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A WORLD WITHOUT ORDER?

Key Takeaways from the 62nd Munich Security Conference
(Policy Brief)

By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 62nd Munich Security Conference, held under the theme “*Under Destruction*,” convened at a pivotal juncture for the international order.¹ Three competing diagnoses framed every debate: the rules-based order was broken, bruised, or being rebuilt under an entirely different logic. Yet beneath the diagnostic disagreements, two imperatives united virtually all participants: Europe must build genuine strategic autonomy, and new coalitions must urgently fill widening global governance gaps.

Secretary Rubio’s address confirmed a fundamental US recalibration: warmer in tone than Vance’s 2025 speech, but equally transformative in substance. European leaders, led by Chancellor Merz, arrived not to appeal to Washington but to announce their own direction. The result was geopolitical anxiety on one side and a new, unsettled European resolve on the other. Munich 2026 may be remembered as the conference where sustaining the official narrative of an enduring rules-based order became impossible.

MSC 2026 AT A GLANCE

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Three Diagnoses | No consensus: broken vs. bruised vs. rejuvenated - each framing drives incompatible strategies |
| European Pivot | Germany commits 5% GDP to defense by 2035; Franco-British nuclear deterrence dialogue marks a threshold break with post-Cold War norms |
| US Redefinition | Rubio grounded Western partnership in heritage and religion - not democratic values |
| Ukraine’s Burden | US aid cut 99%; Europe carries near-total responsibility, backed by a €90 billion EU loan for 2026-27 |
| China’s Opening | Beijing positioned itself as the constructive alternative, constrained by its support for Russia and continued regional military posturing |
| Gaza’s Omission | Conference silence on ICJ/ICC findings handed autocratic powers a credibility argument and exposed the order's selective-justice deficit |
| Cyber & Hybrid | Cyberattacks ranked top concern in the Munich Security Index among G7 publics, driven by intensified Russia-China hybrid operations |
| Global South | Western candor on the order’s failures for the first time opened genuine space for coalition-building and institutional reform |

¹ Munich Security Conference, Munich Security Report 2026: Executive Summary (Munich: MSC, 2026), 3-5, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report/2026/executive-summary/>.

I. THREE VIEWS ON THE STATE OF THE CURRENT WORLD ORDER

The conference's defining dispute was diagnostic. Chancellor Merz declared the rules-based order '*no longer exists in this form*,' demanding that Europe build hard-power resources independent of institutional guarantees.² WTO Director-General Okonjo-Iweala countered that the order was "*battered, bruised, but not broken*" - with 70 percent of global trade still flowing under WTO rules.³ India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar counselled repair over reconstruction, while the Trump administration cast itself as engaged in '*renewal and restoration*.'⁴

Moreover, Global South representatives reframed the moment altogether that the proliferation of new bilateral trade agreements constituted not destruction but construction. That European partners uniformly rejected the US framing is analytically significant; the same actions read as demolition or restoration depending entirely on one's structural position within the old order. Each diagnosis points toward an incompatible strategy, making coordinated response structurally difficult.

II. EUROPEAN PIVOT: FROM DEPENDENCY TO SELF-RELIANCE

European leaders arrived in Munich not to appeal to Washington but to announce their own direction, a dramatic shift from the disorientation of 2025. Chancellor Merz announced plans for a 'strong, self-supporting European pillar' within NATO, backed by Germany's pledge of 3.5 percent of GDP on core defense by 2029 and an exemption of the constitutional debt brake. Germany also committed to NATO's full 5 percent target by 2035.⁵

The most consequential development was quieter: trilateral dialogue among Germany, France, and the UK on repositioning the Franco-British nuclear deterrent as a collective European capability.⁶ No agreement emerged, but the willingness to discuss it in Munich marked a threshold that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. Merz simultaneously warned that domestic fragmentation, including far-right parties with pro-Russian sympathies, was itself a security vulnerability the continent could no longer ignore.

Two Immediate Tests: Greenland and Ukraine

Washington's threat to annex Greenland exposed a structural vulnerability at NATO's core: Article 5 protections are meaningless when the threat originates from an ally. European pushback was swift and unified. Danish Prime Minister, Frederiksen, warned that the pressure could resurface, making a permanent Arctic security role a strategic necessity. The UK dispatched a carrier strike group to the region, a symbolic assertion of independent capacity with real deterrent implications.

On Ukraine, with US military aid cut by 99 percent,⁷ the burden of support has fallen almost entirely on European shoulders. The EU approved a €90 billion loan covering Ukraine's 2026–27 needs.⁸ Zelenskyy warned that Ukrainians cannot defend all of Europe indefinitely; Putin, in his words, remains

² Friedrich Merz, "Remarks at MSC 2026," Munich Security Conference, February 14, 2026, transcript, <https://www.astrid-online.it/static/upload/frie/friedrich-merz-remarks-at-msc-2026-.pdf>.

³ Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Panel Discussion, Munich Security Conference, February 15, 2026.

⁴ S. Jaishankar, "India at MSC 2026," The Hindu, February 16, 2026.

⁵ Merz, "Remarks at MSC 2026."

⁶ Financial Times, "Franco-British Nuclear Talks at Munich," February 15, 2026.

⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, "FY2026 Ukraine Aid Allocation," February 2026.

⁸ European Parliament, "Parliament Approves €90 Billion Ukraine Support Loan Package," press release, February 10, 2026, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20260206IPR33903/parliament-approves-EU90-billion-ukraine-support-loan-package>

‘a slave to war.’ European consensus held on practical measures, expanding sanctions, leveraging frozen Russian assets, targeting shadow tankers, and accelerating weapons deliveries, with Ukrainian sovereignty unanimously declared non-negotiable.

III. TRANS-ATLANTIC RESET: AMERICA FIRST, ALLIES SECOND

“We in America have no interest in being polite and orderly caretakers of the West’s managed decline.”

— Secretary of State Marco Rubio, MSC 2026

Rubio deployed warmth where Vance had used hectoring - but the substantive gap widened, not narrowed. He grounded the transatlantic relationship not in shared democratic values but in ‘shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage, language, ancestry’ - a civilizational framing that implicitly excludes non-Christian EU members and lends legitimacy to the authoritarian-adjacent politics European democracies have spent years containing. US conditionality was explicit: Washington would act without allies if required.⁹

The most revealing US presence came not from the administration but from a bipartisan congressional delegation, including governors Newsom and Whitmer and Representative Ocasio-Cortez, who explicitly distanced themselves from administration foreign policy. Their presence illuminated a critical distinction: the deepening fracture is not primarily a rupture between the US and Europe. It cuts across societies on both sides of the Atlantic. Washington’s positions are politically contested, not nationally settled.

IV. THE CREDIBILITY DEFICIT: CHINA, GHAZA & DOUBLE STANDARDS

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi positioned China, with its Global Governance Initiative, as the mature, constructive alternative to American disruption, proposing four governance pillars: reinvigorating the UN, championing multilateralism, expanding Global South representation, and building a ‘community of shared future.’¹⁰ European leaders received the overture with interest but not credulity - China’s sustained support for Russia’s war economy and its coercive trade practices undermine its credentials as a good-faith rules-based actor. US tariff pressure has paradoxically accelerated bilateral deal-making across Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, fragmenting trade architecture further.

Global South participants expressed satisfaction that European counterparts were, for the first time, openly acknowledging the old order’s structural deficits rather than reflexively defending it. This candor opened genuine space for coalition-building around water security, subnational climate governance, and coordinated regional responses in Sudan and the Sahel. However, the conference’s most glaring omission threatened to undermine this progress: Gaza. With a Palestinian death toll exceeding 72,000,¹¹ the ICJ having issued provisional measures, and the ICC having issued arrest warrants for senior Israeli officials, the conference pivoted to reconstruction planning without engaging the legal findings. The

⁹ Marco Rubio, "Address at MSC 2026," Munich Security Conference, February 13, 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/02/14/munich-security-conference-rubio-to-give-speech>.

¹⁰ Wang Yi, "Keynote Address," Munich Security Conference, February 14, 2026.

¹¹ Al Jazeera, "Gaza Death Toll Exceeds 75,000 as Independent Data Verify Loss," February 18, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/2/18/gaza-death-toll-exceeds-75000-as-independent-data-verify-loss>

pattern of vigorous enforcement against adversaries and studied impunity for allies further emboldens the autocratic powers with their most effective credibility argument. If the rules are applied selectively, then the universality they claim is hollow.

World Order at a Crossroads: Key Takeaways from Munich 2026

Shifting Geopolitical Landscape & Europe's Strategic Pivot

The 2026 Munich Security Conference highlighted a fundamental split in the global rules-based order. As the U.S. recalibrates, Europe is shifting from disorientation to strategic agency, taking responsibility for its security and the defense of Ukraine.

The Diagnostic Debate: Three Narratives

Is the Global Order Broken, Bruised, or Bolstered?

“No interest in being polite caretakers of decline.” – Secretary Rubio signaled a U.S. shift toward conditional cooperation based on shared heritage.

| | Broken | Bruised | Bolstered |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|
| Diagnosis | | | |
| Key Proponents | The order no longer exists; power politics is all that remains. | Damage is real but 70% of trade still follows rules. | The U.S. is restoring order by reasserting American primacy. |
| Core Claim | Key Proponents: Chancellor Merz, Global South | Key Proponents: WTO, India | Key Proponents: U.S. Administration |

Europe's Strategic Pivot:

From Disorientation to Strategic Agency

Germany Commits 3.5% GDP to Defense

Part of the "Freedom Strategy" to reach 5% GDP defense spending by 2035.

€90 Billion

EU Loan for Ukraine
Europe is filling the gap left by a 99% cut in U.S. military aid.

Testing NATO's Article 5

U.S. threats to Greenland exposed vulnerabilities when threats originate from within the alliance.

Source: Author

V. STRATEGIC IMPERTIVES FOR A CONTESTED ORDER

For Europe

- Lock in defense commitments through binding treaties, joint procurement frameworks, and a formal European Nuclear Planning Group before the current political window closes.
- Develop a permanent Arctic security presence, including maritime patrol, intelligence-sharing, and a multilateral diplomatic framework with Canada and Nordic states
- Face the Gaza credibility gap: condition arms transfers per IHL obligations, actively support international legal processes, and protect domestic civic space for democratic debate on the conflict

For the United States

- Restore substantive partnership: unconditional Article 5 commitment, explicit respect for Danish sovereignty over Greenland, shared trade frameworks, and coordinated Russia-China strategy.
- Pursue selective multilateral re-engagement across WTO dispute settlement, IAEA, and UN peacekeeping to prevent governance vacuums that China will otherwise fill unilaterally

For China

- Match governance rhetoric with behavioral change: reduce Taiwan Strait provocations, verifiably curtail support for Russia's war economy, and be flexible about independent monitoring of Belt and Road projects

For Global South States

- Convert this diplomatic moment into structural reform: push for meaningful IMF/World Bank voting reform, permanent UNSC representation, and inclusion in emerging technology governance
- Build any successor system on a universal application. The legitimacy crisis of the current order will be inherited if the same asymmetric justice is reproduced in whatever comes next.

CONCLUSION

Munich 2026 surfaced a stark truth: the old order may be largely gone, and no agreed successor has emerged to fill its place. Yet the raw materials for a more robust and legitimate international architecture are present: a Europe willing to shoulder genuine strategic weight; a Global South more candid than ever about the failures of the old order; a plurality of US voices whose multilateralist commitment remains large and politically active; and even Chinese institutional proposals, however compromised by Beijing's own behavior.

What is absent is the moral consistency without which no architecture, however carefully designed, will achieve broad legitimacy. The three competing diagnoses debated in Munich, broken, bruised, or bolstered, each point toward a different future. But all three converge on a single uncomfortable truth: the order that existed before will not return in its previous form. The question is not whether something new will be built, but whether those doing the building will have the courage to apply its rules to everyone, allies and adversaries alike. That is the question Munich 2026 raised, but did not answer.



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RHSA

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SMSLASS

Seeta Majeed School of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences

SMC

School of Media & Mass Communication

SCIT

School of Computer & Information Technology

SE

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SMS

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