Securing The Future: A Conversation with Christina Riess

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A Conversation with Christina Riess, Director Aerospace & Defence at Atreus

In this live interview, aerospace and defense executive Christina offers a candid, multi-faceted look into her non-traditional career trajectory, foundational leadership philosophy, and strategic outlook on the future of European defense. Entering corporate leadership at the young age of 32 in a heavily male-dominated technical environment, she initially established her credibility by completing a rigorous helicopter type-rating for mechanics. This technical proof of competence allowed her to navigate high-stakes environments without compromising her personal identity or succumbing to workplace drama. After spending nearly a decade with Airbus—a period during which she utilized corporate training resources to overcome public speaking anxieties and master executive presence—Christina made the

bold decision to leave corporate security. Seeking room to flourish, she transitioned into a Chief Sales Officer role at a small-to-medium enterprise (SME) serving ultra-high-net-worth individuals and C-level executives in private aviation, eventually founding her own boutique consultancy firm for aerospace and defense mergers and acquisitions.

Throughout the discussion, Christina articulates a pragmatic, action-oriented approach to leadership, career development, and risk management. She firmly advises young professionals not to be guided by fear, but rather to "take the lead" whenever they identify an unfulfilled need or operational gap. Emphasizing the power of intrinsic motivation and self-trust, she highlights that true professional intuition—what she defines as "gut feeling"—often provides a more reliable assessment of complex risks and strategic deals than analytical processing alone. Reflecting on career setbacks and mistakes, Christina framing failures as the essential building blocks of genuine professional experience, urging the younger generation to embrace calculated risks, adopt an adventurous mindset, and fail fast in order to discover their true strengths.

Turning to macro-level geopolitical challenges, Christina provides an authoritative analysis of European defense, defense procurement, and strategic autonomy. She argues that for Europe to preserve its democratic values, peace, and economic wealth, it must urgently recover its industrial sovereignty and scale up its defense manufacturing capacity. Crucially, she draws a clear distinction between political interests and industrial capabilities, asserting that national political friction often stymies defense integration, whereas industrial cooperation must take the lead in developing shared military platforms and systems. She further addresses third-country involvement in European initiatives like the SAFE program, noting that while strategic transparency and protection of European sovereign interests are essential, cooperation with partners like Turkey, Israel, and Canada remains vital because Europe cannot face global security threats in isolation.

Finally, Christina explores emerging technological frontiers, specifically commercial space infrastructure and Artificial Intelligence. She praises the EU Space Act as a pioneering framework that establishes sustainable regulation and financing mechanisms, positioning Europe favorably against global competitors like the United States and China in an market projected to reach trillions in the coming decades. On Artificial Intelligence, she underscores its necessity for daily efficiency while advocating for pragmatic security fences to mitigate systemic threats. Closing with an encouraging message to Gen Z, Christina urges the younger generation to actively engage in the defense ecosystem, push past philosophical hesitation regarding defense manufacturing, and assert their voices in shaping the security policies that directly affect their collective future.

About the Interviewed: Christina Riess is an industry leader and executive expert specializing in aerospace, defense technology, and strategic

operational management. Serving as Director of Aerospace & Defence at Atreus and leading the Defence Task Force Europe at Heidrick & Struggles, she bridges technical engineering with executive strategy to drive European defense innovation, organizational transformation, and strategic growth across the defense ecosystem.