

<p><b>Kabinet van de Vice-Eerste Minister en Minister van Landsverdediging</b></p> <p>Lambermontstraat 8 1000 Brussel Tel: +32(0)2 550 28 11</p>		<p><b>Cabinet du Vice-Premier Ministre et Ministre de la Défense</b></p> <p>Rue Lambermont 8 1000 Bruxelles Tel: +32(0)2 550 28 11</p>
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**European Defence Matters – Annual EDA Conference**

**Thursday March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

**(Check against delivery)**

**Mrs. Claude-France Arnould, Chief Executive of the European  
Defence Agency,**

**Excellences, Distinguished members of the international  
defense and security community,**

**Admirals, Generals, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**This edition of the annual EDA conference is taking place at a  
very special moment. We are at a crossroads and I dare say  
most of us will look back on the European Council of  
December 2013 with optimism, yet a renewed sense of realism  
as we still have a long way ahead of us. More than ever  
before, we must now focus our unfettered attention on the  
future and the role the European Union and NATO are to**

play as we are faced with numerous complex and modern challenges.

As to the European Council, I would once again like to welcome the fact that “Defence” was a central theme on the agenda. This is a powerful political signal in its own right, although nobody in this room would have objected against more time being devoted to this crucial topic. Now, it is up to us to guarantee an adequate follow-up and realize the important taskings bestowed upon the Union’s various institutions, the European Defence Agency in particular.

So far for the good news....

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, let us be perfectly honest. I am sure most of you will share my opinion that the steps we have taken so far are simply not adequate to compensate for the ongoing loss of defence capabilities. Let us imagine a perfect world for a moment. Tomorrow, we wake up to see that all existing Pooling & Sharing projects have been realized to the fullest of their extent.

I know, quite a bit of wishful thinking but just bear with me on this one. This utopian scenario would cover but a fraction of the implemented and looming defence expenditure cuts of the future. Even if we have the audacity to assume that more money will be invested into defence capabilities when the economic climate in Europe improves, we, politicians in the Member States and experts in the institutions alike, must realize that we must go to far greater lengths to remedy the existing shortfalls.

This is exactly why I fully endorse the EDA's Policy Framework to foster more and systematic long term defence cooperation. After the Ghent framework of 2010 and last year's European Council, this is to be a new milestone which holds the greatest promise to deliver another much-needed impetus to European defence cooperation. As Mme Arnould stated during last year's conference: "stop talking cooperation, just do it". I could not have delivered this message any better.

**It is now up to the policy makers in the Member States, regardless of their countries' size, to muster the political courage and sustained political support to alleviate the necessary military capacities above the national level and dispense national sovereignty concerns which are becoming increasingly and utterly irrelevant in the years ahead.**

**Equally important is the complementarity between the EU and NATO. Both organizations are a "bloc of shared values" and defend the same interests. It is an often repeated creed but it still holds: duplication with NATO is to be avoided. Both institutions also share similar challenges for the future. I consider diverging threat perceptions amongst member states one of the greatest and most urgent obstacles to overcome in the near future. A reinvigorated and strong European vision on which foreign policy posture the Union is to assume and which military capabilities it needs to credibly underpin its diplomatic efforts is therefore at hand.**

**This is why I conclude that Europe needs a clear and present political will by its leaders to support our common endeavors**

lest the Union drifts farther away from the center of the global geopolitical chessboard. Of course, we all know that the average European citizen loses little sleep over security matters, largely thanks to the EU and NATO laying the foundations for 65 years of peace and prosperity. Mali or the Central African Republic are little known and faraway places to many European citizens and although they were appalled by the Syrian regime's crimes against humanity, only few contemplated on the security consequences these conflicts could have at home. But to those who remain in doubt about how much "defence matters", it suffices to take a look on the map and notice that the political turmoil in Ukraine is taking place at our borders. This political turmoil has seen the west diametrically opposed to Russia in a way unseen since the days of the Cold War. In addition, one cannot help but consider the exponentially rising expenditure in capabilities, research & development by Russia and China.

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By the way, more and more academics are openly thinking on how Europe can survive in the "Asian century"....

**So, ladies and gentlemen. Let's get to work. Time is of the essence and the world will not wait. I will conclude here and I am looking forward to your questions.**

**Thank you for your attention.**

*Pieter De Crem*

*Deputy Prime Minister*

*Minister of Defence*