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Munich Security Conference overshadowed by rising great power conflicts

The 55th Munich Security Conference, which begins today, has been overshadowed by rising great power conflicts. The conference will be dominated by the preparations of the United States and its allies for war with Russia and China, but it will also be impacted by escalating tensions between the Western allies.

The *Munich Security Report 2019*, published by the conference's organisers at the beginning of the week, is a terrifying document. It assumes that a clash between the major nuclear-armed powers is all but inevitable. It is less concerned with the question of how to avoid this catastrophe, focussing instead on how best to prepare for such a clash and who will pick up the pieces.

In the debates over the origins of World War I, it has been repeatedly claimed that the great powers were sleepwalkers who stumbled into the catastrophe. This is an incredible trivialisation of the imperialist powers' responsibility for the war. However, if one compares the prelude to the First World War to the current conflicts between the major powers, they are not stumbling, but running with eyes wide open towards the abyss.

The *Munich Security Report 2019* conveys the impression of a ruling elite that has lost control of political events, and is responding by rearming and preparing for criminal wars that will call into question the survival of humanity.

Already in the foreword to the report, Wolfgang Ischinger, the head of the Munich Security Conference, writes, "A new era of great power competition is unfolding between the United States, China, and Russia, accompanied by a certain leadership vacuum in what

has become known as the liberal international order. While no one can tell what the future order will look like, it is becoming obvious that new management tools are needed to prevent a situation in which not much may be left to pick up.”

As the document goes on to show, these management tools are chiefly weaponry and military firepower to intimidate and destroy rival states.

The first chapter, “The Great Puzzle: Who Will Pick Up the Pieces?” cites from the new *National Security Strategy* of the United States, which declares: “...we are heading into an era of sustained big power competition for which the West, collectively, is underprepared.” Washington views China and Russia as its main rivals: “US strategic documents have singled out China and Russia as the two most important challengers, and many key administration officials have emphasized this threat perception in public speeches.”

The sense that China has become “the most dynamic and formidable competitor in modern history” is now widely shared in Washington, continues the *Munich Security Report*. As evidence, the report cites US Vice President Mike Pence, who accused China “of attempting to erode America’s military advantage on land, at sea, in the air, and in space,” and warned: “We will not be intimidated, and we will not stand down.” The *Munich Security Report 2019* concluded, “Many read Pence’s speech as the announcement of a new cold war.”

Under the subheading “From Pax to Crux Americana,” the report goes on to discuss in detail what Europe must do to enforce its own interests in a conflict involving the major powers. “The European Union is particularly ill-prepared for a new era of great power competition,” states the report. “Nonetheless, increasing uncertainty about the future role of the United States has led to a renewed discussion of Europe’s ‘strategic autonomy.’”

Five years ago, the German government used the Munich Security Conference to announce an end to military restraint. “Germany must be ready to engage in foreign and security policy earlier, more decisively and more substantially,” Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said at the time. “Germany is too big just to comment on world politics from the sidelines.”

Since then, Germany and other European countries have rearmed and significantly increased their military spending. But this, according to the Munich Security Conference report, is nowhere near enough to achieve strategic autonomy and pursue global great power interests independently of the United States.

“There is still a long way to go to reach what Jean-Claude Juncker called ‘Weltpolitikfähigkeit’ at last year’s Munich Security Conference,” states the *report*. “And ‘Weltpolitikfähigkeit’, or the ability to play a meaningful role in world politics, is badly needed. Although most strategic thinkers in Europe agree that a strong transatlantic partnership will remain the best security guarantee for Europe, this preferred option may not be available in the future.”

The report makes an urgent appeal for the European powers to massively increase their military spending once again: “Given the rapid pace of change, European policymakers need to come up with long-term strategic approaches and make available the necessary resources if Europe is to be more than just ‘a theater of serious strategic competition’ for other actors.”

The Middle East Conference, which took place in Warsaw a day prior to the beginning of the Munich Security Conference, underscored how sharp the conflict between the United States and Europe, and Germany in particular, has already become. The German media denounced the conference as a deliberate attempt to divide Europe. “[US Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo exploited the deep-seated hostility of Poland and Hungary towards Brussels, as well as the frictions between these countries and Germany, to drive a wedge into the EU,” complained the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Conflicts within the EU are intensifying. After months of sniping between Paris and Rome, France recalled its ambassador for the first time since World War II from Italy, a founding member of the EU and NATO. French President Emmanuel Macron also called off a joint appearance with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Munich Security Conference. Although he justified his decision with reference to domestic political obligations, the relationship between Berlin and Paris has cooled markedly over recent months.

The European powers are responding to these mounting conflicts by accelerating their rearmament drive. British Defence Minister Gavin Williamson, who will open the conference with his German counterpart Ursula Von der Leyen, delivered a bloodthirsty speech on Monday in which he called for a major intensification of British militarism following Brexit. Britain must be ready to “employ military force to defend our global interests,” he said.

The Munich Security Conference is the largest meeting of politicians, military personnel, arms industry representatives, and military experts in the world. This year, more than 500

international guests are expected to attend, including 35 heads of state and government, 50 foreign ministers, and 30 defence ministers.

The US is represented by the largest delegation, which alongside Vice President Pence also includes House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, President Trump's daughter Ivanka and her husband Jared Kushner. Chancellor Merkel and six other ministers are participating from Germany.

Other registered guests include Ukrainian President Petro Poroschenko, Egyptian dictator Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi, Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Hasina Wajed and the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini, IMF head Christine Lagarde, and interim World Bank chief Kristalina Georgieva are also in Munich.

This high-ranking meeting will spend three days discussing how to prepare future wars that will mean misery and death for millions of people. This is sufficient evidence to confirm that it is impossible to prevent such conflicts with appeals to the reason and conscience of the ruling class.

The *Munich Security Report 2019* contains the result of an interesting poll. Asked which country's power and influence they thought represented the greatest danger to their country, 49 percent of Germans said the United States, compared to 30 percent who said Russia and 33 percent who chose China. The result was similar in France. Asked who they thought would do the right thing in world affairs, 10 percent of Germans named Trump, compared to 35 percent who said Putin, and 30 percent who chose Xi Jinping. Even in the United States, only 48 percent of respondents named Trump, compared to 39 percent for Xi and 21 percent for Putin, who is incessantly demonised by the media.

These results hardly indicate sympathy for the Russian and Chinese presidents, but express the vehement opposition among the population in Germany, France, and the US to the war-mongering policies of their own governments. This widespread opposition to war requires an orientation and a political perspective. It can only be successful if it bases itself on the international working class, and advocates a socialist programme to overthrow the capitalist system, the origin of militarism and war.