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Building a European society that combines security and the environment

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At the last NATO Summit on 24 and 25 June, the allied countries pledged to increase their defence spending to 5% of GDP by 2035. In France, on 13 July, Emmanuel Macron detailed the necessary effort, which he set at €3.5 billion from 2026. These budgetary pledges give rise to fears that defence issues will be prioritized. Given that security cannot be guaranteed in a context of increasing degradation of the climate, air quality, water, biodiversity, etc., how can the priorities of military defence and environmental protection be reconciled?

Sylvie Matelly, Director of the Institut Jacques Delors, answers IDDRI's questions in this blog post.

What are the common challenges?

Over the last fifteen years or so, strategic documents produced in Europe and the United States, as well as many other varied studies, have shown that defence stakeholders will have to adapt to climate change, both in terms of the new threats it introduces and in terms of equipment and operations. However, today's security agenda seems to be built in opposition to these issues. The process of strategic, tactical and operational reflection on the revolution in military affairs imposed by climate change, but also by the development of information technologies and the emergence of artificial intelligence, is still incomplete or insufficiently coordinated. However it has been done in the past: after the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s, the logic behind the arms race, based on the accumulation of weapons in order to be better equipped than one's adversary, gave way to peacekeeping missions in zones of conflict and instability, carried out with fewer but more effective weapons. As a result, equipment had to be adapted (the theatres of operation being very different from one another, for example between Eastern Europe and the Iraqi desert), and forces also had to be trained in this new context.

Today, the debate is often structured in binary terms, around the question "climate or defence, what's the priority? ". As a matter of fact, the focus is more on defence, and rearmament in particular, because the war in Ukraine poses an existential threat to Europe and Europeans, which entails necessary 'sacrifices' according to some political leaders. Yet climate change is also an existential threat for Europe, and the energy transition could be an opportunity to strengthen the resilience, and therefore the security, of the European Union.

As for the industrial sector, there are complementarities to be found in terms of investment and innovation between transition and security. For example, sobriety is generally understood as a reduction in CO2 emissions, but it also favours the strategic and operational autonomy of defence equipment: fighter aircraft that consume less hydrocarbons can be more autonomous and less sensitive to energy dependence; this is a strategic advantage that can prove decisive, since wars are also, and perhaps above all, won by good control of supplies. In the same way, investment in infrastructure and the challenges of resilience are more or less the same for the energy transition as they are for defence. We need to convince both the defence industry and environmentalists of this, which means finding a common approach and instruments that highlight the shared challenges.

The need for systemic adaptation

We are faced with the imperative of a systemic adaptation to the challenges posed, which requires an extremely ambitious agenda. It is not just a question of deploying police or military resources in the territories to be defended; defence is also civil, and involves protecting populations against the risks of shortages (energy, water) and guaranteeing (food) sovereignty. On these different aspects, the defence and security agendas and the climate agenda can converge, just as they can in terms of increased needs for education, training, engineers, researchers, etc. A systemic approach to risk is therefore necessary; otherwise, a competition for resources between issues could lead to sub-optimal or even counter-productive trade-offs, with economic (dropout), social (impoverishment), environmental or security impacts. What kind of security is there in Europe, for example, if the most insecure, who are also the most vulnerable to climate risks, cannot be protected? Moreover, such a situation of insecurity would threaten the necessary funding of defence, which it would be difficult to accept.

Challenges for Europe

Competitiveness

For the Institut Jacques Delors, the only scale that can articulate all these challenges is European. The issue of industrial competitiveness is central to the EU's agenda,^{[1](#)} but is it also relevant to the defence industry, and how? The vast majority of companies in this sector have a dual activity (defence and civil).^{[2](#)} Their lack of competitiveness on the “defence” side compared with their American competitors is not due to a lack of innovation, but to the fragmentation and duplication of investment between different Member States (Germany and France in particular), which are facing the same threats and the same security challenges. In an industry where the fixed costs associated with initial investment, particularly in innovation, are high, the size effect comes into full play (as is the case in the US industry), and only long production runs can deliver the savings needed to ensure the competitiveness not only of a company, but of an entire sector. The current fragmentation and resulting duplication are therefore both costly for the European taxpayer, but also a source of reduced competitiveness in an activity where competitiveness and strategic and technological superiority are a clear advantage and a source of security.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty issues are key for the defence industry, throughout the production and value chains. Dependence on raw materials, for example, is both a handicap and a threat. Sober use of resources is therefore part of this sovereignty issue, as is the reindustrialization of Europe, since more local production is a guarantee of security of supply. The dual nature of the companies in this sector clearly shows the extent to which these issues overlap. It may therefore be useful to work on a common agenda combining sovereignty and sustainability.

Financing

The Draghi report highlights the need to find additional financing to meet the EU's needs. The Letta report proposes further market integration, including the completion of the union of the savings and investment markets. The progress, initiatives and investments made in this direction will attract additional funding, for defence for example. Enrico Letta emphasizes the large volume of European savings, but at the same time notes that they are being reinvested in the United States, including in companies that will ultimately buy up European defence companies.

For the defence lobbies (sometimes referred to as the ‘military-industrial complex’), the funding they now enjoy after years of depletion must be used to rebuild a strong European defence sector. So much so that the climate issue is not the priority.^{[3](#)}

Towards a whole-of-society project

A narrative needs to be built for a European economy and society that can both ensure security and adapt to climate change. The defence industry and the armed forces have everything to gain by working pragmatically on a global, systemic project. It is a project for society that citizens—who do not envisage themselves in a battle tank—need in order to accept the efforts required. The European Union needs a social project if it is to combat climate change and ensure its security at the same time.

^{[1](#)}

The [Letta report](#) on the future of the single market and the [Draghi report](#) on competitiveness have had a major influence on the debates leading up to the European elections in 2024.

^{[2](#)}

This is the case of Airbus, for example, in the aeronautics sector.

3

As illustrated by the numerous attacks on various subjects such as green taxonomy and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).