

What to Expect From the 2023 Munich Security Conference

By Mike Rogers, Mitchell Reiss, Kate Fall, Joachim Peter,
Marc Reverdin and Brittany Walters

Brunswick Geopolitical

February 2023

What to Expect From the 2023 Munich Security Conference

Every year since 1963, the Munich Security Conference has hosted governments, experts and companies to come together to discuss Euro-Atlantic defense and security issues. Dominated by the presence of NATO countries, including a strong US delegation (President Biden in 2021, Vice President Harris in 2022), the conference functions as a thermometer of European security debates and helps identify future trends. It's also a forum where leaders from outside the alliance come to pass on messages, as Russian President Vladimir Putin did in 2007 when he accused the US for the first time publicly of supporting an unreasonable expansion of NATO to the East. The 59th Munich Security Conference promises to lay out a rich agenda for European security actors and companies interested in the European market.

Refocusing on European security

The difficulties encountered by NATO in recent years, marked by US President Donald Trump's financial demands on the Europeans, President Emmanuel Macron's remarks on "NATO's brain death," the American strategic pivot towards Asia and the question of relations with China, have pushed the MSC to reinvent itself by focusing increasingly on the security aspects of global issues, including climate, biodiversity, digital, health and food.

However, the Russian war against Ukraine has caused the event to refocus on its origins: the security order in Europe, which now needs to be completely reinvented. This will require writing new rules and reforming institutions, but also rethinking the whole European defense tool in the light of new or previously undetected threats. In Germany, this is known as *Zeitenwende* (turning point), or the historical paradigm shift of German defense policy in the direction of a more assertive militarization.

More broadly, this war requires a rethinking of the set of principles and values that underpin the international order, which is now subject to competing "visions" between democracies and autocracies. The 2023 conference report, entitled "Re:vision," warns specifically against the revisionism of autocracies and calls for the rebuilding of a new shared vision within the international community.

6 areas to watch

1. Ukraine

Russian armies first invaded Ukraine days after the 2022 Munich Security Conference. As spring returns, the question of the resilience of the two opposing armies will be the subject of much speculation. The current strategy seems to accept war without end for the foreseeable future. It does not appear that this approach will be challenged in the short term, despite the huge loss and damage.

In this context, German and French support for the Ukrainian war effort will continue to generate intense media coverage. In a clear disagreement with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Christoph Heusgen, the new charismatic head of the MSC, advocates for the delivery of fighter jets to Ukraine. The Pentagon appears to be warming to the idea after sending 31 Abrams tanks to Ukraine last month.

2. NATO

NATO's ability to sustain the solidarity of the alliance in the long term, as well as the growing East/West divide, will likely come under scrutiny. Despite the unity created by the present circumstances, many eastern member states sharing a border with Russia increasingly feel that western states are acting indecisively. The future of the alliance relies on its agility, responsiveness to this divide and ability to meet the demands of today's security environment.

Other discussions will focus on the question of enlarging the NATO alliance to include Sweden and Finland, which is ultimately subject to Turkey's agreement, and likely to remain paralyzed until the country's presidential elections later this year. Ukraine's application to join NATO will be discussed but is not expected to lead to any decision in

the short term. Members will likely concentrate on the operational integration of Ukraine, which could take the form of a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the NATO summit to be held in July in Vilnius.

As for the European pillar of the NATO alliance, there will likely be a focus on operational reinforcement. In the context of the war in Ukraine, those who advocate for European strategic autonomy have been marginalized, as the priority is for the whole alliance to form a block against Russia.

3. Defense spending

Germany and France have each announced billions of euros in funding to support and upgrade their armies in this new geopolitical context, raising crucial questions for business on how these funds will be accessed, how much will go to national companies, the possibilities for foreign companies to receive funding, etc. Key questions in a context where companies are more present than ever at the conference.

The concept of the “Europeanisation” of defense is at the heart of new EU legislation, obliging defense companies interested in the European market to demonstrate their commitment in Europe. Another dimension is a strong alignment to ESG priorities, such as greening militaries and respect for human rights. Some of the answers, at least for Germany, could be found in the much-anticipated first German National Security Strategy, which could potentially be released at the conference.

4. China

Defining what a European relationship with China should look like, both as a bloc and as individual nations, will be a major focus point of the conference. The nexus of economic growth and national security makes this a more challenging discussion than it was previously, be it in tech, trade, energy or pandemic preparedness.

The Sino-Russian relationship will remain in the limelight a year after their “no-limits partnership,” while China’s provision of essential materials to Russia continues. Former Foreign Minister and new Politburo member Wang Yi will likely participate, while Russia has, for the first time in many years, not received any official invitation (Russia did not send anyone in 2022).

5. Energy and climate

Energy will prove to be an important topic as nations’ commitments to green energy choices continue to be compromised by the ongoing energy security crisis. Europeans will continue to discuss their answer to the US Inflation Reduction Act and ways to ease their strict collective rules on state subsidies. There may also be a focus on the urgency in strengthening resilience to climate impacts, such as migration, particularly in global regions already greatly impacted by climate change, such as Africa and Southeast Asia.

6. Technology and cybersecurity

There will likely be an emphasis on enhancing cooperation through joint standard-setting around technology and cybersecurity, especially between the EU and the US, and a continued commitment to a democratic and trustworthy information environment. European tech regulation will be in focus, including the Digital Services and Digital Markets Act, both of which seek to create a safer digital space, protect fundamental user rights, identify and break up gatekeepers and level the playing field for businesses.

Brunswick will be present at the Munich Security Conference with a high-level delegation of senior advisors to support attending clients. Through its robust senior advisors, extensive network and ample experience in the defense sector, Brunswick is well-placed to help companies make the most of their participation during the conference and beyond, supporting clients with our advice in view of the global and national challenges that will be discussed.

To continue the conversation:

Mitchell Reiss, Partner and Co-Lead, Geopolitical Practice, Washington, DC
mreiss@brunswickgroup.com

Kate Fall, Partner and Co-Lead, Geopolitical Practice, London
kfall@brunswickgroup.com

Joachim Peter, Partner, Head of Office and European Defense Sector Lead, Berlin
jpeter@brunswickgroup.com

Marc Reverdin, Director, London
mreverdin@brunswickgroup.com

Arne Lietz, Director, Berlin
alietz@brunswickgroup.com

Brittany Walters, Associate, Berlin
bwalters@brunswickgroup.com

Tobias Wolf, Associate and European Defense Sector Manager, Berlin
twolf@brunswickgroup.com