

In the Spotlight +++ Transatlantic Relations +++

Washington's call to action has not yet been answered

Stepping up: a stronger Europe for stronger transatlantic security and defence

by Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger, Chairman of the Munich Security Conference, Munich

In Europe, the sigh of relief was noticeable when President Biden stressed the renewed US commitment to NATO at the beginning of his tenure. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) Special Edition in February 2021, he made it crystal clear that the United States is “fully committed” to the NATO Alliance; article V – the assurance that an attack on one is an attack on all – is an “unshakable vow.”¹ Since then, the Biden administration has repeatedly reaffirmed and followed up on this firm commitment to NATO and the transatlantic partnership – be it in the context of Secretary of State Blinken’s participation in the NATO Summit in March, the US decision to not withdraw but increase troops in Germany, or President Biden’s eight-day trip to Europe in June.

This alliance-based approach, however, goes hand in hand with greater US expectations of its partners. This was highly visible at the G7 summit in Cornwall when President Biden urged the European allies to support US efforts in boosting democracy more strongly. The communique published after the NATO leaders’ meeting sets an ambitious agenda. It is now time for Europe to show that the transatlantic alliance is not a one-sided love affair, but that Europe is willing and capable to step up and fulfil its international commitments.

The European part of the equation

To make Europe a more valuable partner and to improve the shared transatlantic security architecture, the following four points should be guidelines for a European to-do list.

1. Enhancing the coherence of the EU’s foreign policy and formulating a joint approach towards China and Russia

The European Union will only be able to assume international leadership when speaking with one voice. To prevent the EU from being “held hostage by those who hobble European foreign policy with their vetoes”, as German foreign minister Heiko Maas put it in a recent speech,² the current unanimity requirement in EU foreign and security policy needs to be abolished. As the path towards qualified majority voting will be long, member states should start by giving up their veto rights voluntarily and by raising the costs for veto use. Formulating a joint European strategy is also urgently needed

to address the challenges arising from China and Russia, and essential for being a strong partner of the United States in developing a powerful approach towards the two countries. An important component of the Biden administration’s expectations is that the EU step up its efforts to counter the rise of authoritarianism.

2. Deepening European defence and security cooperation – from paper to action

A European Defence Union, deepening military cooperation, pooling and sharing resources, and reconciling different strategic cultures, is not a new idea. Since 2016, a number of initiatives have been launched, including PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation on Security and Defence) and the EDF (European Defence Fund). However, so far, the results have been weak, especially in terms of real military capacity to act. While much ink has been spilled on concepts like “strategic autonomy” or “sovereignty” and while calls for a “European army” are highly present in the public discussion, European defence is nowhere near that. Facing the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic that will put additional pressure on Euro-



Munich Security Conference

For nearly six decades, the strengthening of transatlantic ties has been at the heart of the MSC’s mission. While the ongoing pandemic has forced

the MSC to not hold the 57th Munich Security Conference in 2021, we remain committed to providing a platform for transatlantic exchange on security policy challenges in these critical times. Therefore, the MSC has initiated the series ‘Beyond Westlessness: The Road to Munich’ with several events between February 2021 and February 2022 to prepare the ground for the next Munich Security Conference.

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Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger

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photo: MSC/Kuhmann

pean defence, European states need to make sure that they do not turn inwards – as they did after the 2008/2009 financial crisis resulting in “bonsai armies” across Europe – but use the pandemic as additional incentive to expand and deepen cooperation within the EU and NATO.³

3. Renewing the commitment to increase defence spending

The signal that Europe is willing to invest more in the security of the Alliance starts with a renewed commitment to a higher defence expenditure and to long-term financing. While it is widely agreed that the spending target of 2% of the country's GDP is no adequate benchmark for a country's actual contribution and capabilities, a significant increase in defence spending is needed. More importantly, as NATO states have repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to the 2%, the target has become a central symbol of Alliance solidarity. Any efforts to improve the framework for assessing the contribution of NATO members thus need to take it as a starting point and build on it. Secretary Blinken just signaled his openness to do so, reaching out to NATO partners by stressing: “The full implementation of these commitments [2%] is crucial. But we also recognize the need to adopt a more holistic view of burden sharing. [...] We must acknowledge that because allies have distinct capabilities and comparative strengths, they will shoulder their share of the burden in different ways”.⁵

4. Moving from burden-sharing to burden-shifting

Finally, Europe needs to understand that today, it is not just about classic burden-sharing – meaning increasing ones' contribution to collective security and defence – but more and more about burden-shifting.⁶ As the United States are increasingly moving their focus to the Indo-Pacific, Europe will need to assume greater responsibility in its eastern and southern

neighbourhoods. While the US will continue to support its European partners, Europe will have to take the lead in crisis management operations, including in the Sahel region.

We need a proactive Europe

Rather than waiting for proposals and calls to action from its transatlantic partner, Europe should come up with its own initiatives. It needs to sketch out how it sees its role in the future transatlantic security and defence partnership, what it is willing to invest politically and economically, and what it expects from the United States. So far, Washington's call to action has not been answered.

¹ Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference | The White House (<https://bit.ly/3vSYG5n>)

² Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the opening of the 19th Ambassadors Conference “Build back better – Foreign policy for the post-COVID world” – Federal Foreign Office (auswaertiges-amt.de) (<https://bit.ly/3dcYg2M>)

³ Saving European Defense From the Coronavirus Pandemic – Carnegie Europe – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Toward a New “Lost Decade”? Covid-19 and Defense Spending in Europe | Center for Strategic and International Studies (csis.org) (<https://bit.ly/3h1hj1f>)

⁴ Zeitenwende | Wendezeiten – Special Edition of the Munich Security Report on German Foreign and Security Policy | Munich Security Conference (<https://bit.ly/3wUuSpS>)

⁵ Reaffirming and Reimagining America's Alliances: Speech by Secretary of State Blinken following NATO Foreign Ministerial | U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (usmission.gov) (<https://bit.ly/3wVzaor>)

⁶ Seizing Biden's Pivot to Europe: Time for Responsibility-Sharing | The German Marshall Fund of the United States (gmfus.org) (<https://bit.ly/3x8uAM4>)