

Munich Security Conference signals a new arms race

Ulrich Rippert
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The Munich Security Conference, which ended last Sunday, took place in an atmosphere of warmongering and pro-armament propaganda. Beforehand, President Donald Trump had threatened to withdraw from NATO if the European allies did not significantly increase their military spending.

European government representatives responded by warning that the United States could not be relied upon in the long term. In future, Europe had to take its security into its own hands. A systematic military upgrade was therefore imperative. Before the start of the security conference, German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen announced a massive rearmament of the Bundeswehr (armed forces) in a document entitled “We have understood.”

More than 25 government leaders, 80 foreign and defence ministers and over 500 security experts from around the world participated in the conference. Von der Leyen repeated what she had written beforehand in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “We Germans and most Europeans have for far too long relied for our security on the broad shoulders of our American friends. And yes, we know that we have to bear a larger, fairer share of the burden for the common Atlantic security.”

In Europe, she said, the willingness to do so was “greater than ever.” The European armed forces had “learned military skills and the prudent trust of others in numerous joint operations over recent decades.”

Chancellor Angela Merkel said Germany would honour its commitments and spend more money on NATO and rearmament. “We are committed to the two-percent target,” she said, referring to the requirement that NATO member states devote 2 percent of their gross domestic product to military spending. “We will make every effort to achieve it,” she added. Currently, Germany allocates about 1.2 percent of its gross domestic product to its military budget. “We will do significantly more for defence policy,” Merkel stressed.

At the same time, she warned the US against withdrawing from NATO. No one could deal singlehandedly with the problems of the world, the chancellor said. This was understood as a criticism of Trump and his anti-NATO statements.

The head of the Security Conference, Wolfgang Ischinger, was even more explicit. In interviews, he sharply attacked the new US president. In the Berliner *Tagesspiegel*, the former

German ambassador to Washington said, “The United States no longer counts as the political-moral leadership symbol of the West.” Europe had to fill the resulting vacuum and take on more leadership responsibilities.

The German government is using the widespread opposition to the nationalist and racist policies of the Trump administration to advance its plans for European rearmament. The Munich Security Conference played a central role in this.

Three years ago, at the same conference, German government representatives announced an end to military restraint. Now, the demand of the new US administration that the Europeans do more for their own defence serves as a welcome pretext to drive forward the military buildup.

At the beginning of the conference, Ischinger published an anthology with contributions from high-ranking politicians and security experts under the heading “Germany’s New Responsibility.” In his introduction, he calls for “closer planning and coordination of EU defence budgets.”

The increase in defence spending to two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) demanded by the US government and adopted by the NATO member states in 2014, was too small, according to Ischinger. At least three per cent of GDP was necessary. To achieve this, budget items for crisis prevention, development aid, diplomacy and defence had to be reorganized and directed into a military buildup.

This would mean raising the German defence budget, currently 37 billion euros, to nearly 100 billion euros. Such a gigantic hike in military expenditure would require massive cuts in all areas of social spending and would be opposed by the vast majority of the population.

That is why the Munich Security Conference, which reaffirmed the decision to step up German and European rearmament, was accompanied by shrill warmongering from the media. The recurring mantra runs: By electing Trump, America has abandoned its leadership role in the Western alliance. Germany must understand this as a wake-up call and an opportunity.

The lead article in the news weekly *Der Spiegel* is headlined “Beyond NATO.” It begins with the sentence, “Donald Trump is right.” Seventy years after the end of World War II, Europe had to take on responsibility for its own security. While it was

“premature” to write off America as a partner, it was also “reckless and naïve” not to adjust to the fact that Europe “can no longer rely unconditionally on America.”

There follows the memorable sentence: “The description ‘junior partner’ can finally be consigned to the rubbish heap of history.” Until now, only far-right groups had spoken of Germany freeing itself from American hegemony and paternalism and enforcing its sovereignty.

Such nationalist tirades have not been heard since the “Sturmlied,” the anthem of the Nazis, with its refrain “Germany, awake!” Trump’s slogan “America first!” is regarded as a blow for liberation in Germany’s editorial boards and party offices. Finally, there is a feeling of release from all inhibitions. The call to arms can be linked to the old chauvinist slogans.

Christiane Hoffmann, the author of *Der Spiegel*’s lead article, is married to the Swiss parliamentary deputy and former ambassador in Berlin, Tim Guldemann. In her article, she articulates the views within leading diplomatic circles, which are being discussed ever more openly.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* headlines its editorial comment on the Munich Security Conference “Forced to be self-confident.” It reads: “The European Union has received a wake-up call. It should be understood primarily as an opportunity.” The American president thinks the European partners must do more for themselves. “His vice president embellished the formula: We are there for you when you’re there for us.” This conditionality is new. It forces the Europeans to agree on their goals.

In its latest edition, the political weekly *Die Zeit* asks the question, “Does the EU need the bomb?” It regrets the fact the Bundeswehr “cannot freely make use” of the American nuclear weapons stationed in Germany and is “allowed to use them only...if Washington gives the green light.” Some Europeans could now “imagine their own deterrent, independent of the US.”

That *Die Zeit* specifically means a German atomic bomb is clear from the next few paragraphs. The authors regard with skepticism whether the two European nuclear powers—France and Britain—would grant the German government joint decision-making power on the use of the weapons in an emergency. The British prime minister had already made clear how she intends to use this power—as a lever in the Brexit negotiations with the EU. And in France, it is completely open who will set the tone after the presidential election.

The authors of *Die Zeit*’s article strongly regret the fact that Germany is “a pacifist country.” The Germans, according to *Die Zeit*, had “forgotten how to think in nuclear terms.” In other words, they had “forgotten” how to think in terms of the destruction of millions of human lives. Apparently, they need to be taught it again!

Jan Techau, in the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, is even more explicit. He refers to the “endeavour to

stand there ‘morally clean’ after every undertaking,” which supposedly runs through the foreign policy debate in Germany, as “neurotic.” The “exaggerated moral standard for measuring behaviour” leads to “an isolating neurosis.”

The director of the Richard C. Holbrooke Forum at the American Academy in Berlin traces this moral neurosis back to the “collective trauma of a society” that “at the end of World War II had to realize that all its energy, its idealism, its readiness to suffer deprivation, its ambition, its creativity, its discipline had flowed into the most terrible of all human projects.”

A remarkable formulation! Will Techau have us seriously believe that Hitler’s followers supported him out of idealism and only noticed that he was a criminal at the end of the war?

In any case, he vehemently advocates the surmounting of moral scruples and basing the debate on security policy “on political interests and responsibility” instead of “the satisfaction of one’s own moral requirements.”

“Foreign policy,” according to Techau, “almost always takes place in a moral grey area, in which one, if one wants to remain capable of action, is forced to make painful compromises in one’s own moral invulnerability.”

He refers to the military as the “crowning discipline of foreign policy.” He declares that “The willingness to expose oneself militarily” determines “in times of new strategic uncertainty in Europe, more than any other factor, whether a country is a reliable partner and ally... The political costs of making one’s moral invulnerability the main national interest can thus be enormous.”

Techau too raises the question of whether Germany needs its own nuclear weapons. He concludes with the threat, “In the coming years, Germany will face foreign policy and security challenges of which the country cannot even dream today. Possibly not even in its nightmares.”



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