Aspen Germany at the Munich Security Conference

Key Take-Aways and Aspen's Activities at the MSC 2026

Key Take-Aways

The 62nd Munich Security Conference (14–16 February 2026), held under the title "Under Destruction," confirmed that the era of geopolitical comfort is over. Bringing together more than 50 heads of state and government, foreign and defense ministers, parliamentary leaders, military officials, CEOs, and civil society representatives, MSC 2026 once again functioned as one of world's premier forum for strategic exchange. Leaders met not only in plenary sessions but also in bilateral and minilateral formats, closed-door roundtables, off-the-record strategy sessions, and crisis consultations. Munich's value lay less in formal communiqués and more in candid signaling, alignment-testing, and strategic calibration.

Substantively, the conference underscored five core realities. First, the post–Cold War "rules-based order" is no longer taken for granted; great-power rivalry and institutional erosion now define the landscape. Second, despite a softer tone, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's speech made clear that there is no transatlantic reset: sovereignty, reciprocity, and civilizational framing increasingly shape American foreign policy. Third, Europe recognizes the need for greater strategic responsibility, yet a gap remains between rhetoric and operational readiness. Fourth, the erosion of arms control and the modernization of nuclear arsenals have brought deterrence and strategic stability back to the forefront. Fifth, conflict now extends beyond physical battlefields into cyberspace, technology supply chains, and information warfare. Finally, middle powers and actors from the so-called Global South demonstrated growing agency, reminding participants that global order is no longer organized around Western introspection alone.

1. Goodbye to the 'Old Normal': From Rules to Power Rivalry

The 62nd Munich Security Conference framed 2026 as a pivotal moment in global geopolitics. Its official theme, "Under Destruction," was illustrating: the conference organizers and participants agreed that the post-World-War II, rules-based international order is no longer functioning as it once did. The Munich Security Report 2026 used the metaphor of "wrecking-ball politics" to capture this transformation.

Historically, the international system rested on a set of widely shared expectations: adherence to international law, cooperative security arrangements (especially NATO), liberal economic frameworks, and the US-led provision of public goods like collective defense and open markets. The 2026 MSC suggests this consensus is breaking down. The conference's report describes a world where:

- Alliances and global institutions are under strain — particularly the transatlantic partnership that anchored the "old normal."
- Radical shifts in policy, rhetoric and power projection reduce the space for incremental reform.
- Trust in political systems is eroding, with electorates across Western democracies ex-

pressing skepticism about institutional responsiveness and legitimacy.

In this context, the language of rules-based order has given way to talk of competition among great powers, challenging the assumption that international norms will naturally manage conflict or crises.

Source: MSC/Kuhlmann

2. No Transatlantic Reset

When U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio took the stage at MSC 2026, anticipation was high. Unlike last year's speech by Vice President Vance – widely perceived as a frontal attack on Europe and a direct import of American culture war rhetoric – Rubio's address struck a more friendly tone. He invoked shared heritage, described the United States as a "child of Europe," and emphasized the historical depth of the transatlantic bond.

The result: a standing ovation in the main hall. The applause reflected relief that the speech was not openly confrontational.

But substance matters more than tone. And in substance, there was no reset. Quite the contrary, the speech exhibited several worrisome aspects.

The "Illusion" Narrative: Declaring the Old Order a Strategic Mistake

Rubio's central thesis was that the post-Cold War "rules-based global order" rested on flawed assumptions. His argument reframed the last three decades not as a period of progress, but as an era of strategic naïveté:

- The belief that global governance would supersede nation-states,
- the expectation that free trade alone would guarantee peace and prosperity,
- the outsourcing of sovereignty to international institutions,
- climate prioritization at the expense of domestic industry,
- tolerance of mass migration without regard to cultural cohesion.

Rubio criticized international bodies such as the United Nations as inadequate, advocating reform and a return to national sovereignty and interest-based alliances.

His speech was not merely a policy critique. It was a narrative revision of the entire post-Cold War era.

Domestic Policy as Foreign Policy

A defining feature of Rubio's address was the seamless fusion of domestic political themes with foreign policy strategy. Rubio spoke very much to his domestic audience (with the midterm elections in November 2026 and the 2028 presidential elections in mind). His message:

- Globalization harmed American workers,
- climate-driven economic restructuring weakened industry,
- uncontrolled migration threatens cultural

continuity,
- Trump's leadership is "rejuvenating".

Domestic economic and cultural priorities are now explicit drivers of foreign policy.

Culture War and Civilizational Framing: Soft Tone, Hard Narrative

Marco Rubio's speech stood out for the dense layering of civilizational, identity-based language. This rhetoric taps into cultural and ideological themes popular with conservative, nationalist and populist constituencies.

Rubio repeatedly invoked the idea of a shared Western civilization rooted in common history, heritage, and values, framing the transatlantic alliance not merely as a strategic partnership but as a cultural and historical community:

- He underscored that Europe and the United States are connected by centuries of shared history, culture, Christian heritage, language, and collective sacrifice.
- The objective was to portray the alliance as a civilizational project, appealing to narratives of Western pride and exceptionalism.

Another notable element of Rubio's rhetoric was the linkage between migration, cultural cohesion, and civilizational survival:

- Rubio warned that open borders and "mass migration" had undermined societal cohesion and threatened the future of Western cultures and societies.
- He suggested that such policies contribute to the "decline" of Western civilization, a narrative that mirrors right-wing anxieties over demographic and cultural change.

Rubio's speech also implicitly rejected post-colonial guilt narratives – the idea that Western nations should atone for historical wrongs such as colonialism or slavery:

- Rather than acknowledging historical transgressions, he urged pride in heritage and culture, encouraging nations not to be "shackled by guilt and shame."

Source: MSC/Kuhlmann

3. The European Moment? Mind the Delivery Gap

At this year's MSC, the question was not whether Europe must assume greater responsibility – there is consensus that it should. The question was whether it is doing so at sufficient speed and scale and if the EU members states are sufficiently united.

Across sessions on defense industrial capacity, Ukraine support, transatlantic burden-sharing, and economic security, participants of the conference seemed to agree: Europe understands the structural shift. However, discussion repeatedly returned to the same unresolved issue – implementation.

In his speech Friedrich Merz emphasized that Europe must become more capable in defense, acknowledging that assumptions about automatic U.S. security guarantees are no longer sufficient. Ursula von der Leyen stressed the need for further strengthening Europe's defense industrial base and reducing strategic dependen-

cies, arguing for faster EU decision-making in security matters.

Leaders spoke openly of sovereignty, power, resilience, and deterrence. What remained unresolved is tempo and cohesion.

- Defense budgets are rising, but integration lags,
- industrial ambition is strong, but coordination is uneven,
- institutional reform is debated, but not yet realized,
- Strategic autonomy is embraced, but operationalized gradually.

How European was Friedrich Merz's speech? It was European in diagnosis, but predominantly national in framing. His tone reflected a broader European realism visible in Munich: less reliance on U.S. security guarantees, more emphasis on sovereignty, capability, and deterrence. However, the operational framing was more German than European. Merz's speech was not an inspirational address about Europe as a transformative political project. It did not outline bold reforms of European institutions, deeper EU integration, or a new vision for European partnerships. Rather than proposing structural changes at the EU level, he focused on responsibility, capability, and pragmatic cooperation within existing frameworks – with Germany positioned as a central actor.

Source: MSC/Conzelmann

4. The New Nuclear Question: Strategic Stability Revisited

At MSC 2026, the nuclear question returned to the center of strategic debate. In multiple panels on deterrence, NATO posture, and great-power competition, participants openly acknowledged that the nuclear domain is becoming less regulated, less predictable, and more technologically complex.

- First, the erosion of arms control frameworks has significantly reduced strategic guardrails: The weakening or collapse of key agreements has diminished transparency, verification, and formal ceilings on arsenals. What once provided structured predictability now relies increasingly on signaling, posture, and unilateral declarations. Several speakers noted that without functioning arms control regimes, miscalculation risks rise.
- Second, modernization is accelerating across all major nuclear powers: Russia continues to upgrade both strategic and non-strategic systems and integrates nuclear signaling into its conventional war strategy. The United States is undertaking a comprehensive modernization of its nuclear triad, replacing aging infrastructure to maintain credible deterrence. China is expanding and diversifying its arsenal at a pace that alters long-term strategic balances.
- Third, transatlantic recalibration has brought uncomfortable questions to the surface in Europe: While European actors are not advocating independent nuclearization, discussions in Munich reflected a sober re-

assessment of extended deterrence. The credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, Europe's influence within NATO nuclear planning, and the relationship between strategic autonomy and nuclear posture were debated more openly than in previous years.

Strategic stability is being revisited in a world defined by modernization, multipolar rivalry, and weakened institutional guardrails. For Europe, this is not a theoretical debate.

5. War Beyond the Frontline: The Digital Battlefield and Technology

At MSC 2026, one of the clearest cross-cutting themes was that the character of conflict has fundamentally changed. War is no longer confined to territorial battlefields; it now unfolds simultaneously in cyberspace, outer space, supply chains, and the information domain. The frontline is hybrid: kinetic, digital, economic, and cognitive.

Ukraine served repeatedly as the empirical reference point in discussions. Participants highlighted how drones, commercial satellite systems, real-time battlefield data, and cyber operations have reshaped operational dynamics. Civilian technologies have become dual-use assets, and private sector infrastructure – from communications networks to cloud services – is now embedded in military resilience. This blurring of civilian and military domains introduces new vulnerabilities alongside new capabilities.

Equally central was the role of information warfare. Disinformation campaigns, strategic narrative shaping, and digital influence operations were described not as peripheral tactics but as integral components of modern conflict. Control over perception, legitimacy, and public opinion has become a strategic objective. Several panels emphasized that democracies are particularly exposed to cognitive warfare, where societal cohesion itself becomes a target.

Beyond active conflict zones, technological competition is systemic. Control over semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, advanced manufacturing, and critical raw materials increasingly determines geopolitical leverage. Industrial policy, export controls, and supply-chain diversification are no longer merely economic tools; they are instruments of national security.

MSC 2026 thus reinforced a central insight: deterrence and defense now depend as much on technological sovereignty, digital infrastructure, and information resilience as on conventional military power.

6. The World Beyond Western Self-Absorption: Middel Powers and the "Global South"

A critique hovered over MSC 2026: much of the debate remained transatlantic. Panels were dominated by questions of U.S. reliability, European readiness, NATO credibility, and the erosion of the liberal order. This risks obscuring a larger structural reality – the world is no longer organized around Western introspection.

Beyond the Atlantic conversation, middle powers and actors commonly grouped under the label "Global South" are not waiting for Western coherence.

Representatives from India, Brazil, South Africa, Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa made clear that the emerging order is not viewed primarily

through a transatlantic lens. Instead, their priorities center on:

- Strategic flexibility,
- economic resilience,
- technology access,
- energy security,
- debt sustainability,
- development financing.

These actors are strategically selective; they balance and diversify partnerships. They refuse to collapse global politics into a binary West-versus-rest framework.

The term "Global South" itself is contested as geographically imprecise and politically heterogeneous.

Overall, MSC 2026 did not produce dramatic announcements or a new grand doctrine. But it clarified the changing geopolitical environment: the old order is eroding, power politics is back, deterrence is being recalibrated, technology is reshaping conflict, and multipolarity is no longer theoretical. The conference revealed a world in transition. The central challenge for Europe and its partners is no longer recognizing this shift, but adapting to it with more speed, coherence, and credibility.

At MSC 2026, we were present not merely as an

Our Activities at the MSC

observer, but as an active convener of strategic debate. In a year marked by geopolitical fragmentation, renewed nuclear uncertainty, and intensified information warfare, Aspen Germany contributed to the conference's core themes by hosting high-level discussions that bridged policy, academia, media, and civil society. Through public panels, an Oxford-style nuclear deterrence debate, and expert roundtables on countering information manipulation in Europe, we provided platforms for candid exchange across sectors and borders.

„Weapons of Mass Persuasion: The Power of Information"

On February 14, 2026, in cooperation with the Amerikahaus München and the Tagesspiegel, we hosted an official side event on the growing role of information ecosystems as a domain of strategic competition. In light of recent elections in Romania (2024) and Germany (2025), the discussion examined how coordinated disinformation campaigns, including bot networks, fabricated narratives, and paid influencers, fuel polarization, undermine trust, and represent an evolving form of hybrid threat to democratic societies.

Participants included members of the Aspen Germany InfluencersAgainstDisinfo 2025 cohort, Johana Bázlerová, Mickaël Brunhammer, and Anastasiia Mozghova. Together with Anja Wehler-Schoeck (Tagesspiegel), André Loesekrug-Pietri (JEDI, Joint European Disruptive Initiative), and Christian Heldt (German Federal Foreign Office) they explored both risks and op-

portunities in the digital information environment.

A key takeaway from the discussion was that while digital platforms and the internet undoubtedly amplify threats, they also democratize access to information and create new opportunities to counter disinformation. The same systems that enable the rapid spread of manipulation also provide the tools, knowledge, and networks needed to strengthen resilience and promote trusted, fact-based communication.

Strengthening resilience against foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) therefore requires sustained collaboration across policy makers, media, technology actors, creators, and civil society. Building a resilient information environment is not solely the responsibility of institutions or platforms. It demands active engagement from journalists, digital creators, and citizens alike. The challenge is significant, but so is the opportunity, if societies choose to act.

„Keeping the Peace or Fueling the Fire? The Future of Nuclear Deterrence“

Another highlight of our activities at the MSC 2026 was our signature Oxford-style debate, this time on the future of nuclear deterrence, organized in cooperation with Amerikahaus München, Tagesspiegel, and the Academic Association for Security Studies (BSH) on February 14, 2026. The official MSC side event brought together two teams of experts to debate whether nuclear arsenals should be modernized and how such efforts shape global security.

The debate reflected growing uncertainty about the role of nuclear weapons in today's geopolitical environment. One side argued that modernization programs are essential to keep existing arsenals credible, usable, and therefore capable of maintaining deterrence and preventing escalation. The opposing team warned that these same programs could undermine global security by fostering a new nuclear arms race, weakening arms control, and increasing the risk of miscalculation. The discussion featured leading voices including Héloïse Fayet, Camille Grand, Mallory Stewart, Daniel Poneman, Emma Belcher, Sara Nanni, Dr. Sibylle Bauer, and Melissa Parke, who argued their positions with precision and passion.

Despite differing perspectives, participants converged on the importance of renewed dialogue, transparency, and risk-reduction measures. A key takeaway from the debate was that, regardless of where one stands on modernization, there is a shared commitment to preventing nuclear escalation. The session demonstrated that common ground can be found in the fundamental goal of safeguarding global security.

„Defending Democracy: Countering Information Manipulation in Eastern and Southeastern Europe“

As part of our program, we hosted an unofficial MSC side event on “Defending Democracy:

Countering Information Manipulation in Eastern and Southeastern Europe," organized in cooperation with the Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft and supported by the Europa Union Deutschland on February 14, 2026. The discussion addressed the growing role of information manipulation as a central instrument of hybrid warfare and its impact on democratic institutions, societal cohesion, and political polarization across the region.

Speakers highlighted that both foreign and domestic actors have intensified disinformation campaigns in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, particularly in fragile and transitioning democracies. In EU enlargement countries, such efforts risk undermining public support for European integration and democratic reforms, while in EU member states they weaken trust in institutions and public backing for sensitive foreign policy decisions. The panel underscored the need for regional cooperation, cross-sector partnerships, and local ownership to strengthen democratic resilience.

The discussion brought together Sunčica Bakić, Johana Bázlerová, Christian Heldt, Anastasiia Mozghova, and Milijana Rogač, and was moderated by Christian Hagemann. Opened by Stormy-Annika Mildner, the session explored practical strategies and tools to counter information manipulation, with a particular focus on collaboration between civil society, independent media, content creators, governments, and EU institutions. Participants emphasized that strengthening fact-based communication, supporting trusted institutions, and empowering digital actors are essential to building long-term societal resilience and secure information environments.

A key takeaway was that defending democracy in the information space requires sustained, coordinated action across borders and sectors, as well as stronger partnerships between local and international stakeholders.

Transatlantic Relations and the New World Order – Is this the End of the EU and NATO?

On February 14, 2026, also on the sidelines of the MSC, we convened security experts, diplomats, policy makers, and leading think tank representatives from both sides of the Atlantic for an exclusive, off-the-record discussion on the future of the transatlantic partnership.

The round table took place at a moment of extraordinary geopolitical tension. Continued uncertainty regarding Ukraine, developments in and around Venezuela and Greenland, and the uprising in Iran formed the backdrop of our exchange. One year into his presidency, U.S. President Trump's strategy of disruption, aggressive rhetoric, and tariffs has reshaped global dynamics, unsettling allies and raising fundamental questions about the future of the multilateral order.

Under the title “Transatlantic Relations and the New World Order – Is this the End of the EU and NATO?”, participants engaged in a candid and forward-looking on:

- The current state of the transatlantic relationship
- The implications of recent U.S. policies for the European Union and NATO
- European responses to accelerating geopolitical shift
- How to ensure Ukraine’s long-term security and independence

The discussion was moderated by Ruediger Lentz and Stormy-Annika Mildner. Host partners were the American Council on Germany, Berlin Dialogue, Aspen Institute Germany, WiTreu Legal, supported by Deutsche Atlantische Gesellschaft e.V. and German American Exchange.

At a time of disruption and uncertainty, open and trusted dialogue remains essential for safeguarding our shared security architecture.

Beyond convening our own panels and debates, Aspen Institute Germany was also proud to partner in an Aspen U.S./Strategy Group reception that welcomed members of the U.S. Congressional delegation attending MSC 2026. The reception offered an important space for informal and trusted exchange between American lawmakers, European counterparts, and members of our network at a time when sustained transatlantic dialogue is more vital than ever.

We were particularly delighted to see some of you – our members – in Munich. The conversations on the margins of the conference, the shared reflections after panels, and the spontaneous exchanges throughout the three days are what truly bring the Aspen community to life. Your engagement, perspectives, and continued support make it possible for us to convene meaningful dialogue at moments of strategic transition.

The insights gained at MSC 2026 – from nuclear deterrence and technological competition to democratic resilience and multipolar realignment – will directly inform our activities in the weeks and months ahead. We will integrate these learnings into our programs, policy dialogues, and partnerships, ensuring that the debates in Munich translate into concrete impact within the Aspen Germany network.