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America first — Europe last?

After Munich, the transatlantic bond seems weaker than ever. And Europe's response? Much of the same old story

The Munich Security Conference has ended, but the shockwaves it generated will reverberate for some time to come. Typically, the gathering in southern Germany has served as the annual high mass of the transatlantic community. This is where the unity between the US and Europe has been celebrated for more than 60 years. In the process, there has also been some fierce criticism of one another, especially when it comes to burden-sharing within the alliance. At the same time, the conference has served as a platform for intensive dialogue on common challenges.

But instead of celebrating – or at least reaffirming – the transatlantic alliance, discussing a common course against Vladimir Putin in Ukraine and planning the maintenance of the rules-based international order, all that remains of this year's conference is a change of direction, a new seating arrangement and a European evergreen.

A transatlantic *Zeitenwende*

There is a new sheriff in town, that much has been clear since the US election. Donald Trump's policies affect a wide range of issues, especially European security. The big question before the Munich Security Conference was therefore how the new man in office would deal with Europe's central conflict — the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

After all, Trump had long promised to put an end to this war in the blink of an eye. It was just unclear how he would go about it. Munich was supposed to bring clarity on this. But there was no announcement on Ukraine at the start of the conference; instead, US Vice President JD Vance opened a much bigger can of worms. In his speech, he barely touched on security policy, but fundamentally questioned the shared transatlantic values. His criticism of European democracies becoming increasingly closed off to the true will of the people, which led to a comparison of Europe with the late Soviet Union, was a drumbeat that

will reverberate for a long time to come. The tone was set: the transatlantic alliance is no longer what it used to be. In this sense, the announcements that followed in Munich, ahead of the NATO meeting in Brussels on Ukraine policy, were easier to understand.

With US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth's speech at NATO, the phone call between Trump and Putin a few days before the security conference and the appearance of the special envoy for Ukraine, General Keith Kellogg, in Munich, the Trump administration has made it clear that it is abandoning two principles of its previous policy. The maxim 'nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine' is being thrown out of the window, as is the principle of forming a united Western front against Putin. In doing so, the US government is making a U-turn in its Ukraine policy, which is beautifully summed up by the well-known catchphrase 'America First'. Whereas President Joe Biden endeavoured to ostentatiously involve all allies and, above all, the government in Kyiv, at most expressing his own preferences behind the scenes, his successor is openly and bluntly aligning himself with American interests.

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This turnaround has direct implications for the negotiations now beginning in Saudi Arabia. The start of a diplomatic process, quite apart from Russian participation in negotiations, had so far been hampered by disagreements within the West. There have been disputes within the group of supporters and within Ukraine itself as to what goals should be pursued and, therefore, what concessions could be made. Trump and his team have cut through this knot. Hegseth had already taken future NATO membership and the reconquest of the occupied territories off the table in Brussels. One could have interpreted this as a 'naked emperor' moment, as it had been clear for some time that both were largely unrealistic. But from a negotiating point of view, it was a faux pas because two important chips were taken off the table unnecessarily.

But Washington's actions show how it interprets the negotiating situation. General Kellogg also emphasised this again in Munich. There will be a table for the 'big players', where the US and Russia will negotiate directly with each other and make the key decisions. Ukraine and Europe will, if they are lucky, be seated at a side table in the room, or even outside, but will then be allowed to implement and abide by the decisions. This signals a move away from security systems such as the

OSCE, where everyone has a seat at the table. Instead, it sounds much more like Yalta, where the major powers outline the contours of a new order and make decisions for everyone else. It remains to be seen how far this does justice to the complexity of the situation.

The reactions to Vance's speech and the unilateral American decisions on Ukraine? Gasps for breath, Europeans pale as cheese and reactions of defiance, especially the joint singing of 'European evergreens'. The scene was almost reminiscent of a carnival — after all, anyone who has ever come into contact with European security policy knows the well-known classics by heart. There was immediate talk of the 'European hour', the European army was dusted off and taken out of the moth box by Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself, and, of course, the 'wake-up call for Europe' was on everyone's lips, even if it wasn't news back in 2019. It always means the same thing: Europe should take more responsibility for its own security, invest more in its defence and thus relieve the US of its role as the continent's security guarantor. Basically, the same conclusions as those drawn in the context of the turning point following the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

To make it clear that this time it really is meant seriously, French President Emmanuel Macron has scheduled a European crisis summit. One day after the 'European nightmare', as the Munich Security Conference 2025 was categorised, a number of important European heads of government are meeting in Paris. The short-term goal is to find a common strategy for Ukraine and a way to sit at the big table after all. Because the US' brutal 'America First' approach harbours the risk that the European NATO allies will not find a common response, but will end up trying to secure at least a place as close to Washington as possible. The result would be 'America first — EU last', and there is reason to suspect that this is also one of the goals of the new US administration.



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