

# HOLGER MEY

Vice President of Advanced Concepts Airbus Defence and Space

**Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Executive Chairman of Ifri and the WPC**

Now, without any illusions, I hand the floor over to Holger Mey.

You are a great technology expert and we have covered a number of aspects of technology over the last three days in various sessions, so I am sure you have something new to tell us.

## **Holger Mey**

Let us see, but I also want to pick up the title, the end of illusions. Some years ago, after 2014 and the annexation of Crimea, I had a dinner with some parliamentarians, including from the Foreign Policy Committee in the German parliament. One deputy said that they were all disappointed in Putin and disillusioned about Russia. My spontaneous reaction to that was that you can only be disillusioned if you had illusions in the first place and I wonder how one can have illusions about Russia. It is probably a good recommendation for your private life, too, if you do not want to be disillusioned do not have illusions in the first place. On February 24 this year, our Foreign Minister, Baerbock, said in the earlier morning that we had all woken up in a new world, and I wonder in which world she was living before, probably in a world of illusions and wishful thinking. Particularly in the Green Party they have had a steep learning curve, as you might have observed. I think one of the key problems was a lack of understanding of the continuous role of military power in international relations. There is so much talk, and particularly in my country, about soft power, civil power, etc., but if one takes three generic scenarios about possible developments in Russia: (1) If Russia falls apart, I think we will need a lot of forces to somehow manage the chaos in the East. (2) If Russia regains strength and becomes confrontational and antagonistic to the West, we will need lots of forces for containment and deterrence. We did that during the Cold War quite successfully, and a Cold War is a million times better than a hot war so nothing wrong with that, but it requires a lot of military power. (3) My preferred scenario is that Russia one day becomes a friend and partner to the West, and I say that then we need a lot of military power and people look at me and ask why, and I say because we need to be a strong partner of Russia and never ever be a weak partner of Russia. I think that those who understand that best are our Eastern European friends and perhaps also in the North, referring to Finland. I think during the Cold War we were all blaming Finland for Finlandization, probably a sort of appeasement politics, but I think they understood that it does not make sense to kick the Russian bear into whatever every second day. But every other second day, the Finns reminded the Russians that during the Winter War there were 10 dead Russians for one dead Finn, and they probably should not try that again. I think this is exactly how to talk with Russia, speak friendly and carry a big stick. I do not blame the German governments for seeking cooperation with Russia, but I blame them for not doing it from a

position of military strength. I do not blame them for buying cheap gas from Russia, but I blame them for allowing themselves to become so dependent on it. I think that militarily speaking the problem is about never putting all your eggs in one basket.

I would interpret history as a combination of continuity and change and with the end of the Cold War, of course, it was not the end of history, to the contrary, history was back, as we saw on the Balkans. Basically, we know very well from history that everything that happens today is not very surprising, and if you read about the Peloponnesian War it actually looks like current day to day politics. In a sense, if you take continuity and change, in one way we can refer to the Roman Empire plus cyber. Yes, there is something new like nuclear weapons, something new in the tech sector like nanotechnology, biotechnology, robotics, Artificial Intelligence. My military friends once said to me: "Why should the Russians ever attack with tanks and artillery? They can do it with cyber." Of course, they use cyber, but they also use tanks and artillery. I think we forgot about worst-case analysis. However, worst-case analysis seems to be pretty sound to adopt. Wonderful if it turns out to be better, but better if one is prepared for the worst. Also, most of the younger officers who write for military journals and magazines often begin their article with "we are the army, the air force, the navy" and systematically prepare for the most likely scenarios. I think this is a big mistake, because one should prepare for risk, and risk is the combination or the product of likelihood times damage level. And one must not overlook the low-probability high-impact scenarios. Particularly in Germany, I think we completely failed to do that, as you see when we started dismantling our military and are now having to rebuild it. You do not have a fire insurance because it is very likely that your house will burn down, it is because of the consequences, and that is what we need to keep in mind. We have prepared our armed forces to be efficient for peace time and unfortunately forgot to prepare them to be effective for war time. Believe it or not, the German armed forces have an ammunition supply for two days of war and then it is over.

This is quite sad and so I would submit that this is, indeed, a world of illusion that has to be over now. Like 2000 years ago when we had no democracies but republics, during long peace time periods they never paid enough for defense and then they later paid with money and blood.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

Thank you, Holger. Going back to our own past when we were working together with Albert Wohlstetter on some war scenarios in the eighties. It was after the first oil shock and in those days the Americans, like the Europeans, were discussing the scenario of what we used to call the one and a half war. That was the idea of having to conduct a major confrontation with the Soviet Union, plus regional wars. In those scenarios that was in the Middle East after the first and second oil shocks. The situation is different today, but I have the following question. You mentioned as one possibility the collapse of the Russian Federation, this was actually about to take place in the nineties, and this was why the Russians wanted a strong man in power. Suppose this scenario happens again as a result of one of the possible scenarios with the continuation of this war. Russia could fall apart either from within, as the Soviet Union fell in 1991. Or it could fall apart as a result of the extension of the war and from the Russian viewpoint, Putin tries to justify his invasion by the fact that he felt threatened by increasing Western activities in Ukraine. Now, if there is a scenario like that, in your judgement do you not think there could be a case where the Kremlin could consider that the vital interests of Russia are at

stake and from their viewpoint that could justify resorting to nuclear weapons? I am talking about a scenario that is very different from the ones that have been discussed in the last few weeks.

### **Holger Mey**

First of all, let me say that the reason why I had these entirely generic scenarios is because I wanted to show that no matter what happens, it has to do with military power, and it is very sensible to have military power as an element in international relations. If I was advising the planners and armed forces, I would say plan in a way that the result is largely insensitive to huge assumption variations. Perhaps it is going to be a different enemy than you thought, he might be stronger than you thought, have weapons you did not know he has, allies you did not realize he gets along with, tactics and methods that are against international law, but they employ them anyway. One has to prepare for all these things, soldiers always act into the unknown and they are trained for that and need the mental furniture for that. One even cannot exclude that the opponent uses nuclear weapons. I do not know how likely it is, but we better prepare for one cannot be excluded, even if not very likely. Even better: the better prepared we are, the less likely that it would happen. One of the scenarios – probably the most important scenario – we were looking at in the Cold War and today is that the Russians want to conquer and not to destroy. What if this assumption is wrong? What if they do not want to conquer, but just to destroy and to get rid of their opponent. I think Putin made that very clear, if Ukraine wants to become a member of NATO, there will not be any Ukraine. For me it was absolutely beyond any doubt that if Ukraine moves closer to the West, Russia will attack. At the time, I had to admit I could be wrong but now I know I was not. The question is if we could have prepared differently and I think we could, and should, have. In particular, Germany could have sent 70 or more Panzer Howitzer 2000s to Ukraine rather than seven, if we had enough but we did not have enough. We could have been prepared differently but we did not. We should have looked at worst-case scenarios and that must not exclude the use of nuclear weapons. Once again, despite the question of likelihood, it is the typical low-probability high-impact scenario.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

Thank you very much. Talking about the end of illusions, maybe the most profound interpretation of this is to remember that history is indeed tragic.