

# At the Annual Munich Security Conference: The West Displays Its “Insecurity Complex”

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Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

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*“The West is winning!” U.S. leaders proclaimed at the high-level Annual Security Conference held in Munich last weekend.*

*Not everybody was quite so sure.*

There was a lot of insecurity displayed at a conference billed as “the West’s family meeting” – enlarged to 70 participating nations, including U.S. -designated “losers”.

Trump’s crude **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo** made nobody feel particular secure by treating the world as a huge video game which “we are winning”. Thanks to our “values”, he proclaimed, the West is winning against the other players that Washington has forced into its zero-sum game: Russia and China, whose alleged desires for “empire” are being thwarted.



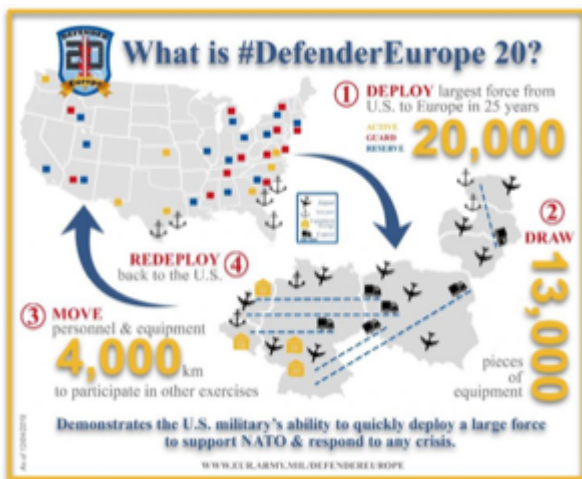
The Munich Security Conference (MSC) is a private gathering founded in 1963 by Ewald-Heinrich von Kleist-Schmenzin, a member of the aristocratic Wehrmacht officer class who plotted to get rid of Hitler when their estates in Eastern Germany were already being lost to the Red Army (to become part of Poland). The conference was evidently conceived as a means to enable Germans to get a word into strategic discussions from which they had been excluded by defeat in World War II.

The Munich conference knew its greatest hour of glory in February 2007, when Russian president Vladimir Putin shocked the assemblage by declaring his opposition to a “unipolar world” as “not only unacceptable but also impossible in today’s world.” Putin declared that NATO expansion up to Russian borders had nothing to do with ensuring security in Europe. Russia, he said then, “would like to interact with responsible and independent partners with whom we could work together in constructing a fair and democratic world order that would ensure security and prosperity not only for a select few, but for all.”

This speech was taken as a major challenge, redefining capitalist Russia as the new enemy of the West and its “values”.

## What Is “the West”?

The term “the West” could mean a number of things. The conference organizers define it by “values” that are supposed to be essentially Western: democracy, human rights, a market-based economy and “international cooperation in international institutions”. In fact, what is meant is a particular interpretation of all those “values”, an interpretation based on Anglo-American history. And indeed, in historic terms, this particular “West” is essentially the heir and continuation of the British empire, centered in Washington after London was obliged to abdicate after World War II, while retaining its role as imperial tutor and closest partner. It implies the worldwide hegemony of the English language and English ideas of “liberalism” and is “multicultural” as empires always are. While the United States is the power center, many of the most ardent subjects of this empire are not American but European, starting with the Norwegian secretary general of NATO. Its imperial power is expressed by military bases all around the world offering “protection” to its subjects.



As for protection, the United States is currently shipping 20,000 military personnel to invade Germany on their way to unprecedented military manoeuvres next month in ten countries right up to Russia’s borders. Some 40,000 troops will take part in this exercise, on the totally imaginary pretext of a “Russian threat” to invade neighboring countries. This delights Washington’s enthusiastic vassals in Poland and the Baltic States but is making many people nervous in Germany itself and other core European Union countries, wondering where this provocation of Russia may lead. But they hardly dare say so in violation of “western solidarity”. The only complaint allowed is that the United States might not defend us enough, when the greater danger comes from being defended too much.

Opening this year’s conference, the President of the German Federal Republic Frank-Walter Steinmeier, expressed Germany’s strategic frustration more openly than usual. Steinmeier accused Washington, Beijing and Moscow of “great power competition” leading to more mistrust, more armament, more insecurity, leading “all the way to a new nuclear arms race.” He didn’t specify who started all that.

Overwhelming establishment distaste for Trump has provided a novel opportunity for leaders of U.S.-occupied countries to criticize Washington, or at least the White House. Steinmeier dared say that “our closest ally, the United States of America, under the present

administration, rejects the idea of an international community.” But he made up for this by accusing Russia of “making military violence and the violent change of borders on the European continent a political tool once again” by annexing Crimea – forgetting the NATO violent detachment of Kosovo from Serbia and ignoring the referendum in which an overwhelming majority of Crimeans voted to return to Russia, without a shot fired.

French President Emmanuel Macron also expressed frustration at Europe’s dependence on Washington. He would like the European Union to develop its own military defense and security policy. “We cannot be the United States’ junior partner,” he said, although that is certainly what Europe is. While repeating the usual NATO line about the Russian threat, he noted that the policy of threats and sanctions against Russia had accomplished nothing and called for a “closer dialogue” to resolve problems. In that, he was surely echoing the consensus of the French elite which sees absolutely no French interest in the ongoing U.S.-inspired feud with Moscow.

Macron openly aspires to building a more independent EU military defense. The first obstacle lies in EU Treaties, which tie the Union to NATO. With the UK out of the EU, France is its strongest military power and its sole possessor of nuclear arms. There are indications that some German leaders might like to absorb France’s nuclear arsenal into a joint European force – which would surely arouse a “nationalist” uproar in France.

## **Playing the Game**

Aside from providing protection, the Empire calls on everybody to play the game of international trade – so long as they consent to lose.

On Saturday in Munich, both Nancy Pelosi and Defense Secretary Mark Esper lit into China for daring to emerge as a trade giant and technological center. “China is seeking to export its digital autocracy through its telecommunication giant Huawei”, Pelosi warned.

Huawei has overtaken Russian natural gas as the export Washington condemns most vigorously as nefarious interference in the internal affairs of importers.

Esper gave a long speech damning Beijing’s “bad behavior”, “malign activity”, authoritarianism and, of course, Huawei. The Pentagon chief concluded his diatribe against America’s number one economic rival by a moralizing sermon on “our values, sense of fairness, and culture of opportunity,” which “unleash the very best of human intellect, spirit, and innovation.”

“Maybe, just maybe, we can get them on the right path,” Esper suggested benevolently. “Again, make no mistake, we do not seek conflict with China.”

In general, said Esper, “we simply ask of Beijing what we ask of every nation: to play by the rules, abide by international norms, and respect the rights and sovereignty of others.”

(He could say, what we ask of every nation except our own.)

The Department of Defense, he said, is doing its share: “focused on deterring bad behavior, reassuring our friends and allies, and defending the global commons.” We want China to “behave like a normal country” but, said Esper, if it “will not change its ways”, then we must make “greater investments in our common defense; by making the hard economic and commercial choices needed to prioritize our shared security ... prepared to deter any threat,

defend any Ally, and defeat any foe.”

In short, China’s economic progress provides another excuse to increase the Pentagon budget and pressure European allies into more military spending. This could only please such major sponsors of this conference as Raytheon and Lockheed Martin (and probably did not displease Goldman Sachs and all the other major Western industries backing this get-together).

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi replied to Esper’s harangue with some lessons of his own for the West, concerning “multilateralism”.

“It is not multilateralism if only the Western countries prosper while the non-Western countries lag behind forever. It would not achieve the common progress of mankind,” said Wang. “China’s modernization is the necessity of history.” China’s history and culture meant that it could not copy the Western pattern nor seek hegemony as major powers in the past.

Wang said the West should discard its subconscious mentality of civilization supremacy, give up its bias and anxiety over China, and accept and welcome the development and revitalization of a country from the East with a system different from that of the West.

The West at Munich did not appear particularly ready to follow this advice. Nor that of Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov who was also allowed his few minutes to address deaf ears. Lavrov lamented that *“the structure of the Cold War rivalry is being recreated”* as NATO continues to advance eastward, carrying on military exercises of *unprecedented scope near the Russian borders, and inflating arms budgets. Lavrov invited the West to stop promoting the phantom of the Russian or any other “threat” and remember “what unites us all” before it’s too late.*

But the self-appointed representatives of “the West” hadn’t come to hear that. They were much more ready to listen respectfully to representatives of such friendly arms purchasers as Qatar and Saudi Arabia whose acceptance of “Western values” was not called into question.

### **“Westlessness”**

It had evidently been decided who belongs to “the West” and who is threatening it: China and Russia. “China’s rapid ascent has stirred much debate over the primacy of the United States and the West in the 21st century,” Esper remarked. Indeed, the “Munich Security Report” published for the conference was devoted to the odd theme of “Westlessness”, lamenting a new “decline of the West” (in echo of Oswald Spengler’s famous *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* of a century ago). The world was becoming less Western – and even worse, so was the West itself.

This complaint had two sides, material and ideological. In material terms, the West feels challenged by foreign economic and technological development, especially in China. It is notable that, while Western powers vigorously promoted international trade-based economies, they seem unable to react to the results except in terms of power rivalry and ideological conflict. As long as Western dominance was ensured, international trade was celebrated as the necessary basis for a peaceful world. But the moment a non-Western trader is doing too well, its exports are ominously denounced as means to exert malign

influence over its customers. The prime example was Russian natural gas. Chinese technology is the next. Both are decried, especially by U.S. spokespeople, as treacherous means to make other countries “dependent”.

Of course, trade does imply mutual dependence, and with it, a certain degree of political influence. Certainly, the overwhelming U.S. dominance of the entertainment industry (movies, TV series, popular music) exercises an enormous ideological influence on much of the world. The U.S. influence via Internet is also considerable.

But the avoidance of such nefarious foreign influence would call for precisely an “inward-looking” nationalism that the MSC denounced as destructive of our Western values.

The Western strategists see themselves threatened by too much globalization abroad, in the terms of China rising, and not enough enthusiasm for globalization at home. Enthusiasm is waning for foreign military expeditions to impose “values” – an essential aspect of Western identity.

The Report deplored the rise of “inward-looking” nationalism in Europe, which could be called patriotism, since it has none of the aggressive tendencies associated with nationalism. In fact, some of these European “nationalists” actually favor less intervention in the Middle East and would like to promote peaceful relations with Russia.

When the alleged threat to the West was “godless communism”, Western values were relatively conservative. Today, the liberal West is threatened by conservatism, by people who more or less want to preserve their traditional lifestyle.

Finally, the MSC acknowledged that “the defenders of an open, liberal West, ... so far seem unable to find an adequate answer to the illiberal-nationalist challenge...”. Part of the reason “may be found in the long almost unshakable conviction that all obstacles to liberalization were only minor setbacks, as liberalism’s eventual triumph was seen as inevitable.” Politicians have presented their policies as without alternative. As a result, there is growing “resistance against a system allegedly run by liberal experts and international institutions, which in the eyes of some amounts to a ‘new authoritarianism’...”

Isn’t “liberal authoritarianism” an oxymoron? But what do you call it when Macron’s police enjoy impunity when they shoot out the eyes of Gilets Jaunes citizens peacefully protesting against massively unpopular social policies, when the UK holds Julian Assange in a dungeon despite denunciation of his cruel treatment by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture? When the United States holds a record number of people in prison, including Chelsea Manning, simply to force her to testify against her will, and with no end in sight?

The day may come when it is accepted that the world is round, and “West” is only a relative geographic term, depending on where you are.

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