

Strategic Assessment of the 62nd Munich Security Conference

February 2026

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

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GLOBAL AFFAIRS**

The 62nd Munich Security Conference (MSC 2026) didn't end with the usual display of transatlantic unity. Delegates called it a "conference of attrition." For three days in February, under the ornate ceilings of the Bayerischer Hof, European and American leaders confronted an uncomfortable truth: the rules-based international order they built over seventy years no longer holds. This report looks beyond the diplomatic drama. Munich 2026 marks a real turning point. Europe stands at a crossroads, forced to wake up, rethink its security, and build its own deterrence as great power rivalry returns.

The conference theme, "Under Destruction," didn't just sound dramatic, it actually captured the moment. When German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said, "the post World War II international order no longer exists," he wasn't exaggerating. He was stating the plain truth. Usually, the Munich Security Conference feels like a yearly check-up for transatlantic relations. This time, the diagnosis was grim: not just a bad fever, but the patient's entire condition was collapsing.

Three major failures stood out in the final sessions :

First, the move from Washington-led unipolarity to a world of multipolar competition has left the old international institutions behind. The United Nations Security Council can't act. The WTO is practically useless in a world where economic warfare is the norm. NATO, for its part, won't even spell out exactly what Article 5 means anymore. Strategic theorists call these "institutional voids" places where power runs wild, and rules barely matter.

Second, power politics or *Machtpolitik**, as the Germans say, is back in charge. The old European hope that economic interdependence would guarantee peace has collapsed. That's exactly what Merz was warning about, Europe's freedom isn't automatic anymore. Now it takes force and the willingness to use it.

Third, threats are accelerating, especially in artificial general intelligence and biotech. Institutions can't keep up. One delegate, speaking off the record, called it the "Munich War Conference" instead of the Security Conference. Military budgets keep growing, but strategy hasn't caught up. Meanwhile, the real existential risks are multiplying, and nobody's really in control.

* A doctrine in political theory advocating the use of power and especially of physical force by a political state in the attainment of its objectives.



At Munich 2026, the real story wasn't what everyone agreed on, but what they fought over in public. Secretary of State Marco Rubio called for "renewal" instead of facing up to Western decline. That move was clever politically, yet it gave away more than he might've intended. The Trump administration's stance came through loud and clear: "America First" means Europe needs to take the lead on its own defense. Washington wants to step back from being the default guarantor and become more of a "partner of first resort," not just an "ally of necessity."

European leaders responded in different ways, but underneath, they shared the same message. President Macron and top EU officials talked about something like "autonomy within alliance." They want to keep the transatlantic institutions in place, but at the same time, they're building up Europe's own ability to deter threats and project power. This isn't about pulling away in a Gaullist sense*, it is more about managing risk. Europeans see that American unilateralism, including possible moves in Greenland and Arctic security, could go ahead without them even being consulted.

The Munich Security Report's findings on "transatlantic mutual trust" really stand out. The report shows that Europeans are adjusting to the idea of America as a less reliable partner. This marks a turning point. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, European strategists are planning for the possibility that America might actually walk away not just as a theoretical risk, but as a real scenario.

Wolfgang Ischinger (chairing the conference) put it bluntly: Europe can't just keep talking. Words and speeches don't cut it anymore. Europe needs a real plan and actual action. Ischinger said he'd seen European unity, but if you look closer, it's mostly talk. The gap between what Europe says and what it can actually do is obvious.

Munich 2026 made this tension hard to ignore. They brought in 5,000 officers from all over Europe, locked down the airspace above the city, and ran joint counter-terrorism operations. Clearly, Europe's not short on operational skill when it comes to defending its own turf. But here's the problem: these defensive moves don't turn Europe into a true global power. They don't build the kind of strategic autonomy Europe needs if it wants to stand on its own alongside the other giants.

*Gaullist sense refers to a political approach based on the ideology of General Charles de Gaulle, primarily focusing on national sovereignty, a strong centralized state, and an independent foreign policy. It is not strictly left or right, but rather a moderate, patriotic position that emphasizes France's "grandeur" and its ability to act independently of superpowers like the US or Russia.



Then there's the wave of terrorism statistics that swept through the conference. Forty-two percent of transatlantic terrorism cases now involve minors. European intelligence and police are chasing adolescent kids as young as 12 or 13. This isn't just a security problem; it's a second crisis front. Hybrid warfare, cyber attacks, fake news, weaponized migration, and economic pressure keep grinding away at Europe's foundations. It wears people down and weakens society before any conventional threat even shows up.

Two conflicts have put Europe's credibility on trial. Ukraine stands as the more urgent test: can European countries really hold the line against Russia if the U.S. steps back from its usual role, especially when it comes to logistics and intelligence? At the conference, people didn't hide their growing sense that Washington treats Ukraine as a political bargaining chip, not a strategic imperative. For the U.S., support isn't rooted in principle; it's shaped by whatever works at home.

Gaza tells a different story but ends up in a familiar place. With the U.S. and Israel running the show, Europe's diplomatic efforts barely register. European leaders talk about values and norms, but without hard power, their influence barely nudges the direction of the conflict. The lesson is hard to ignore. If Europe wants to matter in these crises, it needs real military weight behind its words. Diplomatic unity is nice, but it only goes so far. Power is real, independent power sets the terms.

Munich 2026 didn't just wrestle with current geopolitical tensions. There was something deeper at play, a time paradox that most analysts barely touched. Delegates found themselves pulled in two directions at once. On one hand, the urgent need to rearm using conventional military tools. On the other hand, the slow but steady rise of AGI and new biotechnological threats could force that could make today's weapons and strategies look pointless, even reckless, in a few decades.

People admitted, almost uneasily, that we're handing future generations a world where humans have less and less control over artificial intelligence. Meanwhile, viral and biotech technologies keep growing more powerful. This isn't something our current institutions are built to handle. If anything, the MSC's old habit of focusing on state-centered security now looks outdated. To keep up, it needs to shift radically toward managing existential risks. And yet, the intense competition over military budgets and the "Munich War Conference" vibe makes that kind of long-term thinking nearly impossible.

Munich 2026 marks a turning point for Western strategy, with three directions taking shape.



First, Consolidated Autonomy. Here, the European Union moves to build its own defense muscle, think integrated forces, maybe even nuclear deterrence options. The idea is to rely less on the U.S., though not to cut the cord completely. For this to work, Germany needs a big shift in how it thinks about strategy. Merz talks a good game, but so far, industry and the military haven't caught up.

Next, Managed Divergence. NATO still matters, but more as a place to talk than a force that acts as one. European and American militaries can work together, but they aren't fused. Instead of a single big playbook, they coordinate on a case-by-case basis when needed.

Then there's Competitive Fragmentation. If Europe can't pull off real autonomy, countries start going their own way, cutting deals with Russia or China. That chips away at any sense of shared security and gives rivals room to expand their influence.

Right now, managed divergence seems to be winning. But the chance for true autonomy is slipping away. As Ischinger put it, what matters now is a real plan and real action. When MSC 2027 rolls around, people won't judge Europe on what it says in statements; they'll look for results.

In short, the 62nd Munich Security Conference didn't deliver any big diplomatic breakthroughs, but it did cut through the noise. The era of the rules-based order isn't just threatened, it's over. Europe stands at a crossroads now. Either it settles for a secondary role in a US-led system, or it builds up its own strength to defend itself. Neither path promises real safety, not with great powers jockeying for position, technology upending old assumptions, and hybrid threats everywhere. Still, pretending that old routines or empty rituals can hold things together just doesn't work anymore.

The next decade will show whether Munich 2026 was Europe's wake-up call or its swan song.

* This paper was published in Al-Ahram Online on Friday, February 20, 2026. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/562724.as>.

