Given the dire state of global security, dark clouds hung over this year’s Munich Security Conference. The conference’s sixtieth anniversary was one of superlatives, but also had to address a superlative number and breadth of crises and challenges, making it impossible to summarize it comprehensively. Still, some key themes emerged over the weekend: the need to insulate transatlantic unity from isolationism; the call of “now” for European action; the search for ways out of the Middle East’s vicious cycle; the reimagining of global order; and, across the board, the finding – or missing – of silver linings.

The sixtieth Munich Security Conference (MSC) gathered under somber circumstances. Violent conflicts have caused staggering levels of human suffering: Russia’s brutal war on Ukraine; Hamas’ terrorist assault and Israel’s retaliation; a regional conflagration in the Middle East; and violent conflicts of all kinds from Haiti to Sudan – 35 in Africa alone¹ – and from Yemen to Myanmar. Global challenges like rising inequality, accelerating climate change, spreading food insecurity, resurgent nuclear proliferation, and rapid technological transformation are not waiting for these crises to fix themselves. Not only are the rifts between great powers stymying action on these challenges; countries everywhere seem increasingly disillusioned with the unequal benefits of the global order and are distrustful of cooperation. Many countries are narrowing their horizons, focusing on protecting their own “slice of the pie” rather than attempting cooperation that provides inclusive benefits. The Munich Security Report 2024 thus asks whether such thinking could lead the world into a vicious cycle of “lose-lose” dynamics.²

Matching the superlative number and breadth of crises and challenges, the sixtieth Munich Security Conference was also one of superlatives. The anniversary showed how the gathering has come a long way in its transformation from a smoke-filled room of 60 men representing the NATO countries to a leading global forum for holistic debates on international security – one that not only reflects the growing recognition of the importance of women and the so-called Global South in these debates but aims to actively drive it forward. As such, the almost 1,000 participants, among them 45 heads of state or government, represented 109 countries. Across 60 sessions in the main program, more than half of speakers were female and more than a quarter from the Global South. Alongside the main stages, a record number of over 200 side events were hosted by leading public and private sector organizations.

Commenting on the Munich Security Report shortly before the conference, Vice-President of the European Commission Margaritis Schinas called on policy-makers to “resist the intellectual appeal of pessimism.”³ In the same vein, MSC Chairman Christoph Heusgen opened the conference encouraging participants to look for the “silver linings” among the dark clouds – slivers of hope for turning crises into opportunities for change.


Insulating Transatlantic Unity Against Isolationism

The message of the death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny arrived minutes before these opening remarks. His wife, Yulia Navalnaya, received the news while at the conference. Her defiant impromptu speech, calling on the international community to hold Putin and his circle accountable, gave participants further reason not to be complacent. Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy saw the announcement of Navalny’s death as a clear message to the leaders attending the conference. He stressed that Putin was waging a “war against any rules at all.” Zelenskyy issued an urgent call to remedy Ukraine’s “artificial deficit” of artillery ammunition, long-range missiles, and air defense systems. The fall of Avdiivka to Russian troops during the conference weekend hammered the message of the impact of dwindling ammunition supplies home.

While last year’s conference was marked by transatlantic unity behind supporting Ukraine for “as long as it takes,” this year was characterized by uncertainty.

While last year’s conference was marked by transatlantic unity behind supporting Ukraine for “as long as it takes,” this year was characterized by uncertainty. Discussions unfolded as a 60-billion-dollar aid package for Ukraine was blocked in US Congress. Shortly before the conference, Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump sent shockwaves across Europe when he questioned whether, under his leadership, the US would protect allies that were not spending enough on defense and even encouraged Russia “to do whatever the hell they want” to them.5

The US, represented in Munich by Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken as well as a bipartisan Congressional delegation, sought to reassure Ukraine and NATO allies. Harris firmly rejected isolationism, making clear that “America cannot retreat” and that “isolation is not insulation.” She underscored the importance of continued support to Ukraine, not least because a failure to impose severe consequences on Russia for its war of aggression would embolden other authoritarians around the globe. Harris also referred to the “sacred” and “ironclad” US commitment to NATO and expressed confidence that the bipartisan support in both houses of Congress would unblock the much-needed aid for Ukraine. At a meeting on the margins of the conference, the G7 foreign ministers also reaffirmed their “unwavering resolve to continue to support Ukraine.”5 While many US representatives drove this message home, some, such as Republican Senators Pete Ricketts and J.D. Vance, argued that “in a world of scarcity,” other issues, notably irregular migration at the US-Mexico border and security in the Indo-Pacific, take priority over security in Europe and the Middle East.

Living Up to Europe’s Moment

European leaders were adamant that the continent must get even more serious about defense, regardless of what happens in the US. Many commended that Europeans are, in fact, gradually stepping up. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg noted that the number of Allies that will meet the two percent spending goal is expected to double this year. This includes Germany, which will meet the target for the first time in 2024. Shortly before the conference, Germany and France joined the UK as the second and third G7 countries to conclude bilateral security agreements with Ukraine. Various speakers, including US Vice President Kamala Harris, applauded the EU’s recently agreed 50-billion-euro aid package for Ukraine. This brings the bloc’s civilian and military assistance to 90 billion euros, which – as EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell noted – exceeds total US support.

However, given the stakes and Ukraine’s race against time, many believed this is not enough. As German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius put it: “We Europeans must and can do more. And we need to do it faster.” Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silija insisted that the schedule for bolstering European defense was “now.” The discussions showed that Europeans are well aware of what has to be done: setting two percent of GDP as the “floor” for defense spending, procuring and developing much more together based on common standards, and providing the defense industry with long-term guarantees, allowing it to rapidly ramp up production. However, there was noticeable frustration that – two years after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion – this recipe has only been implemented in parts and too slowly. Many cited political will as the missing ingredient. In this regard, a joint push by the so-called Weimar Triangle – Germany, France, and Poland – would have sent a strong signal from Munich. The absence of French President Emmanuel Macron and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk meant that this opportunity was missed. Several decision-makers also stressed the importance of explaining spending priorities to domestic publics. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz acknowledged that money spent on security might be lacking elsewhere, but insisted that “without security, everything else is nothing.”

The discussion also revolved around the longer-term vision for Ukraine and other countries in the EU’s Eastern and Southeastern neighborhood. Representatives of the

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5 “Trump Says He Wouldn’t Defend NATO Allies From Russia if They’re Delinquent,” NPR, February 11, 2024, https://perma.cc/2BW2-KXPH.
region pointed out the danger of being stuck in a gray zone between the EU and NATO on the one hand, and Russia on the other, and emphasized the existential importance of their westward integration. While the discussions failed to offer clarity on the paths of Ukraine and Georgia towards NATO, European leaders affirmed how serious the EU’s membership promise was. As accession takes time, many representatives of EU and candidate countries showed openness to staged accession, including integration into the Single Market ahead of full membership. They also addressed the link between EU internal reform and enlargement, focusing on ways of reducing the many veto points in the accession process, as well as more broadly in EU decision-making. The conference also provided a rare occasion for a bilateral meeting between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, raising cautious optimism on the prospects of a peace treaty between the two countries.  

**Breaking the Vicious Cycle of Violence in the Middle East**

The war in Gaza, following the dreadful Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, was the other major conflict at the top of the agenda. The discussions focused on ways to mitigate human suffering on both sides, including the release of over 100 Israeli hostages still held by Hamas and the catastrophic situation in Gaza, which has already resulted in the deaths of nearly 30,000 Palestinians, leaving 17,000 children orphaned. The conference offered opportunities to discuss the release of hostages, including a meeting of multiple countries’ chief hostage negotiators and an event where released hostages and families of those who remain abducted spoke of their experiences. Israel’s President Isaac Herzog met bilaterally with one of the mediators, Qatar’s Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, and publicly commended his significant efforts. Without revealing details of the negotiations, Al Thani referred to entrenched positions on what needs to happen first: the release of Israeli hostages or a ceasefire and humanitarian package for Gaza. He called for an unconditional ceasefire and warned that the window for negotiations was rapidly closing, with ongoing preparations for a military offensive on densely populated Rafah risking mass displacement. Norway’s Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stere warned that Israel’s self-defense was not proportionate, could set a dangerous precedent, and create “a security challenge for generations.”

Many speakers in Munich reiterated the call for a ceasefire and humanitarian corridor, insisting that the vicious cycle of violence in the region can only be broken with a credible perspective for a two-state solution. Asked about the prospects thereof, Herzog recalled the trauma of the Israeli population after the October 7 attacks and stressed that any future agreement must guarantee the security of the Israeli people. He said that one cannot accept terror as a tool to bring about a two-state solution. He further accentuated the importance of pursuing the normalization of relations with regional players, notably Saudi Arabia, saying that this would be a game changer that could change the trajectory of the region. Speaking on a different panel, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said that the Arab states stood ready for a true partnership with Israel if it agreed to a two-state solution. Many speakers also highlighted the need for a stronger stance to contain spoilers, pointing to the destabilizing role of Iran and its proxies. Various elements of a comprehensive peace deal between Israel, Palestinians, and Arab countries were thus put on the table. The order of priorities differed, and the opportunity to speak with, not about each other, was mostly passed up in Munich. Nevertheless, some, including the Belgian and Spanish foreign ministers, expressed hope that there could be “momentum in tragedy.”

**Making the Order Work for Everyone**

The conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have not only drained resources and political capital; they have also widened the gulf between the transatlantic partners and countries of the Global South. The fate of Gaza is a lightning rod for concerns that many crises in the Global South are measured by a different standard or receive short shrift from transatlantic politicians and media. Opening the conference, UN Secretary-General António Guterres named the inability to solve enduring crises—like those in the Sahel, Sudan, or Haiti—addressed in Munich—as evidence that “today’s global order is not working for everyone. In fact,” he said, “it’s not working for anyone.” This assessment was largely shared by the presidents of Ghana and Colombia as well as the prime minister of Barbados on the subsequent panel.

> On climate change, water and food security, the discussions often gave a sense that solutions are known and within reach, but that political will is lacking.

The debates in Munich demonstrated that, to make the global order work for everyone, fundamental changes are necessary. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must remain the bedrock of global norms. They must be protected against those who, as German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock put it, “don’t want to […] negotiate the slice of the pie, but […] want to rob the whole bakery.” However, these norms’ consistent application and a frank conversation on double standards are an overdue necessity. Major challenges that disproportionately affect the Global South must be tackled. The means and tools of tackling them—institutions as well as access to finance

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and technology – must be reformed and regulated in more inclusive ways. For instance, the risks of artificial intelligence (AI) roll-out, especially to democracy, emerged as a shared challenge in a “super election year.” Twenty tech companies signed an accord in Munich to jointly prevent deceptive AI content from interfering with global elections. On climate change, water and food security, the discussions often gave a sense that solutions are known and within reach, but that political will is lacking. “There is no more knowledge that is needed to allow decisions to be made that will […] save the planet,” said Mia Mottley, prime minister of Barbados, who received the MSC’s Ewald von Kleist Award together with John Kerry for her advocacy for climate justice and financial solidarity. The world must live up to its promises on climate finance, and even more importantly, address the debt spiral among the poorest countries. Their owed debt service in 2024 will exceed their public spending on health, education, and infrastructure combined, according to Guterres. Consequently, the need to structurally reform the international financial institutions was a common refrain.

Generally, for countries of the Global South to fully participate in solving problems, institutions like the UN Security Council must become more inclusive and representative of today’s realities. As an example, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar pointed to the inclusion of the African Union into the G20 during India’s chairmanship. Judging by the debate in Munich, what is lacking is not actionable reform proposals but the willingness of major powers to “blink first.” Perhaps encouragingly, the tenor of US-China dialogue was less acerbic than just a year earlier. Both the US and Chinese top diplomats, Antony Blinken and Wang Yi, stressed an obligation to the world to manage their relationship responsibly.

Seizing Silver Linings

Discussions at the sixtieth Munich Security Conference confirmed that dark clouds are indeed hanging over the world. However, they also showed that there are silver linings and that momentum can emerge from crisis. While some opportunities for dialogue were missed in Munich, others were seized. The discussions showed that the recipes often lie on the table but that decision-makers have to put them into practice or engage in deeper dialogue on the right order of putting ingredients together. Finding a silver lining is thus no reason for complacency but an urgent call for action.

Key Points

1. The sixtieth MSC took place under heavy clouds. Lose-lose dynamics are threatening to erode the benefits of global cooperation; the world is facing a record number of conflicts while global challenges, such as the climate crisis, will not resolve themselves.

2. The transatlantic partners reaffirmed their continued support to Ukraine despite symptoms of fatigue and an increasing politicization of military and financial assistance. Europeans are gradually stepping up to the challenge, but Ukraine’s race against time calls for faster and more substantial action.

3. Discussions on the war in Gaza addressed potential elements of a comprehensive peace deal between Israel, Palestinians, and Arab nations, including, in the short term, the release of Israeli hostages, a ceasefire, and humanitarian relief for Gaza. Momentum could arise from tragedy, but decision-makers must overcome divergence on the sequence of measures and the longer-term vision for peaceful coexistence.

4. The above conflicts have deepened the gulf between the transatlantic partners and countries of the Global South and reinforced criticism of double standards. A global order that works for everyone requires reformed international institutions and greater solidarity on the challenges facing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

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