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ENHANCING CRISIS MANAGEMENT AMID
RISING COMPETITION
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MINISTER OF THE ARMED FORCES, FRANCE

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Dear friends, it is an honour to be in front of you today in Singapore. I would like to commend the Singapore authorities and thank them for the way they have welcomed us. And also a warm thank you for the organisers of this indispensable meeting. And thank you very much to John as well, who is enough of a friend to facilitate this roundtable. Last year, indeed, I had to skip this meeting to get €413 billion for the French defence, and I had missed the meeting, so I hope you will accept my apologies.

Improving crisis management with increasing competition: I know for a fact that when speaking, most speakers forget about the main topic and speak about something different. But if you allow me, I will try and stop for a few minutes on the topic you have picked for today. It is not a current one and I think it feeds lots of worries. Maybe, John, you could have been even more careful by suggesting that in this very competitive context we are able not to hinder what already exists when it comes to crisis management. And if I were to go for a bit of banter, having the French Minister of the Armed Forces a few days before the Olympic Games in Paris is a challenge in and of itself because we have something that is getting organised in a difficult international context but with security challenges that still exist.

When I was giving some thought as to what I wanted to say today, the first challenge of the times we are experiencing is selfishness. Selfishness is an easy trait to get for human beings. We are experiencing tough times. Conflicts are more numerous and the mechanisms we already have were designed when the world was more or less at peace. We had more time, we had more money to invest to be better trained and better prepared. And when the situation is getting tougher, there is a reflex in people that is becoming more national and forgetting about the mechanisms. And I am having a look at Josep Borrell who is here, and my counterpart from the Netherlands. It has been an actual challenge, from COVID to the war in Ukraine, to protect unity amongst European countries, but beyond this making sure that the European political project is giving some results and make sure that we do not get to close our minds. We have managed to do so but it has been a challenge.

And in the Indo-Pacific, this is also a challenge when it comes to humanitarian disasters. Let me remind you of what happened in Vanuatu, in Tonga. Let us not forget our friends from Papua New Guinea who are facing a terrible, terrible disaster. And even though competition and wars are coming back, everything that is connected to rising sea levels and climate change in general and civil security that is being challenged, these are challenges that we have in front of us. And no matter our political parties, no matter our own convictions, our populations want us to bring out results, which is why President Macron decided to send jets, an A400M from our overseas territory, to get some humanitarian goods to Papua New Guinea. We have to make sure that we make these mechanisms more sustainable for the future. And you will see in the future that very punctual decisions we made are going to become more sustainable and are going to become mechanisms.

The second risk is selfishness, but selfishness used as a strategy, a strategy that is out in the open and it relies on this principle: considering there is increasing competition, let us not rely on partnerships anymore. And one country, because of its culture, will make sure never to give this up, and it is France, on a very precise topic: it is the fight against terrorism. And I want to commend my predecessor, Florence Parly, who is in the room. The 2015 terrorist attack, the fight against terrorism in the Levant, in the Sahel, in Afghanistan – it is clear we have terrorist groups that are reorganising themselves in a more international jihadist structure. And from 9/11 to today, there is something we have made a lot of headways on: it is the interconnections between intelligence services. And no matter interferences, no matter the differences that we can witness at the UN General Assembly when it comes to the economy or any other topic, there is one topic that shows an actual partnership of all countries: it is the fight against terrorism. However, now one needs to ask themselves whether these partnerships through terrorism are still as strong as they used to be.

France as a country has been heavily criticised because it was in touch with Moscow and with Russian authorities because of the terrorist attacks that were perpetrated at the Crocus City Hall. However, the French Intelligence Services did have elements that would be an element of proof to get the truth about the attacks. And we have decided, despite the strong differences – to say the least – that we have with Vladimir Putin, to give to the Russian Federation the information we had about the terrorist attack. And this is one very practical example for this roundtable of a partnership that we can have with increasing competition: terrorism, the fight against organised crime.

President, Your Excellency, I was listening to you, illegal fishing: that is an actual blight in the Northern Pacific but also in the South Pacific. We will not be able to fight against illegal fishing and what is going on at sea if we do not work together at a very high level. Same goes for drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human trafficking. All that we do to fight against this needs to be protected. And let us not be selfish with technological jumps. Technology is being developed as we speak, and with the topic that was picked for today, artificial intelligence in the future will mean solutions for decision-makers but also for NGOs [non-governmental organisations] and firms, large companies, solutions and tools to be able to keep moving forward. States, because of what is going on at the moment, should not hinder partnerships and show a lack of generosity. I am speaking for France right now but I am pretty sure that my European counterparts in the room do agree. Our road map has not changed. Fighting against selfishness was my first point, but also fighting against a form of selfishness that would be getting back to the past. That would be an actual disaster.

Third risk, to keep working on the proposal that was given to us. Dear John, we do not have an obligation to get used to this increasing competition. Of course, I am a French minister, and very fond of General De Gaulle at that, who is speaking, but the alignment, the bloc theory and a world that works that way is not unavoidable. We can avoid this situation, and I think that the Shangri-La Dialogue is participating in this, but also with the conversations, the more private ones, that are happening at all the floors in this hotel. However, the Cold War is over and now this idea of blocs that is moving towards the North Pacific – we are a country of the Pacific with our overseas territories. We are a member of the Security Council of the UN. We know for a fact that blocs opposing themselves is not a solution. So it is our responsibility to find avenues and new pathways to fight against this logic.

And I know that I have gone over time, but let us not try and replace what international organisations do. What ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] is doing is moving the right way. However, diplomacy is not enough. We need to have very practical ways to make sure we keep these multilateral organisations alive, which is why our French Navy is involved with a lot of ships, a lot of people, a lot of technical steps. The same goes for humanitarian mechanisms, making sure that humanitarian law is abided by. In the Red Sea, we were mentioning maritime security from a very theoretical standpoint. We were maybe thinking about one given sea and realise that it happens in the Red Sea; and now Europe is looking at the Indo-Pacific region, with war navies that now have to act in self-defence to defend trade ships. If we want a better world, we need to make sure that international law is implemented. This also works for UNIFIL [United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon] at the Lebanese border, where you have French forces working under a UN mandate where we are trying to de-escalate the situation.

If I were to sum up what I have just said, let us not accept any double standards. This will be my conclusion. As for crisis management with an increasingly serious crisis, the solution is in international law, and the fact that double standards are not to be accepted is absolutely key. You had a very good roundtable about nuclear proliferation. Our South Korean colleague will be taking the floor in a few minutes, and I think that nuclear powers have a special responsibility in the fight against proliferation. I am saying so as a nuclear country. Our American and British friends know so.

Our Russian and Chinese friends know so as well. They know that proliferation in North Korea is also a matter of concern. No double standards in international law. I could have spoken about Gaza and a number of topics but this is my contribution for the topic you have chosen for today.

Sir John Chipman, Executive Chairman, IISS

Thank you very much for addressing at speed such a wide array of issues. There are so many things we could pick out from your remarks, but I thought it was interesting you essentially ended with a reflection on the lack of active arms-control arrangements, whether in the North Atlantic theatre, the Greater Middle East theatre or indeed the Indo-Pacific. That so-called Cold War habit of regular arms control has entirely dissipated from our lexicon and our activity. And reviving an arms-control activity relevant to this region and indeed others, I think, will be one of the tasks for effective crisis management.