

The World is at the Brink – and the West doesn't know what to do about it Observations from the 2018 Munich Security Conference

by Daniela Schwarzer and Henning Hoff

Munich Security Conference chairman Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger didn't waste time, delivering a warning in his opening speech: "The red alarm lights are blinking." According to Ischinger, the risk of interstate conflict has never been this high since 1989. A tense international security situation set the tone for this year's Munich Security Conference (MSC), and neither Europe nor the United States seemed to have any plan to address the threats facing them both.

These risks were spelled out in brutal detail in the course of the conference: the situation in the Near and Middle East, North Korea, the risk of cyber warfare, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the growing power of illiberal superpowers. The clearer the picture of the dangers facing the West became over the three days, the more worrisome the lack of any concrete strategy to minimize these risks. The West, which finds itself locked in conflict with illiberal states, seems to be paralyzed by complex challenges and deep divides within its own camp.

EU Governments Are Ready to Cooperate

Over the first two days, discussions focused on the state of the European Union and NATO; PESCO, or "permanent structured cooperation," a defense framework the EU launched last year, was one of the central themes. The EU defense initiative, which will also coordinate funding in EU member states, was spurred by three developments: first, reduced confidence in the USA since the election of President Donald Trump; second, a need to demonstrate

the resilience of the EU in the face of Brexit; and third, a desire to better coordinate the growing defense expenditures the EU states were making in the course of meeting the "2 percent of GDP" goal NATO demands.

The criticism of PESCO that has been expressed in recent weeks also appeared in both official statements and informal conversations in Munich – an unpleasant surprise for Europeans, who had assumed that the USA would see a strengthening of the EU's defense capacities as a step in its own interests. This fact was pointed out by NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, who said that "stronger defense cooperation in Europe is not an alternative to NATO," and stressed that the non-EU members of the defense alliance would not be at a disadvantage; after all, with the Brexit decision 80 percent of NATO defense spending will soon come from non-EU countries.

Some participants indeed thought they could see Washington's fingerprints on Stoltenberg's statement. The

American government is concerned that the USA could lose access to the EU market and be excluded from future developments. In unofficial discussions, representatives of the smaller EU member states also worried that they themselves could be among the losers, in particular if the European defense industry should consolidate. So far, however, despite all criticism, PESCO remains a project the NATO planning staff is firmly committed to. At the same time, over the coming months and years it will need to be evaluated against the hopes that have been placed upon it.

Germany and France Seem Ready to Get Going

Additional ideas came from Berlin and Paris during the joint appearance by acting German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen and her French counterpart Florence Parly. Von der Leyen underlined the foreign policy stance of the recently concluded coalition agreement: “We want to remain transatlantic, but become European.” She supported a “PESCO that would also serve European foreign policy” – that is, the possibility to proceed further as a smaller group that would make decisions by majority. Parly underlined the new level German-French defense cooperation had reached since the German-French summit in July 2017, both “operationally”, as in the stabilization operation in Mali, and in terms of its equipment and procurement. That being said, behind the German-French dynamic on stage, it was clear that differences of opinion remain. Parly highlighted the “European Intervention Initiative,” which is seen as something of a second priority to PESCO in Berlin. Germany wants to build up the EU’s capacities, while France wants to build up its own operational strength, leaving PESCO a less significant role.

On the following day, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker underlined the EU’s “desire for independence” in its foreign and security policies, though he stressed that this was not directed at the US or NATO. He also expressed strong support for majority-based decision-making in these areas. However, appearances by new Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz made it clear that this enthusiasm is in no way shared throughout the entire EU.

Post-Brexit Cooperation with Great Britain Remains Unclear

British Prime Minister Theresa May’s speech brought long-hoped for clarification on a few issues related to the Brexit process. The Prime Minister suggested a security

alliance between the EU and UK following Britain’s departure from the union. Within this framework, cooperation in the area of internal security would be continued, according to May. In saying this, she made an important concession: in cooperating with the EU authorities, London will “respect” the decisions of the European Court of Justice.

Despite these statements, May’s speech lacked a clear unifying message: While she did clarify that Great Britain was “unconditionally” committed to the defense of Europe, her warning that disunity would “damage both sides” revived fears that London would use its security assets as negotiating leverage. The general reaction to May’s speech in Munich was hence mixed.

The USA: Continuity Against Trump

The mission of US participants to the 2018 Munich Security Conference was clear: they needed to convince their NATO allies that the transatlantic relationship was sturdy, that guarantees made to allies were trustworthy, and that US foreign policy would maintain continuity. From the German side, the friendlier tones were welcomed, and acting German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel warned in his speech that Germany would have to contribute more to making Europe stronger and more capable of acting on its own, and in doing so improve the cooperation with the USA. Europe cannot shape the world or defend the liberal order that it has profited from by itself, according to Gabriel.

General H. R. McMaster, US President Donald Trump’s national security adviser, delivered a mostly “classic” pro-transatlantic speech: he stressed the common values the USA shares with Europe, and labeled three issues as particularly high priorities in the USA’s foreign policy: the prevention of the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the war on terror, and the strengthening of international organizations; the last of these, admittedly, appeared slightly disingenuous in light of the massive criticism Trump has leveled at these same organizations. Unlike in the previous year, when Vice President Mike Pence and US Secretary of Defense Mattis vanished from the podium after their talks, McMaster was prepared for a dialogue in Munich. In the course of this discussion, McMaster distanced himself from the president in confirming that it was now “indisputable fact” that Russia had acted to influence the US presidential election. Trump reacted furiously on Twitter over the weekend.

Asked about the Hobbesian views he sketched in an op-ed he published in the *Wall Street Journal* with Trump’s

chief economic adviser Gary Cohn in May 2017 – namely, that he saw the world as an (economic) war in which every nation had to fend for itself – McMaster clarified in Munich that his thesis only applied to the competition between free and unfree states, and that he in no way meant to include the relationships between allies, a tactical reinterpretation that is nevertheless contradicted by many of the things Trump himself said throughout 2017.

On the annual MSC Congressional Panel, the four speakers worked across party lines to present a credible image of continuity in US foreign policy. Should the White House deviate from the previous line, Congress would intervene, as for example in the case of the Russia sanctions or the State Department's financing.

Escalatory Rhetoric Instead of Dialogue

The panel, focused as it was on communicating continuity, also showed what has changed leading up to the start of the 2018 MSC: From Washington's point of view, North Korea has become the most significant risk, while at the past MSC, terrorism had topped the list. The fact that Trump's escalatory rhetoric has made inroads among the foreign policy-makers in Congress was demonstrated by Senator Jim Risch (R-ID), who warned that any military action from Pyongyang would fail "massively" and bring loss and destruction of "biblical proportions." During the panel on nuclear arms control, US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan and former Russian Ambassador to the United States Sergei Kislyak accused each other of pursuing aggressive nuclear arms policies. They traded the kind of verbal blows that one would hardly expect to hear even at the height of the Cold War.

In general, there was little from the US side about national maximization of utility and transactional dealmaking. In fact, the opposite was true: the Americans present worked to restore greater credibility to Washington's place in the Western alliance and the Western community of values. In this they were only partially successful. Participants still considered Trump's word to be final, whatever his representatives might say.

From the Post-Western World to Systemic Conflict

In 2017, the fall of the West and its international relations paradigm and the rise of a "post-Western" world, created by Russia and Iran among others, was one of the central topics of discussion. In the 2018 MSC, however, debates about the international security situation were held against the backdrop of a more and more openly acknowl-

edged systemic conflict between Western, liberal democracies and authoritarian, sometimes protectionist regimes. Foreign Minister Gabriel said, for example, "This new world, which is much more complex than the world of the Cold War, is defined by systemic competition between developed democracies and authoritarians."

The Americans who were present worked to deliver a clear statement on this systemic conflict, one that would place them on the side of Europe. In this context, former Vice President Joe Biden attacked Russia directly: "Putin is doing everything he can to destroy the transatlantic alliance and the international liberal order." According to Biden, it was easier for the Russians to attack the West than to repair the political, economic, and social fractures in their own society.

Russia Once Again Plays the Victim

In fact, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's appearance showed that Russia still sees itself as a victim of Western expansionism above all, and is still far removed from the political mainstream. In a speech that was gloomy even for Lavrov, the foreign minister liberally mixed Nazi revisionism with developments since the 1989 fall of the Soviet Union, and characterized the charges filed against 13 Russian citizens by Special Counsel Robert Mueller due to their interference with the US election as "gossip". Turning to the conflict in Syria and the conditions necessary for a regional security structure, he showed little interest in returning to productive cooperation with the West.

The Elephant in the Room: China

China's roll warrants further reflection. In the plenary session, Foreign Minister Gabriel was the only one to explicitly refer to it; he interpreted the Belt and Road Initiative as an attempt "to establish a comprehensive system to influence the world in line with Chinese interests." China is a counter-balancing force in the systemic conflict, and at the moment the only one pursuing a thoroughly thought-out global strategy. The EU has to develop more internal consistency and help the member states develop a common sense of their interests in the union's foreign relations. It must then develop strategies and instruments to implement these interests together.

China was otherwise relegated to the fringes of the discussion, although even here it was clear that certain things were being thought of differently: belief in China's transformation, for example – both in terms of its step-by-step democratization and in its transition to a market economy

– seemed to no longer be present, even among representatives of the business community. The Belt and Road Initiative is seen as a threat, and not only because China is strategically investing to secure access, undermine Western norms, and build up its own position, but also because it has the potential to divide inner-European unity.

Dealings with China, Central Asia, and the Eastern neighborhood of the EU are themes for which the EU currently has no persuasive strategy. At the same time, with the USA's withdrawal the EU will have to learn to work with the powers in these regions.

This new significance of the relationship with China was hardly seen at the conference. Investments in dialogue with China are urgently necessary. In Fu Ying, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress, the Chinese sent an experienced diplomat and a representative of the Chinese nomenclatura to the MSC discussion on nuclear arms control; otherwise, however, the challenges posed by China, India, and a rising Asia remained largely unaddressed.

There were few actual programmatic discussions in Munich; with the exception of Foreign Minister Gabriel's, the closest were delivered by the emir of Qatar, Sheik Tamim Al-Thani, and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The last suggested an "inclusive" security structure for the Gulf Region, one built step by step, but simultaneously rejected the notion that Tehran was responsible for the current tense situation and dodged a question about Israel's right to exist. It was also typical of the political environment that when there were specific suggestions made there was hardly any reaction.

The EU: More Strategy, More Ability, More Engagement!

Cooperation within the EU paints a mixed bag: There has been progress with the creation of structures and process-

es in the area of defense, and despite initial skepticism the Central and Eastern Europeans seem to be on board. However, strategies for handling the most significant risks, whether an escalation of the situation in the Middle East, the actions of North Korea, or a destructive cyber attack, were absent on both sides of the Atlantic.

Thus the hoped-for "step back from the brink" failed to occur during the Munich Security Conference. Instead, several debates seemed much more suited to spur on ongoing conflicts, as with the debate about the situation in the Middle East on the final day. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in particular used his talk as a reproach to Tehran more than anything else: in the course of his address, he held up a part of an Iranian drone recently shot down in Israeli airspace.

No one should expect the international situation to quiet down. German and European international policymakers have great tasks ahead for which they are not yet sufficiently prepared. As Foreign Minister Gabriel demanded, they must become much more strategically capable, as well as more active and innovative, in order to succeed in this new systemic conflict and help reduce instability. There isn't much time left.

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