

Fears at Munich Security Conference: The Mattis Pitch on NATO

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Ladies and gentlemen, the Transatlantic bond remains our strongest bulwark against instability and Russia.

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis, Feb 17, 2017

While the US commander-in-chief finds the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance something of an obsolete joke, and a costly one at that, his own appointment as Defence Secretary James M. Mattis was singing a different tune in Munich.

The occasion was that of the Munich Security Conference, the 53rd no less, advertised as “a key annual gathering for the international ‘strategic community’” and founded as the “Internationale Wehrkunde-Begegnung.”[1]

After being introduced by German Defence Minister **Ursula Von der Leyden**, Mattis reiterated a line he seems he can stick with: Trump “too espouses NATO’s need to adapt to today’s strategic situation for it to remain credible, capable and relevant.” The interpretation there was elementary: European states had to engage in more convincing acts of binge spending on defence.

Moving onto the lingo of watered down geopolitics, Mattis then claimed that, “We all see our community of nations under threat on multiple fronts as the arc of instability builds on NATO’s periphery and beyond.” Nothing like a good jolt of fear to beef military budgets.

MSC chairman **Wolfgang Ischinger** had set the tone on the sentiment ahead of the receptions, the panels and the strategic love-in. “Instead of waiting in fear of the next Trump tweet, we Europeans should lay the foundations for a Europe that is strong, capable of taking action and committed to Western values.”[2]

Gazing through Trump’s tweets has made officials in European capitals tremble. There is a fear of equivalence: the Trump administration treating German Chancellor Angela Merkel as he would Russian President Vladimir Putin. For the business mind, this is hardly surprising. For the ideologue, this is terrifying.

Ischinger engages in a bit of America gazing himself, trying to decode, then debunk, “America First” as dangerously anti-internationalist. That said, he cautions against writing off the United States as a continuing valuable partner. The US is still the place of more good eggs rather than broken ones. The “majority,” he reminds us, did not vote for The Donald.

Self-deception is a dangerous quality at any security conference, and to speak of Europe in terms of a bloc of clear headed, coherent thinkers acting as one, is comfortingly superficial.

Estrangement is in the air across the continent, and not all see the threats in quite the same way.

Well as it is that a majority of voters thought differently about Trump, but within Europe, fractures have appeared that threaten giddy reassessments and an unravelling. (A nice theme for the conference might have been “Global Exit: Prospects and Promise.”)

Pondering Mattis’ propitiating words were both the antidote and an anti-Trump version of a policy. No one, claimed Mattis, could go it alone on security – a hearty snub to Trimpist unilateralism. “Security is always best when provided by a team.” He praised the German defence minister for the “in-depth” talks held in Washington, where the “security situation facing not only our nations and the alliance, but the broader global community” were chewed over.

There was little doubting the Mattis slant on this: a traditional defender of an alliance moralised in a manner almost anachronistic. (The Russians are coming!) NATO was nothing less than fetish and protector, preserving “the rules-based international order, serving to keep the peace and to defend shared values that grew out of the Enlightenment.”

Similar sentiments were echoed by Senator John McCain, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. There was urgency, even emergency in the air. “In the four decades I have attended this conference, I cannot recall a year where its purpose was more necessary or more important.”[3] There were panels considering the demise, if not terminal nature of the West.

This, claimed McCain, required delegates to reconsider the very idea of “the West,” troubled offspring of “the most awful calamity in human history”. This child born free saw a “better kind of world order... one based not on blood-and-soil nationalism, or spheres of influence, or conquest of the weak by the strong, but rather on universal values, rule of law, open commerce, and respect for national sovereignty and independence.”

McCain’s heavily abridged variant is hardly credible textbook history, ignoring the nastier aspects of what happened during the Cold War, where Manichean beasts and values went head to head in torture chambers, over proxy governments and, as a matter of fact, spheres of influence.

President Recep Erdoğan of Turkey, a vital and dangerous NATO member, would have found such particular comments testily amusing, given how busy he has been working against such shared values. “Under Erdoğan’s leadership,” scribbled an irritated Stanley Weiss, founder of the Washington-based Business Executives for National Security, “our NATO ally has arrested more allies than China, jailed thousands of students for the crime of free speech, and replaced secular schools with Islamic-focused madrassas.”[4] Enlightenment values indeed.

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Notes

[1] <https://www.securityconference.de/en/news/article/munich-security-conference-2017-kicks-off--full-agenda-and-list-of-participants-now-available/>

[2] <https://www.securityconference.de/en/discussion/monthly-mind/single-view/article/monthly--mind-february-2017-how-europe-should-deal-with-trump/>

[3] <http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/speeches?ID=32A7E7DD-8D76-4431-B1E7--8644FD71C49F>

[4] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stanley-weiss/its-time-to-kick-erdogans_b_9300670.html

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