

The Munich Security Conference: a transatlantic trial of strength

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The 45th Munich Security Conference taking place this weekend will be attended by a host of significant political figures. US President Barack Obama is sending his deputy, Vice President Joseph Biden, and other members of the US delegation including National Security Adviser James Jones, the head of the US Central Command, David Petraeus, and the new special US representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke.

Germany is also sending its most prominent political representatives, including Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Vice Chancellor Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD), Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) and Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung (CDU). Also in attendance will be French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Russian Prime Minister Sergej Iwanow and Hamid Karzai, president of Afghanistan. Thirteen heads of state and government plus 50 ministers are amongst the total of 300 participants at the conference.

The Munich conference marks the first major appearance by the new American administration on the European stage. It is also the first trial of strength between major international powers since the transformation brought about by the international financial and economic crisis and the growing problems facing the US government in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the conference held in Munich one year ago, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates vigorously criticised Washington's NATO partners. Gates called for a "fair division of the load" in the transatlantic alliance when it came to the war in Afghanistan, and called upon the European powers to be more prepared to make sacrifices when it came to "fighting and dying". Otherwise, collective security was rendered impossible, and the "alliance will eventually be destroyed," he said.

At the time, none of the European powers dared to oppose America's aggressive war policy. Instead, Paris and Berlin hoped for a speedy end to the Bush era and a new phase in

US foreign policy. It was US Senator Joseph Lieberman who warned the Europeans not to set their sights too high. Lieberman stressed that with regard to the Afghanistan war, Gates did not merely represent the Bush administration, but rather a "non partisan American position." Europe should understand that Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama held exactly the same position with regard to Afghanistan, he indicated.

Lieberman is correct in this respect. President Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are not only continuing the war in Afghanistan, they are intensifying it considerably. The president, who ran his election campaign promising change, has not only retained Robert Gates as defence secretary, but as one of his first measures upon entering the White House has also sent an extra 10,000 soldiers to Afghanistan. He plans to send a further 20,000 troops, doubling the size of US forces in the region while at the same time extending the war to Pakistan.

The composition of the US delegation at this year's security conference makes clear the crucial nature of the Afghanistan war for the new US administration. Obama's new security adviser, General James Jones, was commander of the US European Command (COMUSEUCOM) from 2003. In this function he also commanded US troops involved in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. General David Petraeus headed US forces in the Iraq war and was appointed head of the US Central Command in October of last year. On the occasion of Richard Holbrooke's appointment as special advisor for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Secretary of State Clinton declared that it represented a "loud and clear signal" that the US was once again in a position to provide global leadership.

The situation, however, has changed. The US government has lost influence with the onset of the international financial and economic crises and a series of military setbacks. European governments have offered their support, but only on the basis of advancing their own imperialist interests. To this end they are demanding certain conditions.

Under the title "We Europeans Must Speak with One

Voice," the German chancellor and the French president published a joint communiqué in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* just two days before the Munich conference. In friendly and diplomatic terms, they declare that the epoch of US domination in Europe and the world has finally come to an end. "Today no country alone can solve the problems of the world," they stress at the beginning of their statement, going on to demand an internationally accepted security policy—"of an extensive character." It is necessary to undertake joint analysis, joint decision-making and joint practical interventions. They insist that "Unilateral steps would contravene the spirit of the partnership."

Of central significance in the joint statement is "re-establishing a partnership with Russia." Merkel and Sarkozy write, "The war in Georgia last summer was a turning point," they add, emphasising that it was the European Union—not the United States—that was able to "bring the spiral of violence to a halt and create the conditions for a process to end the conflict."

As neighbour and partner, Russia is "as ever of great importance." Collaboration in the NATO-Russia Council plays "a central role" and should be systematically intensified wherever possible. "Last summer President Medvedev made proposals for an overhaul of European security." We are ready to discuss this with our allies and European partners while taking into account the point of view of all of those involved," the article continues.

Any extension of NATO is only possible in close collaboration and in agreement with Russia. "At the same time we point out that membership of NATO is bound up with certain criteria and involves shouldering considerable responsibility." With this remark, the German and French heads of government virtually rule out, for the foreseeable future, any inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia in NATO, up to now a key US demand.

With regard to Iran, the communiqué states: "We are intent on arriving at a diplomatic solution." Behind this brief statement is more than just the rejection of any military attack on Tehran. In the past, Germany and France were Iran's two most important trade partners, and both countries have suffered heavily from the US-led economic sanctions imposed on Iran. There are clear indications that both France and Germany will lay down an ultimatum to the US in Munich: any extension of their military deployment in Afghanistan must be compensated by an easing of the sanctions against Iran.

The German government in particular has been pressing for some time for a let-up in the sanctions policy against Iran, which possesses the planet's second biggest reserves of gas deposits. Only recently, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) visited Tehran. His trip was

described as of a private nature, but his office confirmed that the visit had been coordinated with the German foreign ministry. Schröder is the chairman of a company that is constructing a pipeline to transport Russian gas to Germany and Europe via the Baltic Sea. At the same time, he has close links with leading German companies that are keenly interested in cooperation with Iran. In an article in the *Financial Times Deutschland* at the end of January, the head buyer for the German energy giant RWE declared: "In the long term the EU cannot afford to exclude the prospect of cooperation with Iran."

In accordance with the same priorities, the chairman of the Munich Security Conference, Wolfgang Ischinger, stressed the significance of participation in the proceedings by leading Iranian politicians, including the foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki and parliament speaker Larijani. Ischinger, who has worked for the foreign service for the past 30 years—including as chief of planning—has also filled the post of German ambassador to both the US and Great Britain during the last seven years. He is regarded as someone who enjoys good contacts with all sides.

This year's Munich Security Conference represents a turning point in international relations. The role of the US, which dominated the transatlantic axis for decades, is now being challenged by a number of European countries. Longstanding relationships are being eclipsed, while new relations still remain undeveloped. However, under the diplomatic surface, growing tensions are emerging across the Atlantic as well as between the Great Powers in Europe itself. As the economic crisis deepens rapidly, each country is increasingly reacting by giving priority to its own economic, political and military interests.



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