

5 Transatlantic Takeaways from the 2017 Munich Security Conference

At this weekend's MSC, Europe got its first taste of what kind of partner a Trump administration would be. The U.S. delegation came to the three-day conference to play good cop to Trump's bad cop, attempting to reassure Europeans that they would be the stewards of America's "unwavering" commitment to NATO. The message was given against the backdrop of new themes, reflections and trends in the transatlantic relationship. Here are the top five:

- **Munich's big question – Who are we?** At a private session on the margins of the conference, a senior U.S. political figure started by asking what he called the [Admiral Stockdale question](#): "Who am I? Why am I here?" The question was in many ways running theme at every panel, bilat, scrum and huddle at the bar. Past MSCs felt driven by particular policy agendas – overcoming the Eurozone crisis, brokering a new relationship with Iran, driving the implementation of Minsk in Ukraine. In 2017, the question was more existential – what are our common values? Can and should they be reflected institutions like NATO and the EU? Should we lean more on interests? How do we buttress democratic legitimacy in an age of populism?
- **The "Article 5 Plus" NATO Narrative:** NATO members clearly had their sites on rethinking in the alliance to reflect domestic priorities. Post-Brexit, UK Foreign Minister Boris Johnson [emphasized](#) Article 2 – the commitment of alliance member to build free and open economies. He used it to make the case for more free trade agreements, greater bilateral economic cooperation and renewed investment in the global trade and investment architecture. Vice President Pence [emphasized](#) Article 3 – the commitment of alliance members to maintain their forces appropriately resourced and battle ready. He used Article 3 to underscore the new administration's core message to NATO allies: hit 2% defense spending goal or watch the alliance transform in ways you won't like. Along with a renewed focus on terrorism, accelerating the march to 2% was at the top of the administration's wish list for European allies.
- **All Eyes on McCain.** The Friday [speech](#) by Senator John McCain (R-AZ) was universally lauded as—perhaps—the conference highlight, clear-eyed and rooted in the principles of liberal democracy. Without mentioning Trump's name once, he sounded alarm bells about attacks on free, independent press, independent judiciary, American credibility and openness. McCain's remarks reflected the cross party resistance from Congress and the U.S. states present at the conference, including Ohio governor and former presidential candidate John Kasich. That resolve did more to reassure conference participants than the administration's charm offensive.
- **Europe says "EU first." The U.S. says "what is the EU?"** Europeans came to the conference to talk EU. Chancellor Merkel opened her [discussion](#) on Europe's security architecture with a push to EU capacity and coordination followed by Franco-German cooperation. She only came to talk about NATO as her third point. Ukrainian President Poroshenko heralded his country's dream of a closer relationship with the EU. The Polish and Dutch foreign ministers squabbled about what the EU means for the preservation of democratic institutions like an independent judiciary. Not so with the Americans. While [Pence](#) and [Mattis](#) reinforced the U.S. commitment to NATO, neither made any mention of the

U.S. government's long-standing strategic equity in the European project. That left many of Trump's assertions about the EU as a "disaster" unchallenged.

- **The Economic Pillar remains the missing link.** On the conference margins, the question of inclusive economic growth, jobs with dignity and rising cost of living was on the minds of many, reflective of an anxiety that the inability to deliver economic prosperity was the key driver of rising populism, authoritarianism and distrust in the establishment. According to one conference participant, even Trump's national security team – so inconsistent on most fronts in the early days of the new administration – remained remarkably latched up on the view that U.S. foreign policy must be in the service of jobs and growth for American workers. And yet – unlike past years – the economic piece completely absent in the MSC agenda. One example is TTIP. President Trump has never mentioned TTIP once on the campaign or in office. That is in stark contrast to TPP, the opposition to which became one of his signature policy issues. TTIP may not be the vehicle for future U.S-European economic relations. The administration has certainly expressed its desire to make trade deals on a bilateral basis, an ominous assertion for the EU. But nobody has officially declared TTIP (perhaps reborn under a new name) dead. And cooperation on trade, along with banking, energy, corruption, monetary policy, digital transformation and other economic areas remain drivers of global security and democratic legitimacy.

MSC Word of the year: transactional