Skills are Everything

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On December 12th, the European Conference on Skills in the Defence Sector took place in Stockholm, jointly arranged by the European Commission, the Swedish Security and Defence Industry Association, and the Association of Swedish Engineering Industries. The conference gathered over 150 key stakeholders, ranging from defence companies to the Swedish Armed Forces to discuss the future strengthening of the sector in the face of its growing challenges.

The programme thus featured a star lineup of keynote speakers and panellists, most notably Dr. Pål Jonsson, the Swedish Minister of Defence, and Gen. Michael Bydén, the Supreme Commander of the Swedish Armed Forces. Subjects covered ranged from equal representation within the

STEM field (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) to cross-border cooperation as a means of further empowering joint research and development within the defence industry.

Key challenges identified during these panels were unsurprisingly many, but an overarching problem was how to best fix the "leaking STEM pipe", referring to the attrition of the qualified workforce within the field. Reasons stated for causing this leak included the fact that the European workforce is shrinking, the insufficient representation within the STEM fields and a general struggle to retain interest among existing personnel and students still in university.

However, instead of addressing how to fix this leakage, the solution was mainly attributed to increasing the inflow of young people into STEM. This is by working to change the public perception of STEM, as well as featuring STEM subjects more in early education. This solution effectively leaves the financing to the state actors through the education system and seems like the industry's preferred short-term solution to the problem. In my opinion, until the other stakeholders in the sector strive to improve the long-term sustainability of the work they offer, with the same urgency as increasing interest, the pipe will keep leaking. An agreed-upon key aspect of any applied solution, however, important whether it's in the short- or long-term, was the goal of achieving equal representation as a result of the bolstering of interest in the STEM fields.

Another key challenge was the lack of speed in policy change by state actors, and its potentially devastating effect on the defence industry and its response to addressing sudden threats. Echoing the Berlin Security Conference, the industry once again calls out for closer cooperation in order to "help us help you". To paraphrase my friend and fellow EPIS member Patrick Weimert, who put it best: it's crucial not to counteract the slow pace by swinging to the opposite end of the spectrum, and that other actors should be cautious to get their own ducks in a row before delving into deeper collaborations.

In summary, one should remember that societies that rely on advanced technology also rely on a well-educated service sector. It's easy to take a stable network connection for granted; assume that new models of phones and anti-missile systems always will enter the market, or rest easy knowing that our bank accounts and digital infrastructure are protected from antagonists, but without programmers, IT engineers or cyber security experts, those assumptions will leave us more vulnerable than we might suspect.

The implications of the leaking STEM pipe will thus affect us all, and only by working to retain and attract skilled personnel can we prevent its implications. Therefore, a good first step for society as a whole to take is to recognize the importance of these work groups, and the ambition and interest required to enter them. Because if we can't keep our skills, we simply cannot maintain our security.