Zeitenwende in the Indo-Pacific?

A Readout From the Munich Leaders Meeting in Tokyo in May 2023

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Summary

From May 14 to 16, 2023, participants of the Munich Leaders Meeting in Tokyo focused their attention on security challenges in the Indo-Pacific and their global implications. They discussed maritime security, the impact of technology competition, matters of deterrence, nuclear security, and how to strengthen the rules-based international order.

Just days before the G7 Hiroshima Summit, the Munich Security Conference (MSC) hosted a Munich Leaders Meeting (MLM) with the kind support of the Japanese government. For the first time, an MLM was held in Tokyo, Japan. The MSC brought together 60 senior decision-makers and experts, including government officials, think tankers, and journalists, to discuss security issues in the Indo-Pacific region.

Like Europe, the Indo-Pacific faces challenges from revisionist actors with manifest ambitions to change the status quo. This has led to a strategic awakening, not only for countries within the region, who have strengthened their security postures and sought new security relationships. Additionally, states worldwide have presented national Indo-Pacific strategies or guidelines in the last years and months, highlighting the importance of the region.

At the MLM, discussions focused on three key aspects: First, participants agreed that security in the Indo-Pacific and Atlantic regions cannot be addressed separately as the two theatres are increasingly connected. This led to discussions about how to strengthen deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. Second, participants agreed that the international order needs to become more attractive and appealing to non-Western countries. Discussions in this regard revolved around the motivations of so-called “fence-sitting” countries who wish to stay out of great power competition. Participants thought about how to better cater to the needs of these countries, but also voiced expectations towards them. Third, participants agreed that the proponents of the current order need to become better at forging a common, positive narrative that highlights its benefits and feels inclusive to those “on the fence” or even on the other side.
Zeitenwende in the Indo-Pacific?

The Munich Leaders Meeting (MLM) convened relevant decision-makers and experts from the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. The Indo-Pacific is home to 60 percent of the global population, generating 60 percent of global GDP. 90 percent of worldwide trade takes place by sea, a major part through the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, in some fields, the world is heavily dependent on countries in the Indo-Pacific. For example, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and China all play outsized roles in supply chains for different types of microchips, building blocks of practically all modern technology, like smartphones or computers. Taken together, any disruption in the region will have worldwide ripple effects on trade and supply chains. Yet, the region faces mounting challenges, aggravated by revisionist actors and increasing competition between the US and China.

A few days after the start of the war, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called Russia’s war against Ukraine a “watershed in the history of our continent.” Yet, the German term he used, “Zeitenwende,” has not only been applied to the European context to emphasize the beginning of a new geopolitical era. Indeed, also countries in the Indo-Pacific are finding themselves in the midst of a Zeitenwende of their own.

Japan has introduced a new national security strategy, pledged to increase its defense spending, overhauled export controls and plans to acquire counterstrike missiles, signaling its willingness to take on more leadership in the security realm. Furthermore, despite historic grievances, Japan and South Korea have fostered a rapprochement on security and economic issues. Against the backdrop of North Korean nuclear threats, South Korea itself has also been in the headlines as it signed a landmark nuclear weapons agreement with the US, involving Seoul more in nuclear planning options and allowing US nuclear submarines to resume visits to South Korean harbors for the first time in 30 years. Additionally, formats such as the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US, known as AUKUS, or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the “Quad,” between Australia, India, Japan, and the US have opened new avenues for cooperation.

Given these developments, frank and open exchange about how to coordinate efforts, deepen existing partnerships, and forge new ones is
Nowadays, the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific cannot be discussed separately.

Yoshimasa Hayashi,
Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Munich Leaders Meeting in Tokyo, May 15, 2023

Participants seized the opportunity provided by the MLM and discussed issues of deterrence, the strengths and weaknesses of the current international order, and how to get more buy-in for it. All discussions painted a nuanced picture of the region’s dynamics and external relationships, highlighting that US-China rivalry is not the only geopolitical frame through which to view the region. While debates were held under Chatham House rule, the MSC was given permission to cite individual comments.

**Dragon in the Room**

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida coined the phrase “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow.” It captures the sentiment among policymakers that Russia’s war against Ukraine represents a reckoning for the European continent, but that the strategic awakening cannot stop there. In this vein, participants at the MLM were quick to agree that security in Europe and the Indo-Pacific is increasingly connected. In all these discussions surrounding deterrence and learning the right lessons from Ukraine, China loomed large.

First, participants agreed that China watches the reactions of the transatlantic allies and their partners on the war in Ukraine closely. They also agreed that continued unity in supporting Ukraine and ensuring it can prevail against Russia militarily and economically are thus of utmost importance. What is at stake is not only safeguarding the lives of millions of people, but also deterring other countries from following suit and disregarding the international order by changing the status quo by force. Hence, deterrence needs to be high on the agenda in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. James William Paterson, a senator from Australia, warned that “the only thing more expensive than deterrence is the failure of deterrence.”

During the MLM, it became clear that deterrence needs to focus on China, but that other revisionist actors in the region, such as North Korea, present a threat as well. At the same time, where possible, avenues of cooperation and trust-building between countries in the Indo-Pacific should be advanced to avoid arms races.

The discussion proceeded to revolve around the best format of security cooperation that would allow transatlantic allies and partners to work together. Some participants preferred a NATO-like defense organization for the Indo-Pacific while others highlighted the benefits of mini- and multilateral groupings. Especially newer arrangements such as the Quad or...
AUKUS were heralded as useful to coordinate security matters in the Indo-Pacific and beyond more closely, with some participants calling for their expansion. Additionally, some mentioned the crucial role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the region and wished for a stronger role of the organization. Regardless of the format, however, several participants mentioned that the most important task for the transatlantic alliance and its partners will be to come up with sustainable forms of burden-sharing to strengthen security in the region and defend the rules-based international order.

Second, several participants emphasized the need to not only think about deterrence in the military realm, but to also tackle the dangers emanating from hybrid warfare tactics. Especially regarding a Taiwan contingency, participants expressed heightened concern over the threat presented by non-kinetic measures such as economic coercion or disinformation. Some participants questioned whether Europeans had understood the extent to which lessons from the war in Ukraine could be applied to a similar contingency in East Asia. For example, participants emphasized the importance of public-private partnerships in Ukraine to aid the country’s fight against Russian hybrid warfare and thought about the role of private companies, especially in the technology field, in a possible conflict over Taiwan. Given that not only Taiwan, but also other hotspots in the Indo-Pacific such as the South China Sea present potential for conflict, participants in general debated about the extent to which Europe would be willing and capable of aiding Indo-Pacific countries politically, economically, and potentially even militarily.

Third, despite the perceived risk of aggression by China, the discussions among participants reflected the emerging trend to avoid speaking of “decoupling” from China, but to call for “de-risking” supply chains and decreasing dependencies in areas critical to national security. However, some participants warned that China might unilaterally decide to decouple its economy – and is already doing so in some areas. This concern was especially prevalent in the realm of technology, where the US and China have been engaging in particularly fierce competition. The dual-use character of many key emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, means that the country that prevails in the ongoing competition will have significant military and strategic advantages. Although one would expect democracies to band together, different regulatory approaches stand in the way of even closer cooperation between the US and Europe on technology.
However, the intensified rivalry between the US and China makes it more and more difficult for Europeans not to side with the US. The perceived need to choose a side has also become more salient on the global level. Countries who refuse to do so find themselves under scrutiny.

Fence-Sitting as a Choice

The Russian war against Ukraine triggered a broader debate about the group of so-called “fence-sitters.” The term entered the debate after numerous countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East declined to openly side with Ukraine after the Russian invasion, for example by abstaining from votes in the United Nations General Assembly. Since then, the debate about fence-sitters has broadened into the question of how these countries, many of them in the “Global South,” position themselves in a great-power competition between the US, China, and to some extent Russia. Instead of fence-sitters, The Economist has grouped the 25 biggest economies that did not condemn the war in Ukraine or wish to remain outside of the great power competition together as the “Transactional 25 (T25).” According to The Economist, they are characterized as “pragmatic,” “opportunistic,” and considered to think that “Western leaders are hypocrites.” Additionally, they have a multipolar trade pattern, and their joint share of global GDP is already at 18 percent in 2023. This shows that many terms (“fence-sitting,” “transactional,” “non-aligned,” “hedging,” “single issue alignment”) are thrown into the debate. Yet, what all of them are hinting at is that major changes in the international order are under way and many countries are not willing to simply side with one great power. One participant reminded the discussants that these countries aim for “strategic autonomy, not being a camp follower.”

Some participants echoed the argument of The Economist and believe that fence-sitting is less an expression of ideology and more a pragmatic approach by countries that do not want to be squashed in great-power competition, aiming instead to reap economic opportunities for their own population. Other participants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East drew attention to the potential benefits of non-alignment, for example that countries can act as mediators in conflicts. In contrast, other participants expressed their dismay that these countries do not stand up against, and occasionally even profit from, Russia’s war against Ukraine. They believe that countries claiming to uphold international law should openly condemn flagrant breaches of it.
These differences notwithstanding, participants agreed on three points: First, the rules of the international order should be applied equally to all. Participants highlighted that this would mean ending American exceptionalism regarding international law just as much as punishing breaches of international law by non-Western countries. One participant argued that the international order should not be characterized by “cherry-picking.” Second, in the age of multipolarity and shifting alliances, liberal democracies need to improve at meaningfully engaging countries from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East in stable, long-term partnerships. Elizabeth Economy, Senior Advisor for China at the US Department of Commerce, made this clear when she said: “Fence-sitters need to be partners. And not just episodic partners; they need to be sitting at the table.” Third, liberal democracies need to become better at presenting a positive narrative around the international order and liberal values that resonates more with countries worldwide instead of viewing every interaction through the lens of systemic rivalry.

Reshaping the Narrative

Especially the point of presenting a more inclusive, positive narrative that highlights the benefits and attractiveness of the liberal international order was raised by several participants throughout the event. Yet, the question around which central concept this new narrative should revolve led to diverging views. Some pointed to the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as baseline documents that all countries agreed to. Especially since these documents were drawn up in consultative fashion, some participants believe in their inclusiveness.

Others argued that the term “rules-based international order” rings hollow, going so far as suggesting to “bury it once and for all” as it is unclear which rules the term refers to and who decides on exceptions. Some participants reminded others that China was pursuing a rules-based order as well, just not one the transatlantic allies and its partners are supporting.

Despite the differences, it became clear that the transatlantic allies and their partners need to extricate their efforts to win over other countries from the frame of US-China rivalry towards a more open narrative. For example, one participant suggested to focus the narrative “not on containing China, but on creating equal rules for all.” Additionally, participants raised the necessity of refining strategic communications to counter disinformation, especially regarding countries that have so far refused to pick sides, and to

"We should not be seen as partners when convenient and pushed aside when inconvenient.”
Abdulla Shahid, Maldivian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Munich Leaders Meeting in Tokyo, May 16, 2023
show a real effort in engaging with their individual needs and concerns instead of treating them as one bloc. The terminology used for the regions and countries in question itself is one starting point. Several participants pointed out that neither “Global South” nor “Indo-Pacific” are useful terms for capturing the complexity of the different countries they claim to encompass.

Last but not least, several participants argued that liberal democracies need to sell their own success stories better and should create positive narratives surrounding their values. This also requires liberal democracies to band together with their partners and communicate clearly how they envision the future, giving others an opportunity to join. The MSC will build on the topics raised in Japan during the next Munich Leaders Meeting.

"If we continue saying ‘Global South,’ we will never understand the different needs of individual countries. We need to understand the specific needs and concerns of each country first before looking at a region, especially on issues of climate, security, and related areas.”

Ambika Vishwanath, Co-Founder and Director Kubernein Initiative and Munich Young Leader, Munich Leaders Meeting in Tokyo, May 15, 2023
Security in the Indo-Pacific and the Atlantic cannot be separated. Instead, policymakers must coherently address the intertwined aspects of security in both regions.

Continued and united support for Ukraine is an important signal to other revisionist actors that attempts to change the status quo by force do not pay off.

Deterring revisionist aggression in the Indo-Pacific, especially by China, requires bi-, mini-, and multilateral security partnerships. Besides defense, resilience against non-kinetic threats of hybrid warfare, such as economic coercion or disinformation, needs to be strengthened.

Liberal democratic countries should work on shifting the current narrative around the defense of the international order. They should appeal to non-aligned states to take a stand by highlighting its benefits and values rather than by invoking systemic competition.

Neither the “Global South” nor the “Indo-Pacific” should be thought of as monolithic blocs with one united agenda. Instead, it is important to understand the needs and concerns of each individual country.
Endnotes

7. The changing nuclear threat environment in the region was the subject of a separate Nuclear Security Roundtable on the margins of the Munich Leaders Meeting.

Image Sources

All images: MSC/Kuhlmann
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