

Focus: State of the European Union speech – Von der Leyen ^{EN}

On September 15th, Ursula Von Der Leyen, the EU Commission president, delivered a speech on “The State of the European Union”. It is a disposition from the Lisbon Treaty, requiring that the EU commission president should, every year, in front of the EU Parliament, draw conclusions of the Commission’s previous year actions and present guidelines for the year to come.

Among many topics, like the pandemic and associated measures (both sanitary and economic), she delivered some defence and security related elements.

First, looking back on the Afghanistan withdrawal, Mrs. Von Der Leyen identified a need to understand the “troubling” reasons of the debacle, to be tackled with honesty within NATO. To that end, she will be working with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on a new EU-NATO declaration by the end of the year.

Second, she stated that the EU should do more for its security, for three reasons:

- The need to provide stability in its neighbourhood, and in various other regions
- The fact that the nature of the threats are evolving rapidly
- The EU is a unique security provider: it should be able to be present where NATO or UN will not.

Third, she stated that although a European Defence ecosystem is currently being built, what is really needed is “the European Defence Union”. Europe is not short of equipment or structures like battlegroups, but is of political will. Once renewed, Mrs. Von Der Leyen identifies three concrete reachable achievements:

- Build the foundations for collective decision-making, based on sharing intelligence to increase situation awareness. This could lead to the creation of a Joint Situational Awareness Centre
- Improve interoperability among Member States
- Tackle the cyber issue: she calls for a European Cyber Defence Policy, with a new European Cyber Resilience Act.

As for the Strategic Compass, due to be agreed during the French EU Council presidency, she declared that she will convene with French President Emmanuel Macron a Summit on European Defence.

European Union military cooperation and external operations ^{SW FR FR EN}

Takuba Task-Force: the discussions of the Malian government with the Russian militia Wagner create tensions between the participants

The Takuba Task Force gathers 6 partners alongside France to help support Mali and its neighbours in their fight against terrorism in the region: Estonia, Italy, Denmark, Czech Republic, Greece and Sweden. Most of them have sent special forces to fight with the Malian army and train them.

Sweden announced on September 16th that they will take the direction of the force, currently held by France, from November 2021 to February 2022, a premiere that is an additional step towards a better European integration.

However, the European common front could crumble on another recent event. As France decided in June to reduce the format of their current parallel national operation, Barkhane, to transfer some duties to a more European force like Takuba, the Malian government has made contact with the Russian militia Wagner. It eventually confirmed what was at first a rumor, causing some troubles among the European allies, especially Estonia. Paris threatened of an early withdrawal, and the Estonian Minister of Defence, Kalle Laanet, said that their forces could also leave the country if the militia was operating there, as the country has tense relations with Russia. Tchad also expressed their worries as what is seen as a foreign interference. Russia denies being linked with this private society, but the country was a strong partner of Mali when it gained its independence in 1961 and remains so.

The EU officially reacts to Ghostwriter cyberattacks and urge Russia to a responsible behaviour

The EU diplomacy, through its High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell, issued a declaration to condemn the cyberattacks named as Ghostwriter and detected in 2020. They targeted several Member States officials, especially in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and more recently Germany.

Russia is officially pointed at by the declaration, and is “urged to adhere to the norms of responsible State behaviour in cyberspace”. Russia did not officially react or deny.

Second focus: the German federal elections in Bundestag [EN](#) [EN](#) [FR](#)

Germany was called to the urns last Sunday, on September 26th, to vote for the Bundestag parliamentarians and therefore for the next chancellor. After 16 years of undisputed rule, Angela Merkel is indeed leaving her seat, opening a period of uncertainty concerning Germany's political and geopolitical future positions.

Latest results, still not final, show a very fragmented political landscape: CDU/CSU, Merkel's party, and the Social-democrats SPD are very close around 25%, followed by the Greens at 15% and the liberal FDP at 11.5%. Consistent with the German system, the main parties now have to form a coalition to obtain the majority needed to rule. Three main options are on the table: either SPD and CDU/CSU agree to work together, or one of them allies with both the Greens and FDP. The coalition could be unknown for weeks.

On defence topics, CDU/CSU and FDP are aligned and pushing forward, for external operations or defence projects. They however have a less firm position regarding China and Russia. SPD is also quite supportive of an active position, except for the 2% GDP rule in defence expenses and nuclear topics. The last potential partner, the Greens, have however traditionally voted against most deployments in the last sessions, relying more on the United States and the transatlantic link. But recent manifestos show they support EU integration if properly controlled, like the Bundestag does for German national defence-related actions.

International relations [EN](#) [EN](#) [EN](#) [FR](#)

The EU Indo-Pacific strategy and the AUKUS alliance

The EU presented on September 16th the Union's strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. This reflection justifies the need for such a strategy by the significance of the region, globally (60% of the world's population, of global GDP) and for the EU (2nd largest export destination, and 2nd biggest market). It is also the place of many coming challenges, from climate change to security and rule of law. Given the two region's interdependency, the EU finds it essential to reinforce their cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners, for Europe's security.

Security and defence is one of the seven identified "priority areas". Concretely, the EU focuses on maritime aspects, seeking to conduct more joint exercises and port calls with Indo-Pacific partners, and to extend Member States naval deployments in the region. The second naval pillar is the promotion of maritime security in the Western Indian ocean, which faces many piracy threats. Beyond naval issues, the last axis is the broadening of partnerships, mainly through participating in local groups such as ASEAN Defence ministers' meetings, and extending the Framework Participation Agreements with other countries to include them in EU CSDP missions or operations. Last, with less concrete actions, the EU strategy also identifies new security challenges like cybersecurity as additional cooperation domains.

However, the day before, quite a diplomatic crisis occurred as the United States announced the creation of an alliance with Australia and Great Britain in the same region, named "AUKUS", which includes providing Australia with new nuclear-propelled submarines. It puts notably France at bay, because the country had signed in 2016 a very expensive contract with Australia to provide them diesel-propelled machines. It has resulted in a confidence crisis between the two allied countries, as well as with the United States.

France has indeed reacted very strongly to the breaking of the contract, seen as a betrayal from both the United States and Australia, as they have never been informed of any ongoing negotiations. French Foreign Affairs minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called it a "stab in the back" that shouldn't be done between allies, and was not understandable given that France was supportive of the American "pivot to Asia" strategy. He called back its ambassador in Washington and in Australia, a first in the nation's history. Since then, French President Macron and Joe Biden called each other and agreed to launch a reconciliation path. In all the process, Great-Britain involvement was seen by France as only opportunism.

What could have been seen as only a French problem had however some repercussions on the EU level. Josep Borrell called for putting in place a permanent communication system so that it cannot occur again, and for the recognition by the United States that the EU should build a military force that can act complementary to NATO.

Some European countries have already engaged in a national Indo-Pacific strategy and conduct military acts of presence, like France with a submarine sailing in the South China sea beginning of 2021, or the German Bayern frigate currently stopped in Perth harbour.