The Future of German Aerospace

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I. About the person – Marie-Christine von Hahn

EPIS: Dear Ms. von Hahn, thank you very much for the invitation to speak with you today. As a representative of the German Aerospace Industries Association (BDLI), you are a stakeholder within a security sector that is currently experiencing massive momentum. But before we turn to your organisation and your industry, a few questions about you personally. Where and what did you study, and how did your path to BDLI ultimately unfold?

von Hahn: Thank you, it is a pleasure hosting EPIS today. I completed my studies at the University of Potsdam in 2004 with a master's degree in English Studies, American Studies, and Spanish. During my university

days, I quickly embraced a vital passion for communication. I realised that I enjoyed working with many different people and that I had a fundamental interest in politics. After a series of internships and a traineeship at a PR agency, I began working as a research associate in the German parliament (Bundestag), in 2006. Here I quickly found myself dealing with topics that – due to their link to industrial policy and, as a consequence thereof, social responsibility – were subject to controversial debates. A pattern that would continuously accompany me throughout my professional career. In 2009, I moved to Wintershall Holding, where I worked as a lobbyist in the Berlin office before I joined Aurubis, Europe's leading copper producer. There I spent ten years inter alia as the Berlin representative and head of politics and sustainability. In October 2024 I joined BDLI as Principal Managing Director, diving into the fascinating realms of the aerospace sector.

EPIS: A highly interesting path and combination of academical background and professional career! What advice would you give students closing in on their graduation – a well elaborated five-year plan or trusting in the job market to provide you with eventually unforeseen opportunities?

von Hahn: Fundamentally, I don't think there is a one-size-fits-all answer; it's a very individual matter. Some people feel more comfortable with a fixed plan, while others let life come to them and trust that new opportunities will arise. Both can be equally successful. However, what is always beneficial is building networks, meeting people, and attending events in order to engage in conversation.

Another aspect is the professional component. If I know, for example, that my heart beats for security policy, I see no reason to abandon that passion. Passion and enthusiasm are a solid foundation for professional growth. At the same time, internships are a good way to get to know both specific subject areas as well as personal interests, strengths and weaknesses.

EPIS: You already began to describe your work within its framework and your passion towards it. What, for you, defines political communication as a profession and what motivates you to carry out this job in a leading role?

von Hahn: I have always felt an urgent need for controversial topics such as nuclear waste disposal and reactor safety to be discussed and, ideally, resolved through dialogue. I believe that, in this context, we need people who can and want to communicate, to do this essential explanatory and translation work between the public, politics, and the sectors or industries involved. It is in this communication that I found my passion.

II. About the organisation – German Aerospace Industries Association (BDLI)

EPIS: Today you are operating in the highly complex technological field of aerospace. How great is the need for the explanatory and translation work you mentioned, for example in dialogue with politics or the media?

von Hahn: Essentially, our work is about creating and designing a functioning German and European aerospace sector. However, this is a sector in which many different stakeholders operate and are involved. BDLI, as the voice of the aerospace industry; research institutes; legislators; and the public which must understand why the Federal Republic of Germany invests financial resources in this sector.

A high level of technological understanding can generally be assumed in dialogue with experts. Yet, in recent years we observed a broader awareness and substantive understanding of defence and space issues among the media as well. We have had many conversations with journalists who suggested to us that public interest in these topics is growing. A development which we perceive to be both important and needed in order to face today's challenges and to gain acceptance among the public towards urgently needed investments in the aerospace sector.

EPIS: Despite this growing public interest and awareness, are there still challenges that BDLI faces in its work and communication?

von Hahn: BDLI encompasses three strands – civil aviation, military aviation, and space. All three areas are fascinatingly different, enfolding their own dynamics and challenges.

One vital reason for this phenomenon are fundamental differences in their financing and business models. Civil aviation is a commercial business, with procurement mechanisms and contracting processes very different from those in the military sector. The same applies to space, where there is still an enormous need for awareness-raising and investment in research. Considering and balancing these different structures within BDLI's spectrum can sometimes be challenging.

At the same time, many of our members are active in more than one of the three areas creating valuable synergies that undoubtedly outweigh occasional challenges. These synergies are also reflected in our political advocacy work.

How closely intertwined BDLI's branches are is, for instance, demonstrated by the German government's current ambition to develop an updated comprehensive aviation strategy. An endeavour in which the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, the Federal Ministry of Transport and the Federal Ministry of Defence are closely working together in order to develop a framework that enhances innovation and fully unleashes the potentials of the German aerospace sector – explicitly linking civil and military aviation.

EPIS: Very interesting developments within Germany's Aerospace sector, to say the least. Does BDLI also maintain relations with European or international organisations and "sister associations"?

von Hahn: In addition to our European umbrella organisation (ASD), BDLI maintains particularly close dialogues with its sister associations in France (Groupement des Industries Françaises Aéronautiques et Spatiales,

GIFAS) and the UK (ADS Group). These are primarily our peers, and we work very closely and gladly with them.

III. BDLI in European and global context

EPIS: That provides us with a great opportunity to take a look at the big picture. In Germany, there is currently a shift in the previously restrained public opinion regarding investment in the defence sector – special funds were recently approved by parliament. Are there similar patterns to be observed in other European countries?

von Hahn: In Germany, we previously held on to the illusion that we could avoid rearmament and rely on protection from others. Now, the Bundeswehr is facing urgent investment needs in every area – from infrastructure to equipment to personnel. Looking at other countries, we see a different self-perception, and a different respect and standing of the armed forces in society. At the same time, I understand that not everyone is inclined to join the Bundeswehr. Fundamentally, however, I am convinced that the current debate in European countries is no longer about whether to invest, but how to invest.

EPIS: Since we are already discussing the European context, we would like to address another current issue. In June 2025, the European Commission presented the "Space Act," a legislative initiative regarding a harmonized framework for the space sector within the EU. How did BDLI, possibly in cooperation with your European sister associations, accompany or prepare for this process?

von Hahn: We are very convinced that it is important to create a consolidated European regulation for the space sector. However, European regulation always carries the risk of overreach, potentially hindering the sector more than helping it. It goes without saying that in a highly complex sector like space, a completely unregulated environment is not possible. The legislator's goal, however, must be the minimum necessary level of regulation – while still allowing the sector to pursue and unleash its full economical potential. A regulatory framework exceeding this logic will ultimately impede the sector's ability to compete on the global scale.

Another weighty requirement in this regard is trust. Trust in the aerospace sector and its companies. Unfortunately it seems to me that in Europe and in Germany we still suffer from a strong mutual mistrust – expecting industries to aim for regulatory loopholes rather than trusting them to operate with good intentions, aiming to contribute. Here I see a urgent need for fundamental change from which all stakeholders could benefit.

For now we – as representatives of the German Aerospace Industries – have to analyse the EU Space Act: does it embody a spirit of trust that ensures freedom of action or does it create a structure that stifles potential. We will see.

EPIS: Speaking of potential. How has the space sector and its economic potential developed in recent years – what impact have private initiatives such as Elon Musk's SpaceX project had on the European sector?

von Hahn: I think that in the US there has always been a broader enthusiasm and deeper awareness for space. Projects like SpaceX have certainly contributed to merging the space sector with private enterprise. Accordingly, the commercialisation of space as an economic factor is more advanced in the US than here.

In Germany, the state remains the anchor customer. This applies to the state's vision, procurement contracts, research programs and space missions. That is probably the most fundamental difference to the US. What gives us hope, however, is the newly created Federal Ministry for Research, Technology, and Space in Germany. A development which shows that awareness for investment demands is growing.

EPIS: How do you assess developments in the defence industry in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine? What observations can be made in Germany and in the broader European context?

von Hahn: Tragically, the situation in Ukraine is creating a huge demand for armaments. History has shown time and again that wars – I regret to stress – have always gone hand in hand with innovation and technological change. The current surge in the use of drones and artificial intelligence is proving this once again and is leading, across Europe and in Germany, to undeniable growth in demand as well as innovation capacity.

EPIS: You mention innovations in the defence sector. Increasingly, defence startups are calling for easier market access and simplified procurement processes by the federal government as anchor customer. How do you, as BDLI, assess this development – do you see potential or competition?

von Hahn: We believe it is right and good that startups are insisting on recognition in the defence sector. As BDLI, we represent stakeholders from the aerospace sector, including startup companies, hopefully in increasing numbers. The larger companies we represent – many of which already have close cooperation with the Bundeswehr and far greater financial staying power – also value the input and perspectives startups bring. They think in agile ways, take new paths, and try things out. That is why we appreciate, in all three of our areas, the synergy effects that emerge from the interplay between established companies and startups.

EPIS: To conclude this interview, we would like to ask what the future holds for aerospace and what advice you would give our members, most of whom are students, if they are interested in a professional career in your sector.

von Hahn: The future of the (German) aerospace industry is certainly very stable – partly for good, partly for less pleasant reasons. Ultimately, this is a sector in which we will not relent in the future. Both in terms of space applications and investments in the defence sector: there is an immense backlog to catch up on. At the same time, civil connectivity and aviation are

advancing in course of which we must also account for climate change and urge for climate neutral technologies. In all three pillars of BDLI we therefore have gigantic development paths which makes it absolutely worthwhile to consider aerospace as a versatile field of activity.

In our career portal we provide insights into this diverse world – both within our association and among our member companies.

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