

War clouds gather over Munich Security Conference

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16 February 2018

“One of the most curious features” of the last two years before the first World War, writes Christopher Clark in his book *The Sleepwalkers*, was “that even as the stockpiling of arms continued to gain momentum and the attitudes of some military and civilian leaders grew more militant, the European international system as a whole displayed a surprising capacity for crisis management and détente.”

One is reminded of these lines as one considers the Munich Security Conference, which begins today in Germany.

The annual meeting brings together hundreds of high-ranking political and military representatives, who participate in the main programme’s debates, hundreds of events on the sidelines, and numerous secret meetings. Both sides from several conflict zones around the world are represented.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko are both in Munich. Heads of government from the Middle East in attendance include Binali Yildirim (Turkey), Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel), Haider al-Abadi (Iraq) and Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (Qatar), and foreign ministers Mohammed Javad Zarif (Iran) and Adel al-Jubeir (Saudi Arabia).

The United States is represented by Defense Secretary General James Mattis, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, CIA head Mike Pompeo and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats. Although Germany currently only has an acting government, it is represented by four ministers: Ursula Von der Leyen (Defence), Sigmar Gabriel (Foreign Affairs), Thomas de Maiziere (Interior) and Gerd Müller (Development).

Other European countries and institutions are also strongly represented: Britain by Prime Minister Theresa May and Intelligence Chief Alex Younger, Poland by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak, and the European Union (EU) by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Foreign Policy High Representative Federica Mogherini.

Also attending are UN Secretary General Antonio

Guterres, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, high-ranking military figures, and leading representatives of international organisations like the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the International Criminal Court, the African Union, the Red Cross, and as a fig leaf, Human Rights Watch.

The conference takes place amid signs of growing international conflicts and an acute danger of war. German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger, the MSC chairman, wrote in the introduction to the Munich Security Report, which will serve as the basis for the conference, “In the last year, the world has gotten closer—much too close!—to the brink of a significant conflict.”

Examples referred to by Ischinger included the tensions between North Korea and the United States, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the tensions between NATO and Russia, the unraveling of landmark arms control treaties, such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the rise of nationalism and illiberalism.

However, anyone expecting the high-level conference to strive for a relaxation of tensions and deescalation of the situation would have been left disappointed. Instead, at the heart of the discussions is the question of how the assembled great powers, and the Europeans in particular, can rearm in preparation for future wars.

The Munich Security Report, which outlines a scenario of the collapse of the international order, has the apocalyptic title, “To the brink—and back?” In answer to that question, the conference is not pulling back from the brink, but preparing to leap into the abyss. Along with the 90-page Security Report, Ischinger presented a 50-page European Defence Report entitled “More European, More Connected and More Capable. Building the European Armed Forces of the Future.” It contains a crazed rearmament program for Europe, the likes of which have not been seen since Hitler, in an unprecedented show of force, prepared the Wehrmacht for World War II.

Ischinger engaged the corporate consultants McKinsey to work out in detail what weapons systems could be purchased

and which wars could be fought if the European powers increase their defence spending to 2 percent of GDP and coordinate their armies and arms programs.

If this goal is achieved by the 28 EU members and Norway by 2024, according to the paper, “about USD 114 billion of additional funds would be available for defense each year, which is the equivalent of two times the UK’s 2017 defense budget.” Total European military spending would then amount to \$378 billion, an increase of 50 percent. Half of this increase “would have to come from Germany, Italy, and Spain—as those countries have high GDPs and a relatively low defense budget in terms of percent of GDP.”

Barely concealing their satisfaction, Ischinger and McKinsey calculate how many tanks, missiles and weapons systems Europe could purchase for this sum. “Rising defense budgets could open a unique window of opportunity to shape the European armed forces of the future,” they write. “The United States launched an analogous increase in spending in response to the 9/11 attacks.”

At one point, they acknowledge the lack of tanks in Europe: “For example, the United States has more than 2,800 main battle tanks, while the armies of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy have around 200 to 350 each.”

Or they pose the question, “How long would it take to purchase, from scratch, all the necessary equipment for an Operation Unified Protector-like mission [the air campaign over Libya in 2011]?” The answer, “Europe would actually need to invest 1.3 years of its 2024 total equipment spending (percent of GDP as is) to purchase the 670 weapon systems required. This shows that buying the entire equipment for just one large mission by itself is a rather tall order in terms of the investment required.”

The NATO defence ministers meeting, which was held in Brussels a day prior to the beginning of the Munich Security Conference, underscored that these are not merely hypothetical questions. “Burden sharing was a key topic of discussion,” a NATO statement said. “Ministers took stock of progress in implementing NATO’s Defence Investment Pledge. By 2024, 15 Allies are expected to spend 2% of their GDP or more on defence. ‘We are moving in the right direction, and I look forward to even more progress in the years ahead,’ said Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.”

The coalition agreement between Germany’s conservative parties and Social Democrats, which is to form the basis for the incoming government’s policies, advocates a major military build-up and closer defence cooperation in Europe. Ischinger, a retired career diplomat, has consulted closely with Germany’s Defence and Foreign Affairs ministries.

The Munich Security Report made clear who the target of this mad program of rearmament is. Alongside China and

Russia, it identified the United States as a potential opponent. The most significant attacks on “the so-called liberal international order, a set of institutions and norms conceived in the aftermath of World War II,” surprisingly “come from unforeseen sources,” states the report. “As G. John Ikenberry notes, ‘the world’s most powerful state has begun to sabotage the order it created. A hostile revisionist power has indeed arrived on the scene, but it sits in the Oval Office, the beating heart of the free world.’”

Future areas of conflict are identified as Central and Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. But the collapse of the European Union, cyber-attacks and internal disturbances are also named as potential causes of war.

One chapter is devoted to nuclear rearmament. “Nuclear-armed powers are modernizing their arsenals, smaller nuclear-armed states are building capabilities, and arms control agreements are fraying,” it states. “A second nuclear age, with more actors and less stability, is taking shape.”

The documents and rearmament plans which set the stage for the Munich Security Conference leave no doubt about the fact that the imperialist powers’ war plans are far advanced. The risk of dying in a nuclear conflict is much higher for the generation alive today than death by common causes of mortality like a heart attack or cancer. Despite this, no anti-war movement exists.

The reason for this is that all of the parties which protested in the past against rearmament and war have made their peace with the capitalist order. Riven by social inequality, national tensions and financial instability, capitalism is the fundamental cause of the war danger. Only an international mass socialist movement of the working class, which connects the struggle against war with the fight against capitalism, can effectively resist the war danger.



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