants could serve as general conclusion. Firstly, there was not one answer to societal resilience. Europeans needed to do with what they had and not what they wished for. In this instance, the better was the enemy of the good. Secondly, economic security was a crucial component of resilience. Ultimately, resilience was meaningless if people were unable to pay their bills or felt that government institutions had stopped delivering essential services.

Top to bottom: Nicolas Piau, Anna Lena Hohmann, François Le Goff (Concluding remarks)

Top left: British Ambassador to Germany, Andrew Mitchell (Dinner); **Top right**: Rowan Barnett (Friday sessions)

Bottom left: Norbert Röttgen (Dinner); **Right:** Evie Aspinall (Friday sessions)

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