

**Axel Leicht**
**Alisa Grunert**

# Thales and the Future of European Security

Navigating High-Tech Defense in an Era of Urgency

## About the Interview

**System Criticality:** Thales provides essential, non-interchangeable naval and radio systems. Their deep integration means entire weapon platforms would fail without their specific subsystems. **Technological Autonomy:** By divesting from civilian sectors and investing €10B in AI, Big Data, and Cyber, Thales acts as a „one-stop shop“ to reduce Europe’s defense reliance on the U.S.

## About the Interviewee

**Axel Leicht** is the Strategic Account Manager for the German Armed Forces at Thales Germany, overseeing key accounts for the Air Force, Army, and Navy. A former Naval Officer and graduate in Economics from the Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg, he brings extensive military and industrial expertise. He has been with Thales for twelve years, most recently serving as Director of Marketing & Strategy since 2017. He leverages his background to drive long-term strategic defense partnerships.

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## About the Interviewer

**Alisa Grunert** holds a B.A. in PolSci & Sociology. She has more than 4 years of experience in Political Education & worked 3 years as a project manager in ESD. She finished a short time study program on the EU at CIFE, works in a Research Project on European Industrial Policy & instructs workshops on parliamentarism and ESD. In her Master's, she focuses on IR, especially security politics. She is a member of WIFIS & in the Board of MEF. Alisa aims to build bridges between IR research & society.

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**A** **Alisa Grunert:**

I'll start with the first question. Please describe in a few sentences what brought you to Thales.

**Thales:**

So, the question is why I work at Thales.

**Alisa Grunert:**

Exactly, a little about your career path.

**Thales:**

Yes, alright. So, I'm a former officer in the Navy. After twelve years of service, I wanted to stay in the defense industry or at least the defense-related industry. That's why I joined Thales. I was mainly interested in the portfolio and the international nature of the company. I stayed there for three years, then took a ten-year break at what is today Airbus Defence & Space, before returning to Thales again, basically for the same reasons.

**Alisa Grunert:**

Before that, you had a military career and then moved into the company. What was the trigger for that?

**Thales:**

The end of my military service, quite simply.

**Alisa Grunert:**

What role do you, or rather Thales, play in the European security structure?

**Thales:**

First of all, we are a system-critical company for German defense, for the German Armed Forces (Bundeswehr). I believe Thales holds an outstanding position among other defense companies as well. For example, in the area

of radio equipment, where we supply radios to the German Armed Forces, the naval domain for naval systems like communications, or command and weapons systems on ships. We are also relevant in re-

gards to simulation, where we build simulators for small arms and where soldiers train marksmanship as well as in crypto distribution and crypto management systems, we're system-relevant for the German Armed Forces there as well.

**Alisa Grunert:**

So that's at the forefront, essentially, those are the unique selling points compared to others?

**Thales:**

I mean I'd say the defense sector is collaborative in spirit, but we are one of the manufacturers that supply the German Armed Forces, and because of that, we have a

**A global technology leader in defense and security, specialized in high-tech systems like naval command, radio communication, and cybersecurity, bridging the gap between innovation and military need.**



certain system criticality. If we were to disappear, there would be a gap, not one that no one could fill, but considering our product cycles, you can't just switch suppliers for a weapons system or subsystems overnight. That simply doesn't work. You need constancy within the defense-industry ecosystem. And Thales is one of the players providing things that can't easily be replaced. For example, in the Navy, communication systems or command & weapons systems on ships. If Thales suddenly disappeared, you couldn't replace that overnight; entire weapon systems wouldn't function. That's the kind of system relevance we're talking about. We are also one of the few companies in Europe in the defense sector with a portfolio that truly offers a "one-stop shop." This is also true for cyber-security and AI. If you look at our defense, space, and cyber security portfolio, we cover everything, from the depths of the ocean, like sonar on submarines, over everything that swims, drives, and moves on land, all the way into space with satellites and satellite payloads. And everything is secured through our own cyber architecture. That makes us unique.

**Alisa Grunert:**

Thinking about strategic direction, has anything changed in recent years?

**Thales:**

Yes, we've increasingly re-shaped our civilian business. For many years, we had activities in the transport sector, ground transportation systems, railway systems, digital interlocking, and train control systems. We sold all of those activities across the group, including in Germany, to Hitachi Rail, who took them over.

**Alisa Grunert:**

And since you already mentioned cyber, are there specific developments or technologies that are particularly relevant?

**Thales:**

Yes, of course. We've been one of the pioneers from the beginning. As a group, we have invested almost ten billion euros in recent years, organically and inorganically. Organically by building our own competencies, inorganically through mergers and acquisitions. So naturally, we're at the forefront of technology, not only in cyber, but also in big data and artificial intelligence. We combined all that with an in-house Digital Factory, that's our internal startup environment, where many young people and students help us drive new technologies forward. We also integrate external startups to secure talent pipelines and match the rapid innovation cycles in cyber, where the market increasingly demands solutions that don't require ten years of development.

**Alisa Grunert:**

And when we talk about such short innovation cycles, how does cooperation with governments fit into that?

**Thales:**

Well, that cooperation is always there, that's our daily business. With "governments," we mean pro-

urement authorities. In Germany, that includes the Cyber and Information Domain Service (Kommando CIR), the Ministry of Defense, and so on.

**Alisa Grunert:**

Do you have examples from other countries?

THALES: Yes, France, for example, has the DGA, the procurement authority, and specialized agencies. What also needs to be considered are the procurement processes in general. There are acceleration laws meant to ensure faster development and procurement. From an industry perspective, there is still room for improvement so that increased needs can be met quickly, and the end-user ultimately gets what they need in time.

“Thales serves as a system-critical „one-stop shop“ for European defense, providing irreplaceable technologies across sea, land, air, space, and cyber domains to ensure strategic autonomy.”

**Alisa Grunert:**

What challenges arise from that? Even with those laws, how does it work in practice?

**Thales:**

We do notice that procurement processes run much faster than five or seven years ago, that's clear. Partly due to new legislation. There are more direct procurements. Budget funds have been increased. Lower-level military units have been given their own budgets. So, for small and very small procurements, the entire procurement chain doesn't need to be activated. A brigade commander can purchase what his / her soldiers or his / her brigade needs – up to a certain spending limit.

**Alisa Grunert:**

In a global security-structure context, are these the same challenges that Thales faces?

**Thales:**

Yes, certainly. It's not a Thales-specific issue, it applies to the entire industry, to our customers in Germany, and in Europe as well. There's pressure, especially in Europe, to become more autonomous in defense, to reduce reliance on the U.S. Not to abandon it, but to reduce it. And you can see that reflected in procurement processes as well.

**Alisa Grunert:**

If you had to describe the greatest challenge for the overall security architecture in just one word, what would it be?

**Thales:**

Time. Time. Time.

**Alisa Grunert:**

We're nearing the end. What expectations do you have of decision-makers from the perspective of Thales?

**Thales:**

I think especially in these times, it's important that the user, the procurer, and the industry move closer together. To reduce friction, there's still a lot of that, driven by processes. We need to reduce it step by step. Ultimately for the benefit of the soldiers, those in the field, at sea, and in the air.

**Alisa Grunert:**

Since we are a student-run think tank, what expectations would Thales have of young people?

**Thales:**

My appeal to you as young people: move through this new world with open eyes. Be open to new technologies, new topics, and new industries like ours. Compared to the traditional sectors that have been attractive for graduates, aviation, automotive, engineering, mechanical engineering, we also offer excellent jobs, great perspectives, and highly innovative technologies across the industry. And we urgently need young people. Young people are the future of this country, and we are not anymore. That's just the reality.

