



Leadership. Ethics. Service

From the President
Air Commodore John Thomas RAF (Retired)

Web : www.euroisme.eu

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Dear Friends of Euro-ISME,

New Year's Message 2026

First of all, may I wish you, and all those you love and care for, a happy, prosperous and peaceful new year.

As the years pass, we can often look back nostalgically to a past that was probably not as perfect as we remember it. We tend to gloss over the rainy summers, the damp and miserable winters and prefer to remember the good times, rather than the bad ones. However, we could sometimes be forgiven for thinking that the past was indeed better than what the future might hold in store.

Europe enjoyed an unusually long period of peace for many decades after the second world war. Apart from the tragic confrontations in the Balkans, even the seismic collapse of the Soviet Union did not produce widespread armed conflict. Other parts of the world did not fare as well, with well documented wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf (twice) and other wars in many parts of Africa and elsewhere. But even during the Cold War, the great powers managed to refrain from antagonising each other in Europe to the point where war would have been the outcome.

But it is now clear that we are living through a time of significant geopolitical realignment, as the tectonic plates of power which separate the United States, Europe, Russia and China move and inevitably start to reshape the geopolitical landscape, often violently. The reasons are many, but include a newly assertive and isolationist United States, an aggressive post-Soviet imperialist Russia, a China adding military capabilities to its existing economic muscle and a Europe which is woefully underprepared for the growing challenges it faces.

The United States, Russia and China all share three striking features. First, they are governed by assertive leaders willing to take advantage of domestic governance structures to their own advantage. Secondly, they share a belief that the post War liberal world order needs to be overturned, implicitly in favour of a world ruled by these same assertive leaders. Europe, ironically, has the opposite problem, often being unable to act decisively due to a lack of consensus.

The third issue, and the one of most direct concern to Euro-ISME, is the erosion of ethical behaviour in war, implicitly or explicitly promoted by these leaders. The unethical behaviour of Russian forces in Ukraine (and elsewhere) has been well documented. We do not yet know how this generation of Chinese troops would behave in a major conflict, but we do know from the Chinese leadership's actions, for example against the Uighurs and in the South China Sea, that legality and morality are clearly taking second place to assertive nationalism. In the United States, the Law of Armed Conflict has been spuriously invoked as justification for attacks on vessels at sea and we have witnessed the spectacle of President Zelensky being lectured like a naughty schoolboy in the Oval Office in contrast to President Putin being welcomed on a red carpet in Alaska.

For all its political and military weaknesses, Europe now risks standing alone as a bastion of military ethics at both the strategic and tactical levels. Europe still has a vision of the utility and need for military ethics which goes beyond the US Secretary of Defense's simplistic view that 'You [the US Military] kill people and break things for a living. You are not politically correct and don't necessarily belong always in polite society' and his evident distaste for 'politically correct and overbearing rules of engagement'. As a personal comment, I have never seen any rules of engagement for a combat scenario that are 'politically correct'.

If my analysis is accurate, all this means that the work of Euro-ISME has just become more important, in a world that increasingly threatens to replace ethics with 'the ends justify the means'. I, and my Euro-ISME colleagues know there are a great many people outside Europe who share our views, not only on the necessity of ethical behaviour in war (or even better in avoiding war) but also on the utility of such behaviour in preventing atrocities, breaches of international law and moral injury. We recognise your commitment and greatly value your support.

Euro-ISME will continue to fly the flag for military ethics for as long as we exist. Please support us if you can, whether by contributing to our annual conferences and webinars, or by joining as an individual or institutional member. If we speak up, there is the chance that those in power will hear us. However, if we keep silent, then I can guarantee that we will influence no-one. Your support, whether moral, physical or financial is essential.

Our next conference in Amsterdam in May will be exploring civil-military relations (CMR); a subject which by definition goes well beyond the normal boundaries of military ethics. I hope you can be there to help us distil what CMR means in an epoch of hybrid war, politicisation, polarisation, social media and the birth pains of what is increasingly looking like a new world order. You will find all the details you need here <https://www.euroisme.eu/index.php/en/events/annual-conference> .

Yours ever,

John Thomas