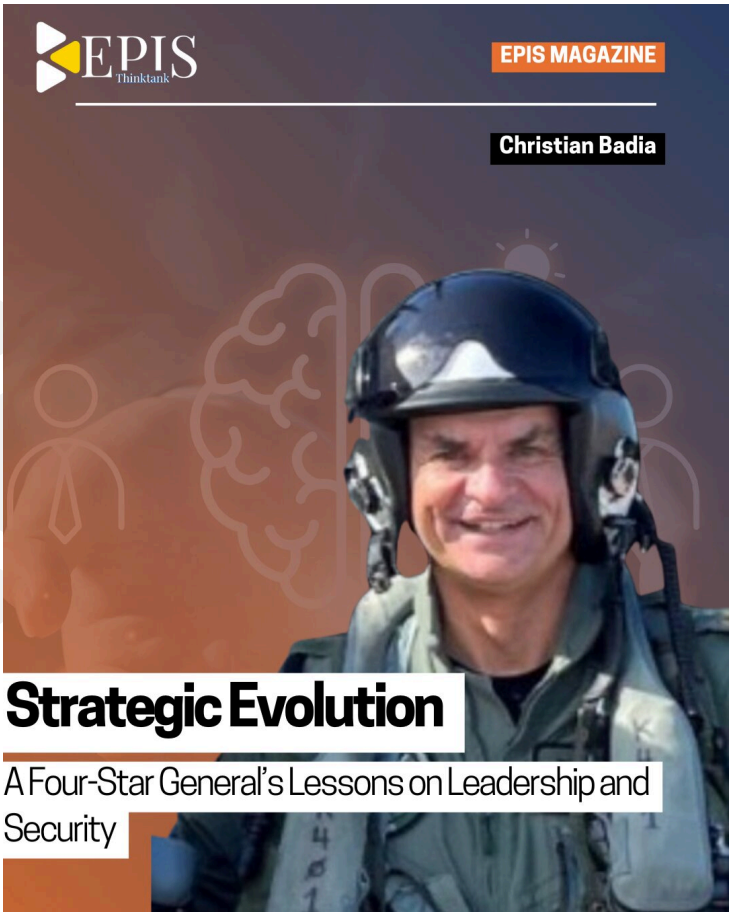
Strategic Evolution

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Christian Badia



ALISA GRÜNERT: First, thank you very much for doing this with us. We would be interested in hearing about your experience with strategic thinking throughout your career. How did this shape you?

BADIA: Well, when you join the Bundeswehr as a young person, I was 21 years old at the time, in the lowest rank the Air Force has to offer, you have a completely different perspective, and motivation. At that age, you're primarily interested in experiencing things. Then I was offered the chance to do fighter pilot training, and I obviously took that opportunity. I flew fighter jets for 25 years. And as it applies to every aspect of life, you develop, and past experiences build on top of one another. What I am incredibly grateful to the Bundeswehr for, after 41 years and three months of service,

is that it is an organization that allows you to rise all the way to the top. We say: aptitude, performance, and capability. You have to bring your own motivation, and you also need a basic level of ability. But the Bundeswehr invests an enormous amount of time into qualifying its personnel. This is the point at which strategic thinking is gradually incorporated within the Bundeswehr. The further you develop through courses, programs, and continuing education, these components come together. It's modular training, a lifelong learning system is essentially what the Bundeswehr offers. And depending on which direction you move, different modules are added, and eventually, a lot of strategic thinking is offered as well. Even though in my opinion, it is nowhere near enough.

.**ALISA GRÜNERT:** So there is still room for improvement?

BADIA: There is definitely room for improvement. But you see it as you move upward in the organization.

ALISA GRÜNERT: And what would be a concrete example of that so-called room for improvement?

BADIA: I think it's similar to many companies: most people work in operational tasks. But strategy and planning, although closely related to operations, follow their own career path as you advance. I was the Head of Planning for the Bundeswehr, where I was responsible for capability planning. I had dealt with parts of this before, and later I did it for NATO. So you can see that it's a path that develops over time. And once you're on that path, you encounter these topics in a completely different way and get the opportunities that come with it. But if you're an operational commander somewhere, then you're more in the operational–tactical sphere, and logically, are trained differently. It's like life in general, you come to a crossroad, and when you look back, you hopefully took the right one.

ALISA GRÜNERT: A bit of path dependency, essentially.

BADIA: Exactly.

ALISA GRÜNERT: I'd like to explore your understanding of leadership. More specifically how your experience and career shaped your understanding of leadership over time.

BADIA: Leadership is the be-all and end-all. Looking back now, I have to say, leadership starts with a clear understanding of the culture you operate in, how you were socialized, and how people build on one another. Because in the end, you can have the best procedures, processes, and technical capabilities. However, if the culture in the organization isn't right, which is just as true for the Bundeswehr as it is for Siemens, Microsoft, or any other company, then things won't work. So much comes down to culture, specifically how you're socialized, how you understand processes, how you implement them, and in which context. In the military, we speak of a "combat community" that shapes how leadership develops. For me, it's absolutely clear, and I always tell people this: the team is everything. Unfortunately, there are many who believe, "I don't need anyone else, I'm my own best advisor." But you simply can't operate like that today. It's crucial to train

young leaders so they truly internalize the principle that everything is based on the team. The better you use your team, the better the organization becomes. Support it, and let it grow. The smarter the people around you, the better you are, and in turn, the organization becomes better. Leadership is absolutely essential.

ALISA GRÜNERT: So the group is only as strong as its weakest link.

BADIA: Exactly. And in our case, tragically, if you are in deployment or war, you must ensure that every link in the chain is as strong as possible so that the team survives.

ALISA GRÜNERT: Absolutely. Since we're still talking about the Bundeswehr, and you've retired now, we'd like to know what your path looks like now, post-Bundeswehr. In what you've just explained, you used many economic metaphors. Does that indicate that you see yourself moving in that direction, or what does your future path look like?

BADIA: I always say the Bundeswehr is an organization like any other—and also not. We used to say it's not like any other, because in the end, we swear an oath and are willing to give our lives for the country. That is always at the forefront. And that must be explained, especially to young people, that this is the ultimate consequence of joining the Bundeswehr. And I would recommend it to anyone. But still, the Bundeswehr has changed significantly in how it operates and how it is structured. That's why I often use economic metaphors: because a lot of what we do is no longer purely military in nature. The fighting, the military operations, leading missions that must, of course, remain purely military. But logistical supply, warehousing, wait times, telecommunications, cybersecurity, all of these have strong links to the civilian economy. And often the private sector can do these things better and more efficiently, because our resources are limited. So now, after retiring, I see it as my mission to explain these things. We are a resilient society, hopefully. We need to work hard to achieve that. There is no separation between the Bundeswehr and society; rather, there is a single society with several instruments, one of which is the Bundeswehr. But we always have to combine the strengths of multiple worlds to succeed.

ALISA GRÜNERT: You just said you would recommend young people join the Bundeswehr. Why, in your view?

BADIA: First of all, serving your country is always a good thing. I strongly support mandatory national service, not conscription specifically, but service duty. I strongly believe all young people, men and women, should serve their country in some capacity. I would recommend that to everyone, even to those who don't join the military. For those who do join the Bundeswehr, I can only say: if you bring motivation and capability, every opportunity is open to you. I had 28 different assignments in 41 years. Imagine having 28 different, highly demanding roles in your career, that's incredible. I always say, I never had a dull moment in my life. It was always varied, always exciting, and you continued to develop yourself further.

TH: To follow up, what were your last assignments, and what was the biggest challenge?

BADIA: Every assignment is a challenge in its own way. Let me give three examples from when I was a Colonel. First, I was the Wing Commander of a fighter wing. At the time, I was an active F-4 Phantom pilot, and the F-4 was being phased out while the Eurofighter was being introduced. The Phantom aircraft were consolidated into the wing I was leading. At the peak, I had 62 fighter jets and 1,800 personnel under my responsibility as a Colonel. It was incredibly exciting, balancing leadership, responsibility for all these people, and keeping the wing tactically ready for airspace surveillance over Germany or elsewhere. Second, still as a Colonel, I was Chief of Staff for the Parliamentary State Secretary Kolbow, and later for State Secretary Dr. Pflüger in Berlin. That meant working at the interface of military policy and parliament. Completely different world, completely different tasks, however, also extremely exciting. My last assignment as a four-star general at NATO included the responsibility for capability planning for 32 nations. And there you see again how qualification, continuing education, and strategic thinking build over time. You cannot learn that in a one-year course. It develops through decades and through diverse assignments like these.

ALISA GRÜNERT: And how long did it take to develop your strategic thinking? Looking back, how much time did you need?

BADIA: Some people feel comfortable in their comfort zone; that's normal. Others naturally look beyond it. I was always someone who wanted to see more. And that's what the Bundeswehr recognizes. When you see someone with interest and potential, you assign them differently, offer opportunities, and send them to the right places. It's reciprocal. So a larger ecosystem forms, which then develops the next generation of leaders. This develops over time. At around age 30, you enter your first leadership roles. Then you realize, the Bundeswehr offers a two-year General Staff Course. What other organization gives you two full years of education, including military, social, and societal topics? All of this develops step by step. I'd say by age 30, the building blocks began to meaningfully connect.

ALISA GRÜNERT: And within the broader European security structure, what role does the Bundeswehr play?

BADIA: I'd say a crucial one, but not an overwhelming or dominant one. As I like to explain, there are "Instruments of Power" that a state must have: political, economic, financial, and then military. The Bundeswehr is the military instrument. A state is resilient only when all of these instruments are strong. That in turn deters adversaries because they calculate how capable a society is of defending itself as a whole. So the Bundeswehr is absolutely vital, just as important as a strong healthcare system, police structure, emergency services, etc. But it is only one part of the whole.

ALISA GRÜNERT: So this all fits into the whole-society approach?

BADIA: Exactly. Today, resilience means a whole-of-state, whole-of-government approach—and that must be understood.

THEODOR HIMMEL: I'm curious, especially since we are in a pan-European think tank. You mentioned your assignment involving 32 nations. From that experience, how does the Bundeswehr compare to other European armed forces?

BADIA: In NATO, you must consider the "big four", the nations that still possess full-spectrum military capabilities and therefore provide the holistic defense backbone for smaller nations to connect to. Those four are, in order: the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. So you already see Germany's importance, and this is also how others see it. Many Polish colleagues told me repeatedly, "We need you. Be confident in your leadership role; we want you to fill it." And that reflects reality. Germany is valued and respected. And I can say, German personnel in the NATO structure are highly regarded.

TH: You've reached the end of your military career, but your mission doesn't end. What is next for Mr. Badia?

BADIA: My next goal is to explain this geopolitical complexity wherever needed: How does NATO work? How does it interact with the EU? How do bilateral relationships between nations fit in? It is a complex system, but we must not let it become complicated. It must be understandable. My other motivation, and something I find very positive, is that society is again more willing to pay attention to the armed forces. And from the private sector, including finance, more funding is becoming available. Ursula von der Leyen calls this the "third pillar of financing", private financing. Private equity and venture capital. So I also explain these structures and help people understand how this market works and how investments can support better capabilities, not only for the Bundeswehr but for European armed forces as a whole.

ALISA GRÜNERT: One last question: if you anticipate what will happen in the next ten years, what would be part of your scenario?

BADIA: Based on what we see and how we prepare, the Bundeswehr and European armies must be capable of deterrence. We need to become stronger and more credible. But I do not believe that, if we succeed, a major direct conflict between Russia and NATO Europe is likely.

The bigger threat, if we are not careful, is the hybrid threat. Hybrid warfare is always about destabilization. And I believe Russia has understood very well how to destabilize Western societies. That is my bigger concern at the moment: hybrid threats, hybrid warfare, and destabilization. But that means we must become more capable of deterrence and improve our whole-of-government approach to counter it.

ALISA GRÜNERT: And in the context of hybrid threats, what does deterrence look like, especially when warfare moves into the grey zone?

BADIA: Exactly, and you are right: this moves toward modern technologies. You must achieve information dominance and decision dominance.

Technologies like cyber, AI, and the internet are essential. To generate situational awareness, you need data, not just data, but structured, analyzed data. Once you can attribute attacks, who did it, to what happened, you must reach the point where a community of states engages in what is called the "blame and shame" approach. When you can publish who is responsible, different measures follow. So first, you must detect it. Then analyze it. Then establish a joint situational awareness center. Then publish it. And finally, employ sanctions and countermeasures. That is the logical sequence. NATO and the EU are currently discussing how to orchestrate this. We are not yet fully there as a unified EU or NATO. But all states understand where we need to go.

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