France's Diplomatic Future in a Shifting World

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Interview Didier le Bret – transcription

Participants: Didier le Bret (interviewee) and EPIS x Andalus Committee (interviewers)

[Theodor Himmel, EPIS Chairman]: Monsieur le Bret, thank you very much for having us; the EPIS Think Tank for foreign affairs and security policy, and with me today is Anas, who can also say something about his think tank.

[Anas, Andalus Committee]: Anas, from the Andalus Committee, a think tank specialised in the Global South.

[Theodor Himmel, EPIS Chairman]: And together we came across you some time ago in some panels and met at dejeuners diplomatiques, and thus we thought that you, Monsieur le Bret, were an interesting person to talk to due to your career in diplomacy and security, and therefore we would like to start this interview by asking you to **tell us a bit more about yourself**.

[Didier le Bret]: I started my diplomatic career in the early 1990s, a quite challenging historical period due to the Soviet Bloc falling apart, and I was basically a diplomat specialised in the former Soviet Union and eastern European countries. I speak Russian, even though I do not have that many opportunities to practice it nowadays. I spent almost 10 years back and forth between Paris and Russia (late 1980s/ beginning of the Perestroika until the end of the 1990s) and these 10 years were truly critical for many reasons, but mainly because that was the short window of democracy and openness that gave us the hope that a Russia might materialise. But, unfortunately, that was not the case. Thus, I spent 10 years truly dedicated to this evolution in the European continent.

And then I started working on global issues in the French Mission to the United Nations. I was the Human Rights and Humanitarian Representative, and I was dealing mainly with all major international gatherings and summits. I was responsible for all of the human rights issues. I was also the focal point for France on mine action (fight against mines/landmines). These were newer issues that I started to deal with linked to the UN problematics and development. Upon my return to Paris, I began covering the field of aids and development, to then be posted in Dakar, where I served as Chief of the French Cooperation (early 2000s). I returned to Paris again and kept working in this field. In 2010, I was posted as a French Ambassador to Haiti, a critical period of my life as I was posted there three months before the earthquakes that took more than 200,000 lives in Haiti. I spent almost four years in Haiti, and then returned to Paris as I was appointed Director of the Crisis and Support Center of the French ministry of Foreign Affairs. I eventually switched from the local-national crisis section to the international crisis section. This made me deal concomitantly with security issues, since as you may know the Director of the Crisis Center is responsible for many security issues regarding French citizens overseas (at that time there were many French hostages throughout the world, mainly in Africa). Thus, I had to deal with various sensitive issues and getting familiar with the security dimension. Finally, I was asked to join President François Hollande for two years. I eventually took a break from public service and worked for the private sector for 5 years, but ended up going back to the Ministry. I was asked to organise a French summit in Paris called Nouveau Pacte Financier Mondial that dealt mainly with questions on how to reduce the gap and aid those countries who wanted to speed up their ecological transition financially and how to gather the sufficient resources for that mission. I was also asked to contribute with a fresh vision and outlook to diplomatic training,

and finally I was appointed Director of the new Diplomatic and Consular Academy.

[Theodor Himmel, EPIS Chairman]: ***Why was the young M le Bret interested in joining diplomatic and foreign affairs?***

[Didier le Bret]: It was all a succession of chance and coincidences. 4 years before I started my diplomatic career I did not seriously envision becoming a diplomat because I was not familiar with the role of the diplomat. I leaned more towards journalism as I loved travelling (and as you see many diplomats have an overseas past of living abroad and understanding different cultures and environments). However, there is a common inclination for diplomacy and the diplomatic vision among many diplomats of being surrounded by a multi-cultural milieu; for instance, I was born in Paris but both of my parents were born in the former French colonies of Algeria and Indo-China or modern-day Vietnam. Thus, you inherit a sort of mindset that makes you curious about your history. I also began teaching at university, but after a year I realised that I would not have been able to spend the rest of my life in a classroom. There was something amazing that was happening in the former Soviet Union and I felt like a call, so I decided to teach the French language in the former Soviet Union. I was not a diplomat at the time but I spent two years doing this. I eventually met some diplomats and realized that maybe it was for me after all, as a diplomat is a sort of journalist with fewer readers but who understands the reality which surrounds him. It is about making suggestions and proposals and having a proactive rather than descriptive mindset. It is a versatile job.

[Theodor Himmel, EPIS Chairman]: ***What experience shaped you the most in terms of how you assess your work and how you view your profession?***

[Didier le Bret]: Definitely the experience of getting through the earthquakes in Haiti because there you are facing life and death and everything that you do has a concrete impact on people's lives, who are truly relying on you from the very first decision you make. For instance, deciding whether to stay at the Embassy or moving since you have heard that after the earthquake, the risk of tsunami is extremely high. So you have two options: either you stay so you can take care of people who are injured and require assistance or you leave. I decided to risk it and stay, and to not lose the trust of the people you are supposed to take care of. It was somewhat having good faith in the outcome. I made sure from a very early stage that I made decisions that were helpful to rescue operations, as for instance was relying on a small team of people that were absolutely dedicated to the task. In these kinds of circumstances you understand truly who you are, as you cannot lie nor pretend to be someone you are not and you have to work alongside your own limits, qualities, capabilities and confidences. You have to be yourself, transparent and honest, and find the right way to ensure that everyone will follow you. Crisis management shapes you. I wanted to show my children that there were good reasons to fight and hope, and to not be pessimistic.

[Anas, Andalus Committee]: **You are now Director of the new Diplomatic and Consular Academy. Can you say a few words about this new institution and what its goal is or whether this is an institution reserved to French people?**

[Didier le Bret]: First of all, as all countries that have a diplomatic apparatus, we need to focus on training diplomats. This is the key mission of the academy. We have more than 100 professional courses annually for those who enter into the Ministry and for those who will be posted or appointed as First Ambassadors for consulates and other functions, in order to train them adequately. We also have language courses where we teach foreign languages; a fundamental base for being a good diplomat. 13 languages are taught in the Ministry. Every year we have 3000 people training diplomats out of a Ministry comprising 14000 people in Paris and overseas. And overall we have 8000 trainees per year, not only from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but also people we accommodate from other ministries.

A key element of the French Academy is to be the interface of the outside world and to have strong partnerships with other countries. Some young diplomats, before working in French embassies, are sent to foreign ministries for training. Partnership is very important. For example, considering the current geopolitical situation, it's clear that we must remain as close as possible to our friends and allies who are now facing significant Russian aggression — such as Ukraine, the Baltic states, Poland, and others that are in close proximity to Russia. Additionally, the cooperation between ministries — and possibly with the academy — is essential.

And coming back to the idea of interacting with the outside world — the partnerships we referred to earlier — we, for instance, have a strong interest in seeing how the French academy can help us connect more deeply with countries that are particularly important to our diplomacy. These include countries of migration origin, the Middle East, parts of Africa, especially French-speaking Africa. These are countries with which we share a long — and sometimes difficult — history, but also a common language. We know each other well. Many individuals from those countries have studied in France.

So when something happens in France, it resonates in those countries — and the reverse is also true. The academy could be a good way to explore how we might build, or rebuild, a certain level of mutual trust.

[Theodor Himmel, EPIS Chairman]: To go a bit deeper into this model of training — you also have a background in the intelligence services and experience in that field. **Is there a difference, or what is the difference, between training a diplomat and training someone for the intelligence services?**

[Didier le Bret]: These are quite different skill sets and training paths. But to a certain extent, you might imagine that when you're collecting information, you also need to handle that information — to prioritize it, interpret it. These are similar skills, whether you're in intelligence or diplomacy.

However, the missions are quite different. For example, when you're asked to recruit someone — that's an entirely different mission. So yes, the missions are distinct. But it's important that people in defense, security, and diplomacy know each other, because at some point, they'll have to act collectively.

[Anas, Andalus Committee]: You spoke about the necessity of rebuilding and the mission of the new academy. We are now living in a very different world—one shaped by new dynamics. My question concerns your views and perspectives, especially since you have dealt extensively with crises throughout your life. **What is your vision for France today—this important country in Europe, and indeed, on the global stage? How do you see France's capacity to respond to and participate in resolving the various crises we face?**

[Didier le Bret]: Today, with the confirmation of President Trump following the January elections, there is a sense that France no longer holds the same influence it once did. It no longer appears to be a powerful country capable of resolving such crises.

Perhaps we should consider what tools are at our disposal if we are to claim a role as a nation involved in global conflict resolution. As you know, the first requirement is sovereignty—being able to assess risks independently and make sound, well-founded proposals. For your diplomacy to be respected, you must be reliable and credible. And to be credible, you must be strong. We transitioned from a situation inherited from civil war to becoming a country that possesses nuclear weapons—though not a large arsenal, officially nine. We have been at the origin of 30 to 50 resolutions that were later cancelled, yet I believe we have been quite proactive in seeking solutions within the United Nations framework. We know how to wage war. Many countries have been involved in real conflicts and have acquired practical experience. In contrast, some nations maintain armies that have never set foot on a battlefield—that's the majority.

What matters most, however, is reliability. You don't gain influence simply by following others—you must operate according to your own principles and capabilities. That's why, once France acquired nuclear weapons, we made the strategic decision to politely ask our American allies to withdraw from our territory. At that time, in the late 1960s, there were about 50,000 American troops stationed in France. To fully recover our sovereignty, we needed to possess nuclear deterrence and a strong, independent military. Consider the post–Second World War reality: France had virtually no army. And yet, today, we have the most powerful military in Europe. Furthermore, we are the second-largest weapons exporter in the world—after the United States and ahead of Russia. That tells you something about our industrial base: we have research, innovation, and a comprehensive defense sector. These are not marginal details; they are essential components of a credible diplomatic posture.

Our current nuclear capability gives us the potential to destroy a significant portion of Russia's major cities if it ever came to that. We have a variety of delivery systems—land-based, air, and naval—that support this deterrence. This means that when we engage in diplomacy, it's understood that we do so with strength behind our words.

To answer your question more directly: yes, this is a pivotal moment for France and for Europe. A French nuclear action would never be launched without the broader European context—it would inevitably involve the continent. That is why now is the right time for Europe to seriously reconsider the foundations of its own security. While a close alliance with the United States remains essential, we must also acknowledge that relying solely on that alliance is no longer sufficient in today's global environment.

We must rebuild the parameters of our own sovereignty. Once Europe can make truly sovereign decisions, it will be in a better position to engage credibly with the rest of the world. Today, one of the fundamental problems in global affairs is the lack of balance and consistency. We allow some countries to act with impunity while holding others to different standards.What we need is greater autonomy among leaders—autonomy that enhances credibility on the international stage. That is the strategic direction we must take moving forward.

[Theodor Himmel, EPIS Chairman]: Before we come to the final question, there's something important you would like to present regarding the **Diplomatic Academy**.

[Didier le Bret]: Alongside our core mission, we aim to connect with key stakeholders and influential figures across multiple sectors. These include decision-makers and high-level professionals from business, politics, civil society, and journalism—individuals who are not only of interest to French diplomacy but who can also contribute meaningfully to its development.

Our goal is twofold: to enrich our own understanding through dialogue with external actors, and to explore ways of working collaboratively, especially with sectors such as business, which often have different operating models. Just as importantly, we strive to deepen our self-knowledge—understanding how others perceive us and how we can improve the effectiveness of our diplomatic outreach.

Each year, we select around 40 participants from these diverse sectors for a unique one-year program. Over the course of the year, they take part in approximately 10 seminars and meetings, offering them insight into the world of diplomacy, and more specifically, into how French diplomacy functions—its strategies, values, and global priorities. This program is intended for individuals who are at a mature stage in their careers —professionals with significant experience in fields such as international relations, academia, media, business, or civil society. They should have a demonstrated interest in global affairs and be open to engaging with the diplomatic world in a structured, reflective way. We will include further details about this initiative as an annex to our interview, as it may be partic-

ularly relevant to readers—especially those in the United States—who are exploring diplomatic and international career pathways. And just to add, we have a parallel initiative for younger participants as well.

[Theodor Himmel, EPIS Chairman]: **What has to be done? What has to be done for the economy, for the diplomatic future, for Europe?**

[Didier le Bret]: That's a huge question. I would say there are a few key things that must be done.

First, we need to regain confidence in our collective capacity to strengthen the global security architecture. There is nothing more universal, legitimate, or efficient than the United Nations. We must trust what was built after the Second World War. That system declared that war is not a legitimate solution for state relations.

Second, force must only be used under the mandate of the UN Security Council. That broad consensus is the best way to preserve life and maintain civilized, organized international relations. This idea was generally accepted—even if imperfect—until recently. On the European continent, despite the recent war in Ukraine, we've had almost 70 to 80 years of relative peace. That success must be remembered, especially for younger generations, to push back against a return to empire-driven thinking—where power dictates everything. That would be disastrous.

We must rehabilitate multilateral thinking and show the younger generation that the UN system achieved real progress—especially in regulation and fighting inequality. The biggest causes of tension are not historical grievances but deep structural inequalities. Fighting inequality must remain a central mission for diplomats.

Second, as I said earlier, we must regain credibility in how we assess global situations and propose solutions. When the Global South demands better financial governance and calls for reform of outdated institutions built after WWII, we must listen.

We need to engage with emerging countries who are fully entitled to demand reform—especially of Bretton Woods institutions. France and Europe can lead these changes—whether in the UN Security Council or financial systems. Of course, these institutions were originally part of the U.S.-dominated global order—the Pax Americana. But now is Europe's moment to rebalance things and give rightful influence to those currently underrepresented.

So, if I had to summarize: We should be obsessed 24/7 with creating a genuine, honest dialogue with the Global South—because of climate transition, financial inequality, demographics, and the new global balance. For all these reasons, we must act more decisively and cooperate.

Interview Summary and Key Points

1. Career Path & Background

2. Motivations for Diplomacy

3. Pivotal Experience: Haiti Earthquake

4. The Diplomatic and Consular Academy

5. Diplomacy vs. Intelligence Training

6. France's Role in Global Security & Sovereignty

7. A European Turning Point

8. Elite Training Program

9. Urgency of Action

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