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No. 1/2022

Unity in a Time of Upheaval

A Readout From the Munich Security Conference 2022

Munich Security Brief
February 2022

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Summary

Overshadowed by the growing threat of a major military conflict in Eastern Europe, this year's Munich Security Conference (MSC) occurred at a particularly critical moment for European security and international peace. Against the backdrop of perceived "helplessness" in the face of a looming Russian attack against Ukraine and a plethora of other interlocking security crises, observers declared the 58th Munich Security Conference one of the most important in recent history. In Munich, the transatlantic partners demonstrated remarkable unity, reassuring one another that as long as they continued to speak with one voice, they were far from helpless.

After a one year break, the 58th Munich Security Conference, the last one chaired by Wolfgang Ischinger, took place in person again – even though due to the ongoing pandemic, the size of the conference was significantly reduced. Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and many other elements of what the Munich Security Report 2022 describes as a "rising tide of crises" had left little doubt about the urgent need for the international security community to resume in-person gatherings.

For the first time in decades, the Russian government was not represented in Munich. But it was all too present in speeches, panel debates, and informal discussions at Hotel Bayerischer Hof on the conference weekend. In what many perceived as a gloomy atmosphere, transatlantic leaders – including US Vice President Kamala D. Harris, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz – conveyed a united message: even if they were unable to prevent a major war, they were determined to make it costly for Russia.

President Zelenskyy, who issued a powerful plea for help for Ukraine, reminded Western countries that in the face of revisionism by authoritarian powers and attacks on liberal democratic values, alignment in words was not enough. The need to turn transatlantic alignment into a joint course of action remains a challenge – one that will continue to concern the MSC as the chairmanship passes on to Christoph Heusgen.

Unity in a Time of Upheaval

When Wolfgang Ischinger took over the chairmanship of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in 2008, the warning words of Russian President Vladimir Putin were still reverberating – words he had issued at the Munich Security Conference 2007 and which many argue had ushered in a new era of East-West relations that promised to be much more conflictive. In Munich, Putin had expressed his discontent with the European security order and NATO enlargement. While the years that followed also included moments of hope and optimism – as when the United States and Russia exchanged the ratification documents of the New START treaty at the Munich Security Conference in 2011 – the general trend was one of rising tensions between Russia and the West. Now, as Wolfgang Ischinger hands over the chairmanship of the conference, Europeans are confronted with war on the European continent. Against that backdrop, the 58th Munich Security Conference took place at what many described as a critical moment for European security and international peace. In light of the massive military buildup of Russian forces at the border to Ukraine, the conference was regarded as a final opportunity for the transatlantic partners to diplomatically resolve the Kremlin-made crisis.

The drumbeat of war in Eastern Europe thus overshadowed the conference in Munich, creating what observers described as a gloomy atmosphere in the halls of Hotel Bayerischer Hof, the MSC's traditional venue.[1] Yet, it was not the only security development that had raised wide-spread concern and had made a physical gathering of the international security community urgently necessary. While almost eclipsed by the looming military assault on Ukraine, a plethora of other security threats that require urgent and collective responses filled the agenda of the Munich Security Conference. They included "the seemingly endless pandemic, the increasingly tangible threat of climate change, the vexing vulnerabilities of an interconnected world, [and] increasing geopolitical tensions."[2]

Taken together, these threats amount to what the Munich Security Report 2022 describes as a "rising tide of mutually reinforcing crises" – a tide that threatens to overwhelm societies and political systems and has created a sense of impotence and lack of control in and beyond Western societies. As data from the Munich Security Index 2022 shows, only 12 percent of respondents in the democracies surveyed disagree with the statement "I feel

"I am often asked whether we are in a new Cold War. My answer is that the threat to global security now is more complex and probably higher than at that time."

António Guterres, UN Secretary General, Munich Security Conference, February 18, 2022

"We are not helpless collectively. On the contrary, we draw our strength from acting together. We are the ones to decide whether or not we are helpless."

Annalena Baerbock, German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Munich Security Conference, February 18, 2022

helpless in the face of global events." Likewise, either absolute or relative majorities in the G7 and BRICS countries feel their countries have no control over global events.

In his opening remarks, UN Secretary General António Guterres provided an unsparing overview of the wide spectrum of security challenges that accompany the one at the border to Ukraine and argued that the result was "increased unpredictability and fragility of the global landscape." Nonetheless, as the Munich Security Report 2022 had hoped for,[3] the political leaders present in Munich actively fought the impression of being helpless in the face of overlapping conflicts and crises. Instead, the transatlantic leaders in particular attempted to project unity and confidence in their ability to tackle the many challenges that confront them.

The "Russia Crisis"

"Not since the end of the Cold War has this forum convened under such dire circumstances," US Vice President Kamala D. Harris argued in Munich. Likewise, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg spoke of "dangerous days for Europe." The conference took place against the backdrop of what the G7 foreign ministers, meeting in Munich, had just described as "Russia's unprovoked and unjustified massing of military forces, the largest deployment on the European continent since the end of the Cold War."[4] As many participants highlighted, if a major war erupted in Ukraine, it would not only have disastrous consequences for Ukrainians and their country; the repercussions would be felt far beyond Ukraine itself. The stakes, so the shared assessment in Munich, were "the foundation of European security"[5] and of "the entire international order."[6] How the "Russia crisis" was resolved, German Minister for Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock warned, would determine whether or not the principles of self-determination, of freedom, democracy and respect for human rights, will prevail as ordering principles on the European continent. If these principles were no longer respected in Europe, added British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, authoritarian leaders in other parts of the world might feel encouraged to violate them, too. He explicitly pointed to the "echo" of an invasion of Ukraine that would be heard in East Asia, particularly in Taiwan.

At the conference, the transatlantic leaders still expressed their hope that it was not too late for a diplomatic resolution of the crisis and reiterated their commitment to engage in "serious" dialogue with Russia. Yet, the most important condition for this type of talk was not met in Munich: the

"Since the start of this Kremlin-made crisis, the European Union and the transatlantic community are fully aligned and united. When the Russian government tried to divide us, over and over again, we have responded with one voice and a common message."

Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission President, Munich Security Conference, February 19, 2022

presence of an official Russian delegation. In the face of Russia's absence from the Munich Security Conference – the first time this century – it was hard to avoid the impression that Moscow had little interest in dialogue about security in Europe.[7] The developments that followed the days of the conference proved that this feeling was right.

Eager to counter the impression of being helpless despite being condemned to soliloquy in Munich, transatlantic leaders left no doubt that while they might not be able to prevent a war, they were capable of making it costly for Russia – and that in this regard the West was fully aligned. According to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the consequences of an attack of Ukraine would be "massive," would cover the political, economic, and financial realm, and would have the transatlantic partners act in unison.

In fact, the transatlantic unity on display in Munich was judged by many as unprecedented. While two years ago, the Munich Security Report had still attested a state of "Westlessness" that was also palpable at the Munich Security Conference 2020,[8] this year's gathering was even described as the "return of the old West."[9] Despite not everyone having started out from the same place when it comes to assessing Russia's actions and the right way to respond, as Kamala D. Harris highlighted, the US and its allies and partners had made a true effort at closing ranks and thereby "achieved remarkably unity." Given that in the weeks before the Munich Security Conference, differences had still dominated the headlines, that is no small feat. Even Berlin's refusal to supply Ukraine with arms and its long reluctance to include the halting of Nord Stream 2 in the package of Russia sanctions, which had raised question about Berlin's reliability among Germany's partners, seemed largely forgotten in Munich. Rather than criticizing Germany, Antony Blinken spoke of complementarity, whereby allies were "bringing different things to the table." Russia's behavior, the transatlantic partners did not tire of emphasizing, was pushing them even closer together. In the words of European Council President Charles Michel, "[t]he Kremlin hoped to divide and weaken our Alliance. They have done the exact opposite." And as long as they preserved a unified front, Europeans and Americans reassured one another in Munich, they were far from helpless.

While many observers shared the assessment that the show of Western unity in the face of a looming war in Ukraine was a major success, another sentiment was equally present: namely that transatlantic alignment demonstrated in Munich was largely self-serving. The absence of the West's

"There is no such thing as 'this is not my war' in the 21st century. This is not about the war in Ukraine, this is about the war in Europe."

Volodymyr Zelenskyy,
Ukrainian President,
Munich Security Conference,
February 19, 2022

main interlocutor, Russia, was not the only reason for this assessment. Another one was the fact that the supposed beneficiary of Western unity, Ukraine, did not regard it as help. In a powerful speech, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Western countries of conducting a policy of appeasement toward Russia. He delivered what observers described as "a rallying call to the West to save his country from a Russian invasion,"[10] pleading the West to exchange appeasement for a policy of preserving peace and security in Europe. Given that for eight years, Ukraine had now served Europe as "a reliable shield" against Russia's army, Zelenskyy argued, united words of solidarity from Western partners were not enough.

While in terms of imminence and feelings of helplessness it provoked, the threat of a major aggression against Ukraine certainly dominated the conference, it was far from the only serious security challenge that, as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had argued in Munich, "urgently require[d] a response." From the future of AI to semiconductor supply chain resilience, from regional order in the Indo-Pacific to food security and women's agency in conflict and humanitarian crises, the main stage, townhalls, roundtables, and side events at the Munich Security Conference covered the whole spectrum of topics on the international security agenda. In fact, before the situation in Eastern Europe deteriorated dramatically, other topics had been front and center to many societies' risk perceptions. The second edition of the Munich Security Index, an annual risk index based on public-opinion surveys in the G7 and BRICS countries developed together with Kekst CNC, had just revealed: while societies are first and foremost concerned about the climate crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, they are highly worried about a diverse set of risks. This diversity – both when it comes to regional crises and issue-specific challenges – was also reflected in the agenda of the Munich Security Conference 2022.

Regional Conflicts

Apart from Eastern Europe, the Munich Security Conference 2022 was dedicated to a series of challenges and conflict zones in other parts of the world, most prominently those in the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East and North Africa. Besides discussions about the Middle East Peace Process, the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the profound destabilization underway at the Horn of Africa, the conference featured animated discussions about Afghanistan and Mali – countries that epitomize the growing challenge to Western attempts to promote peace and stability elsewhere in the world.

"The solution in the Sahel cannot just be a security response, because the Sahel is the part of the world which is at the forefront of the impact of climate change. That is where you see the climate crisis in its entire manifestation."

Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, then–UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General to the African Union, Munich Security Conference, February 19, 2022

In a Townhall session, representatives of Western governments and Afghan civil society discussed the repercussions of the withdrawal of the United States and its partners from Afghanistan. Above all, they debated the monumental dilemma confronting international actors, who do not want to legitimize Taliban rule by engaging with Taliban authorities, while still seeking to deliver humanitarian aid in order to alleviate a major humanitarian emergency and prevent the collapse of the Afghan state.[11] In this regard, Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Anniken Huitfeldt emphasized the need to engage both representatives of the Taliban and of Afghanistan's civil society to properly address the crisis in the country.

As the Munich Security Report 2022 highlights in a chapter dedicated to the Sahel region, despite a heavy increase in peacebuilding activities over the past several years, "the security situation has continuously deteriorated."[12] In Munich, France's decision to withdraw French troops from Mali provided the background for a vivid debate about the future of peacebuilding and stabilization in the Sahel, including discussions about the challenges posed by foreign mercenaries, the differences between state and nation-building, and how the international community could recalibrate its stabilization approach in the Sahel region. As highlighted by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, core to these efforts was ensuring that foreign actors do not perpetuate systems that do not deliver to their people. The then–UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General to the African Union, Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, also emphasized that, in order to build lasting stability, efforts to improve the security situation had to go hand in hand with efforts to promote development, which she argued had been severely underfunded.

A nightcap session dedicated to "The Future of Interventions" provided a bridge for these separate strands of discussion. Conference participants debated the prospects of the project of liberal peacebuilding and what the international community could still achieve in terms of conflict resolution and mitigation. Neglecting the crises elsewhere was not an option for liberal democracies, Annalena Baerbock had already highlighted in her morning address: other actors, including private mercenary groups, would then "fill these gaps." The challenge of dealing with difficult local partners was a central focus of the nightcap session. So was the need for Western governments to better communicate the necessity of stabilization efforts elsewhere in the world to their own populations, as US Representative and Member of the House Committee on Armed Services Elissa Slotkin highlighted.

"There is too much business as usual."

John Kerry, US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, Munich Security Conference, February 18, 2022

Global Challenges

According to findings from the Munich Security Index, the security risk that generates the greatest concern among the societies of key countries is climate change and the risks associated with it. Overall, climate change, the destruction of natural habitats, and extreme weather events were ranked as the top threats facing the international community today by the societies of G7 and BRICS countries. In Munich, the climate crisis was a prominent topic, discussed on the main stage as well as in various other formats and side events of the conference. Discussants in Munich left no doubt about climate change being a tremendous security threat, the impact of which was already being felt in many parts of the world. In different sessions, they discussed, among others, the prospects for meaningful international climate cooperation in times of rising geopolitical tensions, the achievements of the COP26 Summit in Glasgow, and the steps that now needed to be taken on the path to Net Zero. Global leaders identified a massive gap between rhetoric and action among many countries of the world. As US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry pointed out, there was an urgent "need to change the mode" and that the magnitude of the challenge no longer permitted "business as usual."

While the Munich Security Index shows that compared to early 2021, overall concern about the coronavirus pandemic has somewhat decreased among the societies of the G7 and BRICS countries, collaborative efforts to fight the pandemic and prepare for future health emergencies occupied a prominent role in Munich. In a panel discussion on the main stage, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus pointed to the "dangerous narrative that the pandemic is over" when really it was not. Rather than being actively fought world-wide, decisionmakers and experts warned in a townhall event on pandemic preparedness, the "polypandemic"[13] was allowed to produce a "great divergence" among the countries of the world.[14] As a result, the international community would have to brace for "more frequent disruptions" in the future. While many tools and the know-how to fight the pandemic and move the world back to a path of convergence were already available, participants observed, there was a lack of political will to strengthen global governance structures and initiatives like the WHO and COVAX and massively invest in pandemic preparedness. The need to change course and truly "invest in resilience" was highlighted throughout the conference – a need, as pointed out by the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, that extended far beyond the health sector.

"When solutions are put on the table, there is not enough political will [to implement them]."

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General of the World Trade Organization, Munich Security Conference, February 18, 2022

The various threats confronting democratic states and their societies, both from within and from without, were another key theme on the main stage in Munich. Transatlantic leaders discussed how to better defend democracy in the digital age, especially against the growing threat of disinformation, how to stem increasing populism and polarization that were eroding democracy in many parts of the world, and how to respond to soaring attacks by authoritarian regimes on democratic institutions and principles, of which Russian aggression in Eastern Europe was just one of countless examples. The agenda even included a discussion on the role of cities as "democratic game changers." Featuring the mayors of Budapest, Istanbul, and Warsaw, it highlighted the role that cities play not only in the response to key global challenges like the fight against climate change but also in defending democracy at the local level. Many leaders, including German Minister of Defense Christine Lambrecht in a reference to Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, urged conference participants not to underestimate the strength of democracy. However, decisionmakers and experts also agreed that in the months and years ahead, democratic governments needed to substantially increase their efforts to rebuild societies' trust in their political systems, as highlighted by Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi; they had to prove that democracies can deliver on the needs of their people; and they needed to push back against the "methods of authoritarian regimes,"[15] which also include the use of force. In this regard, Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya emphasized that the fate of the Belarusian struggle for democracy was intimately linked to the fate of Ukraine, and that Belarusians were thus closely watching the developments in their neighboring country.

Discussions at the Munich Security Conference highlighted that both Russian attempts to change borders by force, as well as many of the other challenges on the plate of the transatlantic partners – and on the agenda of the Munich Security Conference – were inseparably tied to growing competition between democratic and autocratic systems of rule. This competition, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security Policy Josep Borrell Fontelles argued, was one between an order "centered on the UN, international law, and universal rights" and "a power-based, multi-polar order, with zones of influence and a relativist approach to human rights."

Under different circumstances, the risks posed by China would have occupied a much more prominent role in the discussions in Munich.

"We have learned a lot from recent crises. They have made us stronger. Now we need to work on keeping this unity."

Kaja Kallas, Estonian Prime Minister, Munich Security Conference, February 20, 2022

"Let us stick together!"

Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor, Munich Security Conference, February 19, 2022

After all, it is the actions of China, rather than those of Russia, which many perceive as the greatest threat to democratic principles and the rules-based international order. While Beijing's policies and the extent to which they pose a threat to liberal democratic principles informed many discussions – not least those about the standards that should regulate new technologies – the moment of greatest attention to China was certainly granted when the Chinese State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi commented on the crisis in Eastern Europe. When asked about how he squared China's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference with Beijing's recent statement in opposition to NATO enlargement, Wang Yi was somewhat ambivalent. He emphasized that when it came to the right to non-inter-ference, Ukraine was "no exception," while also calling NATO a Cold War relic.

In all these realms, participants seemed to agree, the risk of being overwhelmed by challenges was evident. So was the perception that what transatlantic partners and the international community lacked most to overcome a sense of helplessness was not a lack of instruments and strategies. It was the political willingness to actively use them and make the massive investments needed to turn the rising tide of crisis. In that regard, the criticism voiced by President Zelenskyy and the discussions on many other security challenges pointed in a similar direction: in the face of growing revisionism by authoritarian powers and many other mounting global threats, the new-found transatlantic unity on display in Munich is highly encouraging. Yet, it is not an end in itself. Under its new Chairman, Christoph Heusgen, the Munich Security Conference will continue to be a platform for like-minded countries to strengthen their coherence and, most importantly, turn it into concrete responses to the many challenges ahead. In this regard, the rules-based international order and the profound ways it is contested these days – in Eastern Europe and beyond – will be front and center.

The Munich Security Conference 2022 at a Glance

> 30

heads of state and government

> 80

ministers

> 20

heads of international organizations
(NATO, EU, UN, AU, OSZE)

206

main program speakers,
including 45 % women

47

main program sessions (Main Stage I & II,
Townhalls, Conversations, Roundtables)

> 20

official multilats
(incl. G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting)

> 2000

official bilats

> 100

partner events

The agenda of the Munich
Security Conference 2022
can be found here:

https://securityconference.org/en/msc-2022/agenda/

The recordings of all Munich
Security Conference 2022 panel
discussions can be found here:

https://securityconference.org/en/medialibrary/
collection/munich-security-conference-2022/

Key Points

1. Overshadowed by the growing threat of military escalation in Eastern Europe and the absence of an official Russian delegation, the Munich Security Conference 2022 occurred at a particularly critical moment for European security and international peace.

2. Eager to counter the impression of being helpless in the face of Russian aggression, transatlantic leaders left no doubt that while they might not be able to prevent a war, they were capable of making it costly for Russia.

3. The transatlantic unity on display in Munich was judged by many as unprecedented – with few traces of the "Westlessness" that was still palpable two years ago.

4. Yet, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy reminded Western countries that in the face of revisionism by authoritarian powers and attacks on liberal democratic values, alignment in words was not enough.

5. While the "Russia crisis" dominated the conference, the debates on the main stage, in townhalls, roundtables, and side events reflected a diverse set of global risks that require urgent collective responses – from the erosion of democracy, the climate crisis, and the coronavirus pandemic to dependencies on critical technologies and challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

Endnotes

If not noted otherwise, all quotes are from the Munich Security Conference 2022 that took place from February 18 to 20, 2022. The recordings can be accessed on the MSC website: https://securityconference.org/msc-2022/.

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11 Also see Julia Hammelehle, "Afghanistan: Losing Heart," in: Bunde et al., "Munich Security Report 2022," 61–71.

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13 See Sophie Eisentraut et al., "Polypandemic: Special Edition of the Munich Security Report on Development, Fragility, and Conflict in the Era of Covid-19," Munich: Munich Security Conference, November 2020, https://doi.org/10.47342/CJAO3231.

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Image Sources

Imprint

The Munich Security Conference (MSC)

The Munich Security Conference is the world's leading forum for debating international security policy. In addition to its annual flagship conference, the MSC regularly convenes high-profile events around the world. The MSC publishes the annual Munich Security Report and other formats on specific security issues.

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