

Club of Three fireside chat with Lord Robertson of Port Ellen – followed by panel discussion on Ukraine and European defence

French residence, London

Tuesday 18 March 2025

In March, the Club of Three organised a fireside chat with Lord Robertson of Port Ellen who is leading the UK's Strategic Defence Review. Lord Robertson, a Labour peer, is a former British Defence Secretary and NATO General Secretary. The event was hosted by H el ene Duch ene, French Ambassador to the UK, at her residence in London.

The fireside chat was followed by a panel discussion on Ukraine and European defence chaired by Dr. Ruth Harris, Director Defence & Security at RAND Europe, with Philippe Errera (Executive Vice President, International and Public Affairs, Safran), Dr. Stefanie Babst (Senior Associate Fellow, European Leadership Network), and Professor Malcolm Chalmers, Deputy Director General of RUSI) as main speakers.

Some 50 senior figures from business and diplomacy and defence experts from France, Germany, the UK and other European countries participated in the meeting, which was held on 18 March as negotiations took place on a ceasefire between the U.S, Ukraine and Russia – following the launch of the idea of a ‘coalition of the willing’ at a summit of Western leaders hosted by the British Prime Minister at Lancaster House on 2 March.

Plans for a future Western, and primarily European, peacekeeping force in Ukraine were still unclear. European leaders had committed to providing troops and aircraft to keep the peace, but some kind of support from the U.S, or ‘backstop’, was seen as essential to deter Russian provocations or even attacks against this force – especially for countries like Germany. However, some participants believed that a U.S backstop was unlikely.

According to a French participant who had just returned from Washington D.C, the U.S administration viewed alliances as a burden rather than an asset. The EU in particular was seen as an economic adversary: some Americans even believed in an ideological and strategic convergence with Russia. The Europeans needed to be aware of the fundamental nature of this challenge from the U.S. Minimising it would be a serious mistake.

In this difficult moment of radical transformation for transatlantic systems that had for decades been profoundly integrated, questions now had to be asked about the point at which Europe might find itself on its own against Russia. One participant offered the view that the U.S was more likely to progressively run down its support of Ukraine and European defence, although there was a possibility that President Trump would lose

interest in brokering an agreement between Ukraine and Russia, and move on to other issues of higher importance to his administration if negotiations dragged on for too long.

It was in Europe's interest to sustain the relationship with the U.S, even on a low flame, and to do its utmost to salvage what could be maintained in place as some U.S support was always better than none at all.

It remained to be seen whether an American general would replace the outgoing head of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe this summer, in line with NATO tradition, or whether the U.S administration would vacate this position. One participant stressed that President Trump could yet, like other U.S administrations before (Republican or Democrat), eventually see the advantages of NATO for the Americans.

NATO was a resilient organisation that had gone through major crises before, including France's withdrawal from NATO's military structure in the 1960s. If the U.S was to leave NATO altogether, which was not believed to be a serious possibility, the Atlantic Alliance would find a way of reconfiguring itself. It was currently led by a very experienced General Secretary.

The 'coalition of the willing' was a good initiative on the part of the Europeans, but they still lacked a clear sense of purpose and strategy for confronting Vladimir Putin's Russia. The Churchillian moment that many had hoped for in February 2022 had not materialised, in part because Europeans feared a direct confrontation with Russia. Policy was still driven by what they were not prepared to do rather than what needed to be done. Europe must project confidence. It had the assets and resources to stand up to Russia, even in the worse case scenario of a U.S withdrawal.

Given the real risk of a wider conflict in 5-10 years – and it was even conceivable that this coalition of the willing could find itself in a situation of direct conflict this year – the Europeans would have to remain dependent on U.S equipment for the time being. But in the longer term, there were powerful arguments for significantly reducing reliance on American systems. All Europeans could see this now.

The forthcoming EU White Paper on European defence represented a major step toward strengthening European defence capabilities. However, many Europeans wanted to see support for an expanded defence industry, not just EU-based, in order to fully combine all capabilities and reflect the highly integrated nature of value chains across Europe.

Other important factors included the vote in the Bundestag that day to increase permissible borrowing limits in Germany, paving the way for substantial investment in defence, and the upcoming Strategic Defence Review (SDR) in Britain. The SDR's

conclusions were not yet available but it was described at the meeting as “transformative”, with the intention of “impressing friends and intimidating enemies”.

On nuclear issues, France’s offer to discuss how EU partners could benefit from the French nuclear deterrent was welcome, but the proposal raised several serious questions including the issue of the chain of command. The fact that a dialogue was taking place between France and Germany about a European nuclear umbrella was highly significant, even if this type of arrangement could not be a substitute for the American umbrella provided under NATO.

The UK nuclear deterrent was grounded in longstanding technology-sharing with the U.S. But it was operationally independent, already assigned to NATO and the warheads were British. It would be enormously difficult for the UK to design its own delivery system in place of Trident, but it was thinkable. Sub-strategic nuclear weapons represented an important area where France and the UK could potentially cooperate more closely. One British participant added that, considering the global scale of Europe’s nuclear armoury with that of Russia, China, and North Korea combined, Europe did not have enough nuclear weapons to tackle the Russian threat. But more broadly, there was at least now an active discussion of the nuclear defence of Europe in terms that would have seemed unthinkable even six months ago.