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The Munich War Conference

The original motto of the Munich Security Conference (MSC), “Peace through dialogue,” has always been a sham. The gathering of high-ranking representatives from politics, the military, the intelligence services and the defence industry from all over the world, which took place for the 60th time last weekend, has always been a hotbed of intrigue, conspiracies and preparations for war.

The speeches and debates in front of the cameras are mainly for propaganda purposes, while the actual work of the conference takes place in back rooms. Meeting in close quarters facilitates discussions and agreements that could otherwise hardly take place.

This year’s meeting in Munich went further than any previous one. It served directly and immediately to intensify ongoing wars. It did not concern itself with “peace through dialogue,” but with demonising the opponent and promoting military escalation.

Russia and Iran, NATO’s two current main adversaries, were not even invited to the conference. A delegation traveled from China and the Chinese foreign minister met with the American secretary of state, but this was to survey the terrain before the next military escalation.

The conference was characterised by a mood of despair and bitterness. The participants reacted to the devastating course of the Ukraine war, which is deadlocked after two years and hundreds of thousands of deaths, and to the growing global outrage over the genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza by grabbing the bull by the horns, arming themselves even more and preparing for a nuclear war.



Izchak Herzog, President of Israel, left, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, right, shake hands at the Munich Security Conference in Munich, Germany on February 17, 2024. [AP Photo/Sven Hoppe]

The official motto of the conference was “Lose-Lose,” the opposite of “Win-Win”—a blunt admission that there can only be losers in this race for arms and expanding wars. “Lose-lose, that is a situation in which there is no way out. And that’s how some things seem in Munich,” commented the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The *Münchener Merkur* wrote: “The West has never been as insecure, even desperate, as at the 2024 Security Conference.”

David E. Sanger and Steven Erlanger, two long-time correspondents for the *New York Times*, described the atmosphere at the conference as follows:

In Munich, the mood was both anxious and unmoored, as leaders faced confrontations they had not anticipated. Warnings about Mr Putin’s possible next moves were mixed with Europe’s growing worries that it could soon be abandoned by the United States, the one power that has been at the core of its defence strategy for 75 years.

Escalation of the war against Russia

In 2007, President Vladimir Putin traveled to Munich in person and warned the US and NATO in urgent terms against continuing to strive for world domination by force. He particularly opposed a further expansion of NATO to the east, which he described as a “provocative factor,” and recalled the guarantees that the Soviet Union had received before its dissolution.

NATO not only ignored this, but accelerated its expansion eastward. In February 2014, Washington and Berlin helped a regime dependent on them to come to power in Ukraine, which shares a 2,000-kilometre border with Russia, and began to systematically arm the country. Moscow responded with a military attack on Ukraine in February 2022.

Although the Western powers have since supported Ukraine with €250 billion, the war is at an impasse. While the initial military successes of the Ukrainian army were celebrated at the 2023 Munich Security Conference, the army is now on the defensive. At the start of the conference, news broke of the Ukrainian withdrawal from the fiercely contested city of Avdiivka—a serious defeat.

In addition, there are growing difficulties in replacing the up to 500,000 Ukrainian soldiers who have so far been expended as cannon fodder, as well as a lack of ammunition due to the blockade of funds by the US Republicans and the inability of the Europeans to ramp up their own production in the short term.

A few days before the conference, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump threatened to withdraw American support from European states that do not invest sufficient funds in the military and to “encourage Putin to do whatever the hell he wants with these allies.”

Die Zeit asked: “Will Europe soon find itself without American protection—or with a promise of support that nobody takes seriously any more?”

The Munich Security Conference reacted to this crisis not with a retreat, but with a further escalation. Although Putin has repeatedly signaled his willingness to negotiate, most recently in an interview with the right-wing US presenter Tucker Carlson, no such solution was considered. The mere thought of an end to the war without the military defeat of Russia, a nuclear power, is now considered treasonous in NATO circles.

The conference opened with an impromptu appearance by Yulia Navalnaya, who had learned of the death of her husband Alexei Navalny three hours earlier. Although the death, let alone its cause, had not yet been confirmed, she was greeted by the assembled heads of government and military leaders with standing ovations and rhythmic applause for several minutes.

“Putin and all those who work for him—I want them to know that they will be punished for what they have done to the country, my family and my husband,” Navalnaya shouted. “I call on the world to fight evil.”

After the conference, she announced in a video that she would take her husband’s place and continue his political work. Apparently, she had been convinced in Munich to take this step, which she had previously always rejected.

Zelensky and Scholz denounce Putin

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who was present in person, devoted most of his speech to denouncing Vladimir Putin. He accused the Russian president of the murder of

Navalny and said that there were only two options for him: a trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague or assassination by one of his accomplices.

Zelensky accused Putin of threatening the whole of Europe and many other countries. The Russian invasion of Ukraine two years ago marked the end of the world as we know it, he said. 2024 was the year in which the rules-based world order had to be re-established.

Zelensky's speech culminated in a call for further military aid and sanctions. He urged his audience not to be afraid of what might happen if Vladimir Putin were to suffer a defeat—in other words, not to be afraid of a possible nuclear war.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz likewise focused his speech on the war in Ukraine and fiercely attacked the Russian president. "It is obvious to me that Navalny was killed," he claimed, without a shred of evidence. Two years after the start of the war, he declared, everyone should be asking: "Are we doing enough to signal Putin?" He added, "We are in for the long haul."

A Russian victory in Ukraine would mean "the end of Ukraine as a free, independent and democratic state and the destruction of our European peace order," said the chancellor. "The political and financial price we would then have to pay would be many times higher than all the costs of our support for Ukraine—today and in the future."

Scholz proudly pointed out that the EU and its member states had so far provided almost €90 billion and had agreed to provide a further €50 billion. Germany alone had provided or pledged €28 billion in military support. Although the money was lacking elsewhere, he said: "Without security, everything else is nothing."

Immediately before the security conference, Scholz and Zelensky had signed a bilateral security agreement in Berlin that guarantees Ukraine permanent military support until its planned admission into NATO. "The significance of this document can hardly be overestimated," emphasised Scholz.

It is the first time that the Federal Republic of Germany has acted as a guarantor state in this form. Among other things, the agreement provides for the supply of weapons, the training of Ukrainian soldiers and support for demining and reconstruction. Should war break out again after a ceasefire, the German government undertook to discuss rapid and effective military support within 24 hours.

Zelensky had also reached a similar agreement in Paris with President Macron, who did not come to Munich himself. There is already one with Britain, which includes a secret additional section.

Genocide in Gaza

The second key topic at the security conference was the Middle East conflict. Here, the representatives of the NATO powers endeavoured to involve the Arab regimes in their plans for a reorganisation of the region under their domination, and to develop the necessary formulas that would allow them to save face in the midst of genocide against the Palestinians.

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The foreign ministers of the US, Germany, Britain, France and Italy met for confidential talks with their counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey was also included in the talks.

As the Saudi foreign minister subsequently reported, the talks focused on normalising relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel in exchange for the promise of a Palestinian state and reform of the Palestinian Authority.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who was also in Munich, described the normalisation of relations with Saudi Arabia as a “game changer” for the region. However, he added, there would be no Palestinian state “if we do not find real solutions to the issue of Israel’s security.”

In a statement, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “firmly rejected any international dictates regarding a permanent arrangement with the Palestinians.”

Call for nuclear weapons

In his speech in Munich, Scholz also spoke indirectly about the rise of the European Union as a nuclear power. He mentioned that talks were being held with France and Britain about the development and introduction of “stand-off precision weapons.”

As the German government’s national security strategy from last summer already announced the development of medium-range weapons and Scholz is now linking this to the nuclear powers France and the UK, experts assume that these weapons will be capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

In recent weeks, representatives of all the establishment parties in Germany have made demands to this effect, including Liberal Democrat (FDP) leader and Finance Minister

Christian Lindner, the recently deceased Christian Democrat (CDU) politician Wolfgang Schäuble, former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Greens) and European MPs Manfred Weber (CSU) and Katarina Barley (SPD).

The Polish head of government Donald Tusk and the head of the Airbus Group René Obermann are also in favour.

There is talk of using the French nuclear arsenal for the whole of Europe, as President Macron has offered. Unlike the British, the French nuclear weapons are completely independent of the US. Sixty-four of the almost 300 warheads are stationed on four submarines and have a range of up to 6,000 kilometres. They could be launched even if France were destroyed by nuclear weapons, and are therefore considered a particularly effective deterrent.

The armament, the financing of the war against Russia, the support for Ukraine and the development of a European nuclear force are swallowing up huge sums of money. There are calculations that Germany will have to spend four percent of GDP instead of two percent in order to meet all the targets that have been set. This would mean doubling the defence budget by adding a further €85 billion a year—which would be recouped through cuts in social spending.

The war madness goes hand in hand with a huge intensification of the class struggle. British historian Tim Mason wrote about the dynamic that drove Germany into the Second World War in the 1930s:

The only “solution” open to this regime of the structural tensions and crises produced by the dictatorship and rearmament was more dictatorship and more rearmament, then expansion, then war and terror, then plunder and enslavement. The stark, ever-present alternative was collapse and chaos, and so all solutions were temporary, hectic, hand-to-mouth affairs, increasingly barbaric improvisations around a brutal theme.

Today, the deep global crisis of capitalism is setting the same dynamic in motion, which no party that defends capitalism can escape. The Greens, whose emergence in the early 1980s was closely linked to mass protests against the deployment of medium-range Pershing II nuclear missiles, are today calling the loudest for the nuclear bomb. Only an independent movement of the working class that combines the struggle against exploitation and war with a socialist programme to overthrow capitalism can break this dynamic.

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