

**POLICY POSITION** 20 February 2019

## Four takeaways from Munich

**Nicole Koenig** Deputy Director, Jacques Delors Institute Berlin

Last week, world leaders gathered for the 55<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference (MSC). The event offered a condensed insight into the state of global politics and Europe's place within it. For me, there are four takeaways and a range of unanswered questions to be monitored.

### 1. The EU appeared as the last stronghold of multilateralism - but this was above all symbolic.

The [MSC report](#) asked who would pick up the pieces of an increasingly disintegrated world order. As a live poll at the kick-off event in Berlin showed, expectations are high for Europe, supposedly the last stronghold of multilateralism, to do the job. Throughout the conference, there were many symbols encapsulating this expectation: its Chairman Wolfgang Ischinger opened the discussion in a [hoody](#) with the EU flag. The ultimate symbol was the much-celebrated [speech](#) of Chancellor Merkel. She made a passionate pledge for multilateralism and for the defence of German and European interests, and directly criticized US tendencies towards unilateralism.

But at the same time, Europe was blatantly absent from some of the discussions on the world's most pressing security challenges. An example was the debate on a strategy for Syria between representatives of the US, Russia, Turkey, Lebanon and the Arab League. The fact that Europe, which is immediately affected by the implications of the Syrian conflict (e.g. migration, terrorist attacks, returning foreign fighters), was also completely missing from the content of the discussion is a sign of its weak voice in its neighbourhood.

**To be monitored:** What concrete initiatives can European multilateralists launch to push their agenda beyond symbols? What role can the EU play in the stabilization of Syria?

### 2. The transatlantic rift was consolidated, but there were some hopeful signs.

The transatlantic rift became apparent in the contrast between the speeches of European representatives and US Vice President [Mike Pence](#). He delivered the same, if somewhat more polished messages that Europeans have heard from President Trump throughout the past year. Assurances that 'America First' did not mean 'America alone', but rather greater burden-sharing in leading the free world were met with polite applause. But well-known issues of dissent were at the foreground: the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty as well as the retreat of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, there were some hopeful signs. With over 50 representatives of Congress, this year's MSC saw the biggest ever American delegation. This was an expression of the bipartisan desire to reassure Europeans and seek dialogue beyond the executive.

**To be monitored:** To what extent can Europeans establish parallel transatlantic channels of communication with members of Congress in the pre-presidential campaign period? What will the gradual withdrawal of the US from Syria and Afghanistan look like and how could it be coordinated with a stepped up European stabilization role?

### 3. Russia, China and Iran rejoiced in Western disunity and imposed their own vision of multilateralism.

On days two and three of the conference, the focus shifted from Euro-Atlantic to global security with representatives of Russia, China and Iran taking the stage. Against the backdrop of Western disunity, they imposed their own interpretations of multilateralism. Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, for instance, [called](#) on Europeans to do more to rescue the Iran nuclear deal: ‘Europe needs to be willing to get wet if it wants to swim against a dangerous tide of U.S. unilateralism’. Meanwhile, the Russian and Chinese interpretations of multilateralism excluded Western attempts to include them within a broadened and renewed disarmament regime.

**To be monitored:** Can Europeans uphold their unified stance on the Iran nuclear deal despite mounting US pressure? What options do NATO Allies have if Russia continues to disregard the INF Treaty? How could China be nudged into joining a sort of INF Treaty 2.0?

### 4. We have to prepare for security challenges that transcend the nation state and add to the toolbox of great power competition.

Many of the less visible side events pointed towards challenges at the intersection of security and technology. Three recurrent issues keep participants awake at night:

- 1) The prospect that terrorists increasingly move from conventional tools (e.g. bombings) to attacks using easily accessible new technologies such as drones and bots.
- 2) Disinformation and online election interference threaten to destabilise modern democracies. This applies to the upcoming [European Parliament elections](#) as well as to the general election in India, the world’s largest internet user.
- 3) Progress on Artificial Intelligence is transforming societies and weapon systems. This could open a new geopolitical battlefield between democracies and autocracies facing far fewer ethical constraints in both regards.

**To be monitored:** How, in what time frame, and at what governance level can democracies regulate the potential dark sides of new technologies without losing their competitive edge?

Europe is facing a capability-expectations gap 2.0. It is expected to pick up the pieces of this complex global puzzle, but faces internal hurdles and strong external competitors. Being a champion of multilateralism will require more than beautiful symbols and nice speeches. It will require the political courage to overcome internal tensions, share sovereignty, and formulate clear-cut and unified positions across a very broad spectrum of internal and external policies. The 55<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference was yet another reminder that European nations have no alternative to standing together.