# MSC 2026: Europe under destruction?

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Michal Lobocki and Karla Kohlhaas




## Transatlantic relations under reconstruction

Compared to last year's sharply critical speech by JD Vance, this year was marked by a more restrained American tone. Nevertheless, Marco Rubio's speech was still accompanied by concerns regarding the future of transatlantic partnerships. As IRIS chairman Nico Lange noted in one of the panels, the American message to Europe increasingly amounts to "handing us responsibility for European security". A constructive shift that may also signal a gradual withdrawal from certain commitments.

A panel in the Amerikahaus with Hillary Clinton, Yulia Navalnaya, and Benjamin Haddad reflected these dynamics. Clinton emphasised that Europeans should not assume a return to previous patterns of cooperation even with a change in the White House. She argued that NATO will endure, but Europe must use its own potential. This set the tone for a more positive yet demanding MSC 2026.

## European cooperation: A revival of the Weimar triangle?

Panels highlighted strong German-French leadership in defence and technology, with visible Polish participation. Former President Duda, speaking at a side event, reinforced that Europe still actively engages in responding to Russian aggression. Germany, France and Poland repeatedly emerged as central actors in European security and industry debates. The possible revival of the Weimar Triangle was emphasised as a key instrument for overcoming EU internal disparities and ensuring a coherent strategic response, particularly given the evolving nature of modern warfare, which now includes more hybrid threats and societal pressures that challenge traditional deterrence.

Poland's growing role as a frontline state and major defence spender has increased the geopolitical relevance of the trilateral partnership, positioning it as a bridge between national interests within Europe. This year's MSC placed a strong emphasis on the growing importance of the Weimar Triangle, highlighted by the presence of the French president, German chancellor, Polish prime minister and multiple representatives of each country.

Despite the renewed emphasis on unity and cooperation. Industrial disparities and national procurement priorities remain obstacles. Nevertheless, discussions involving French, Polish, and German speakers reflected optimism that the Weimar Triangle could drive European leadership, provided multilateral interests outweigh national priorities.

## Youth engagement – the future of Europe's security

Beyond high-level panels, youth engagement was not to be overlooked. Not only Agnieszka Homańska, Head of Cabinet of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, but also Þórdís Kolbrún Gylfadóttir, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland, highlighted the importance of the next generation and young female leadership. Engagement of young professionals from YATA and DGAP demonstrated commitment to European security. As Gylfadóttir emphasised, instead of focusing solely on Europe's flaws, it is important to acknowledge what has been achieved, particularly the nearly 80 years of peace. Preserving this peace, however, requires unified leadership and sustained commitment.

## The way wars are fought has changed

Clausewitz defined the purpose of war as "forcing the enemy to do our will." Today, this battlefield increasingly includes the digital sphere. Many panels highlighted that modern hybrid warfare aims to paralyse the enemy, sow panic, and deepen polarisation within European societies. As Dr. Tsetsos put it during his panel, it is no longer Leopard 2 tanks, but our way of life that autocrats fear most; TikTok was repeatedly cited as an example of how social media can be weaponised to manipulate elections and influence debates on European rearmament. The concept of "weapons" now includes social engineering and "weapons of mass migration". Dr. Khanna used terms like "Lukashenko's gambit" and the "Turkey game of chicken" to illustrate how migration and political pressure are exploited strategically. These discussions emphasised that Europe's response must go beyond conventional military approaches, combining political, societal, and technological strategies to safeguard democratic values and resilience.

## Key takeaways

This year's MSC demonstrated a central development: Europe is compelled to respond to evolving security challenges, evidenced by rising defence spending, including efforts to meet the 2% target emphasised by the United States. At the same time, structural challenges remain, including personnel shortages in Germany's Bundeswehr and the broader responsibility now expected from Europe as the US signals a decrease in its operational role. As Jens Stoltenberg emphasised during a panel, Europe's security is global: the greatest mistake was not fully supporting Ukraine in 2014. Europe must therefore strengthen the eastern flank and gradually build its own deterrence capacity.

Contrary to common perception, multiple joint European armament projects are already underway. However, this is rarely highlighted in public debate, contributing to misunderstandings among European citizens, as emphasised by Sara Naani, security policy spokesperson for the Greens in the Bundestag. She also argues that Europe should not aspire to armies equipped entirely with European-made systems. Such ambitions would take decades to realise. The conclusion is therefore straightforward: Europe should strengthen its own defence capabilities while remaining realistic about its limitations.

Recent developments suggest that Europe is beginning to assume greater responsibility for its own security. A notable example was the firm political stance taken in the context of Greenland. The deployment of forces by several European countries was primarily symbolic, although, as Nico Lange pointed out, it also exposed certain shortcomings. Europe is awakening to power politics, but progress remains necessary. At the Munich Security Conference, Chancellor Friedrich Merz and others stressed that Europe must relearn how to exercise power in international affairs.

While the Munich Security Report 2026 uses the title “Under Destruction,” next year’s edition could equally be described as “Under Construction.” As Hillary Clinton noted, the European Union itself represents a significant historical accomplishment, and the MSC clearly demonstrated why this achievement, including its democratic values, must continue to be protected.

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