

Club of Three lunchtime discussion with Florence Parly Residence of the British Ambassador

11 February 2020, Paris

On 11 February, the Club of Three held a lunchtime discussion with the French Defence Minister Florence Parly on the topic of European defence and security. It was the latest in a series of “fireside chats” with senior government figures from France, Germany and the UK, and followed a discussion with Jens Spahn in Berlin on Germany’s role in Europe in years to come.

Florence Parly was appointed Minister for the Armed Forces in June 2017. Before joining Édouard Philippe’s government, she had held several senior positions in the business sector, notably at French railway company SNCF.

The meeting, hosted at the residence of the British Ambassador in Paris, took place shortly after Brexit had taken effect on 31 January and just a few days after an important speech by President Macron on France’s defence and deterrent strategy at the École Militaire. It involved some 30 senior figures from our three countries in the field of defence and security.

During her keynote address, Ms Parly emphasised that the Franco-German-British relationship had become crucial post-Brexit. France had strong commitments vis-à-vis Britain – via the Lancaster House treaties for instance – and with Germany through the Élysée and Aachen treaties, but real balance required the involvement of three interlocutors rather than two. Contacts at all levels, inside and outside of government, were vital to help foster this triangular relationship.

During this new European chapter that had begun with Brexit, it was France’s intention to ensure that its destiny would remain closely associated with that of the UK. As the 10-year anniversary of the Lancaster House treaties approached, France hoped to use this occasion to further strengthen its military cooperation with Britain: a whole menu of far-reaching proposals was being considered.

As far as Germany was concerned, recent progress had been made on military equipment programmes after months of intense negotiations. Alongside official talks, France was keen to have a dialogue with all the main political parties (CDU, SPD and Greens) in order to explain the importance of these programmes and ensure that they received sufficient support in the German Bundestag.

Despite Brexit, France, Germany and the UK had a busy agenda ahead and Madame Parly highlighted three areas in which they could closely cooperate: terrorism, strategic stability, and security in the Gulf region.

On terrorism, the three countries were operating in the Middle East but with different approaches. The challenge they had in common was a possible US withdrawal from the region. Twice already they had intervened to halt this dynamic, and with Presidential elections approaching in America, they had to seriously consider the likelihood that a withdraw of US troops might actually happen – much as they would prefer this not to be the case.

The Sahel was a very good example of Franco-German-British solidarity in action. France had received significant support from Germany and the UK in the fight against terrorism in Western Africa. Her hope was that they would at some point join the French-led special operations taskforce Takuba.

On strategic stability, Europeans were starting to wake up to the new geopolitical landscape, with China becoming a major military power, Russia continuing to leverage its military for aims that were not always commendable, and the US increasingly looking to the East. There was a sense that arms control treaties were collapsing, and that Europe was very exposed to the threats of missiles. If there was going to be a successor to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, Europeans should be among the signatories.

More generally, Europeans needed to develop their own strategic culture and redefine the way they saw their own security.

On the issue of the nuclear deterrent in particular, France wanted to give their own nuclear capacity a European dimension by involving other countries, for instance through a participation in nuclear exercises. This was one of the key messages of President Macron's speech at the École Militaire.

Regarding the security in the Gulf region, it was important that France, Germany and the UK continued to speak more or less with one voice, and chart their own way by offering a voice of moderation with regard to President Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran. The three countries had shown that they were also able to apply pressure and propose an alternative solution when the JCPOA's dispute resolution mechanism was activated.

Questions were asked about the EU-NATO relationship and whether synergies could be found. France's view was that, far from aiming to replace NATO, Europe's efforts to strengthen its capabilities would increase its efficiency. NATO could also be a vehicle to help the Europeans keep the US involved. In relation to this, France was of the opinion that President Trump's NATO-

Middle East idea, also called 'NATOME', was worth considering. One area in which NATO could be particularly useful was the training of local forces in the Middle East and perhaps in the Sahel too.

One concern vis-à-vis US demands for great European investment in defence was that these investments would be made mainly in US military equipment, which would hinder the development of European defence industries with sufficient autonomy and the right level of technological innovation.

As far as the proposed European Security Council (ESC) was concerned, not everyone in Europe seemed convinced that this type of inter-governmental mechanism with both EU and non-EU members was the right way forward. Although the idea had received support from high profile politicians, for instance Jens Spahn, some feared that the ESC would rival the EU and preferred the more informal E3 cooperation format instead. But she underlined for this group that the ESC was President Macron's solution to ensure Britain's continued contribution to the security and stability of Europe after Brexit. The aim was to complement the already existing European Intervention Initiative (EI2) whose objectives were mainly operational, by adding a strategic layer to Europe's new security architecture.

In answer to a question about whether the Greens in Germany, who looked likely to play a role in the next German government, could be assimilated into the European security establishment, Madame Parly argued that this was not only desirable but necessary. Referring to her remarks about creating a shared security culture, she recalled the robust role that the Greens had played in European defence and security when in coalition with the SPD almost a generation ago.