

Munich security conference shows mutual distrust inside NATO

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For security and foreign policy experts, the Munich conference on security policy, which met last weekend for the thirty-seventh year in succession, is what the World Economic Forum in Davos is for economic policymakers. It is not an official diplomatic conference, but all the top brass and political bigwigs can be found there. The discussions are held in public and diplomatic niceties play a smaller role than at official meetings. This means that opinions are expressed more openly and more clearly than is otherwise usual at summits.

This year's conference was tensely awaited, since the new American Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld would speak publicly for the first time in Europe. Already in the run-up to the conference there was much speculation that the Bush administration would be pursuing a strongly unilateral course driven solely by American interests, with less consideration for the interests of its NATO allies. The Munich conference has now made clear that 10 years after the end of the Cold War transatlantic relations are marked by tensions and deep distrust.

Both sides, the German hosts and their American guests alike, affirmed the need for dialogue. But the fact that the necessity for dialogue has to be stressed in the more than 50-year-old alliance shows how tense relations are in reality. In the end, unbridgeable differences were expressed, which were concentrated on two questions: American plans for building an anti-missile defence system (NMD) and European plans for setting up a strike force with its own command structure independent of NATO.

For a long time in Europe, America's NMD plans have met with scepticism or open rejection. This was justified with the argument that the planned anti-missile defence undermines nuclear disarmament, initiates a new round of the arms race and places a burden on relations with Russia.

Rumsfeld made clear that the building of the rocket shield is a settled question. The Europeans are only being consulted about the when and how. The building of NMD is a "moral imperative", he said, which flows directly from the American constitution. This obliges the US president to

protect his people against any threat. European foreign policy reservations proved ineffective against such fundamental arguments.

Numerous other American participants supported Rumsfeld. Some of them—such as Henry Kissinger, Richard Burt and Richard Perle—played a prominent role in American foreign policy during the Cold War, like Rumsfeld. Others—like Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman—were Republican or Democratic Party rivals of Bush in the election campaign. Lieberman, the Democratic Party's candidate for vice president, confirmed that the building of NMD was beyond question.

In view of the unambiguous American attitude, European representatives expressed their reservations only reservedly. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder called for more clarity about what the exact content of the plans are—which threat scenarios they apply to, whether they are technically realisable, and what effects they would have on Western Europe, Russia and China. These questions, he demanded, would have to be clarified, instead of coming to "hasty conclusions". There must be an "intensive exchange of views" over it.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer was more outspoken. He warned that "a defence project of this size has political consequences, long before it is implemented". The Russian arguments against NMD would have to be taken "seriously". There must not be a new arms race.

The current chairman of the Russian Security Council, Sergei Ivanov, spoke vehemently against the American missile defence plans. The building of NMD made the 1972 ABM treaty senseless and undermined the "foundation of global stability", he said. He also spoke against the extension of NATO to the East and offered a further halving of strategic nuclear weapons, if the ABM treaty remained intact.

American conference participants, for their part, expressed fierce criticism of the European strike force, with which the European Union is seeking to create its own military instrument for the first time. The final plans for this were

adopted in December 2000 at the European Union summit in Nice. By the year 2003, 60,000 men will be made available for worldwide operations.

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld warned of a “confusing double structure” and of “disturbing transatlantic relations”. He stressed that “NATO is the heart of the defence of Europe”. In addition, he demanded that Turkey should have access to the European Union force, which it is doing everything at present to prevent emerging.

Republican Senator McCain openly accused the Europeans of having caused the tensions within NATO. In the past 18 months, meetings of EU and NATO ministers, because of the disputes over the independent European Union force, were a constant expression of a crisis in transatlantic relations, McCain said.

The purpose of the strike force is disputed within Europe itself. The British government has endeavoured to play down the clash of interests with the USA. NATO Secretary-General George Robertson (a former British defence minister) gave numerous soothing interviews on the fringes of the Munich conference. On the other hand, the French government sees the purpose of the European Union force as strengthened military independence from the USA. Publicly, the German government is restrained, but is cooperating closely with France in forming the structure of the new force.

The mutual distrust within NATO became clearer following the change of government in the United States. It is, however, by no means new. In the long run, the conflict over NMD and the European strike force contains more fundamental questions. This concerns the strategic weight of Europe and America.

Since the end of the Cold War, the European powers have been less prepared to accept US hegemony unreservedly. With the establishment of the European single market, the introduction of a common currency and the gradual extension of the EU to the East, the European Union is stepping forward ever more clearly as an economic rival of the USA on the global market. This also feeds the need for it to stand on its own legs militarily.

The arguments about the NMD plans contain a whole series of questions. Superficially, the argument seems out of place, since the most elementary technical prerequisites for the installation of an effective anti-missile defence system are lacking. Military experts assume that their development will take at least 10 years.

Also the form and scope of the project are unclear. Whereas the Clinton administration had only considered the installation of a limited number of anti-missile rockets in Alaska, now it is assumed that the Bush administration is undertaking a far larger project, involving placing anti-

missile rockets on submarines.

The previous argument for NMD was that it would defend the USA against missile attacks from so-called “rogue states” like North Korea, Iran and Iraq. There was no such talk in Rumsfeld's Munich speech. The *Financial Times* concluded: “The implication was that missile defence systems could be part of US defences, like aircraft carriers or armoured divisions, to be deployed against any enemy when appropriate.”

This is the general line of European fears. A functioning missile defence system, which can be used against any opponent, would give the USA a great strategic advantage and secure its hegemonic position for a long time. Rumsfeld's offer to make the system available to NATO's European members did little to calm their fears. The financial burden on government budgets would be gigantic. Moreover, adopting such a system developed in the USA would cement American technological supremacy.

The argument that NMD is directed against threats by “rogue states” has always been doubted in Europe. Some military experts believe the real target is China, where Europe is pursuing its economic interests intensively. According to a comment in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on the Munich conference: “In truth, missile defence is a project to protect America's leading role and the country's interests, particularly against the strategic challenge from China.”

Other commentators sense economic interests behind the project. The billions of dollars flowing into the development of NMD not only guarantee lucrative contracts for the American armaments industry, they also provide the civilian economy a technological lead over its international rivals.

The tensions between Europe and America are not temporary in nature; so much became clear in Munich. They arise from the intensified struggle for the world market and bring serious dangers for the whole of mankind.



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