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Munich Security Conference threatens war on all fronts

The proceedings at the 54th Munich Security Conference, which took place in Germany over the weekend, make clear that the imperialist powers are once again collectively dragging humanity to the brink of disaster.

Overt threats of war centred immediately on Syria, Iran and North Korea. But the US, European and other powers made clear that their ultimate military targets are Russia and China. Moreover, in their supposedly collective struggle to secure global hegemony, the imperialist powers are themselves being pitted against one another in ways not seen since the Second World War.

Washington led the pack in bellicosity towards Syria and North Korea, tied to allegations of Russian and Chinese culpability.

The conference was opened by chairman Wolfgang Ischinger warning that the world has moved too close to a “major interstate conflict.”

UN Secretary-General António Guterres followed with the declaration, “For the first time since the end of the Cold War, we are now facing a nuclear threat, a threat of a nuclear conflict.” This was not laid at the door of Washington, but to “the development in relation to nuclear weapons and long-range missiles by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made a point of noting in his address Friday that Munich was closer to North Korea’s capital, Pyongyang, than to Washington, before focusing his ire on Russia. NATO was supposedly seeking to avoid a new arms race with

Russia, but “Russia is modernizing its nuclear capabilities, developing new nuclear systems, and increasing the role of nuclear weapons in its military strategy. This is a cause for real concern.”

Stoltenberg boasted last week that non-US NATO defence spending grew by 5 percent in 2017, so that eight alliance members have reached the 2 percent of GDP commitment. This is expected to reach 15 member-states by 2024.

Speaking Saturday, US National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster said, “We face a range of common threats. Rogue regimes that already imperil international security in the Middle East and northeast Asia.”

It was necessary to “act against Iran,” he insisted, which was cultivating a “network of proxies” and militias in Syria, Yemen and Iraq that were “becoming more and more capable, as Iran seeds more and more...destructive weapons into these networks.” Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad was still using chemical weapons against the US-backed Islamist insurgency, he also claimed, citing “public accounts and photos.”

Identifying Iran, but in a barely veiled reference to Russia and China, he added, “We know that Syria and North Korea are not the only rogue states developing, using, spreading dangerous weapons...”

Picking up the torch, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned Sunday of Israeli readiness for a multi-front war with Iran. Holding aloft what he claimed was a piece of an Iranian drone shot down in Israeli airspace February 10, he delivered “a message to the tyrants of Tehran... Do not test Israel’s resolve.”

“Through its proxie Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza Iran is devouring huge swathes of the Middle East,” he said. “We will act without hesitation to defend ourselves. And we will act if necessary not just against Iran’s proxies that are attacking us, but against Iran itself.”

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel added that when it came to China and Russia, “the West does not have a new strategy to deal with these two powers.” Both China and Russia “constantly try to test and to undermine the [European Union’s] unity.” Through its Belt and Road Initiative, “China is developing a comprehensive alternative system; a system unlike ours that is not based on freedom, democracy, and individual human rights. China seems to have a real global strategic idea and they are pursuing this idea persistently.”

Just as striking as the anti-Russian and anti-Chinese rhetoric was the increasingly naked discussion of the gulf opening up between the US and the major European powers. The

conference, which was to focus on Europe's "contribution" to global security, was organised after repeated US demands for increased military spending, repeated this week by US Secretary of Defence James Mattis at a meeting of NATO. But Munich featured a running argument over the dangers of a breach in the NATO Alliance.

Stoltenberg spent much of his contribution warning that future EU defence cooperation—as laid down in last December's Permanent Structured Cooperation agreement, PESCO—must not threaten NATO's unity.

Strengthening "the European pillar within NATO" and "better burden sharing," was fine. However, after the British exit from the EU is complete, some 80 percent of NATO's funding would come from non-EU allies, he said. The risk "of weakening the trans-Atlantic bond, the risk of duplicating what NATO is already doing, and the risk of discriminating against non-EU members of the NATO alliance... must be avoided."

"The EU cannot protect Europe by itself," he added pointedly.

Last Tuesday, US envoy to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison also warned that "we do not want [PESCO] to be a protectionist vehicle for the EU and we are going to watch carefully because, if that becomes the case, then it could splinter the strong security alliance that we have... We want the Europeans to have capabilities and strength, but not to fence off American products."

Stoltenberg, who clearly spoke for Washington, was given short shrift by both Germany and France.

German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen said that Europe could no longer accept a situation in which they were stymied by the need to decide joint foreign policy approaches unanimously within NATO.

"Europe has to up its pace in the face of global challenges from terrorism, poverty and climate change," she said. "Those who want to must be able to advance without being blocked by individual countries... We want to remain transatlantic but we want to become more European."

"A start has been made," she said. "Last December we finally launched plans for a European Defence Union. In a way we started out on the political path toward working on a European army."

Speaking to *France 24*, von der Leyen went so far as to link "Brexit, the migrant crisis, a more assertive Russia and an unpredictable White House" as a collective "wake-up call we needed to understand that we had to change something and stand on our own two feet."

France's Foreign Secretary Florence Parly was equally dismissive of US concerns.

“When we are threatened in our own neighbourhood, particularly to the south, we have to be able to respond, even when the United States or the (NATO) alliance would like to be less implicated,” she said.

EU nations must be ready to act “without asking the United States to come to our aid, without asking them to divert their ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) capabilities or their supply craft from other missions.”

Both Germany and France have recently committed to increasing military spending—with France pledging to meet the NATO two percent target by pledging \$370 billion of investments by 2025.

UK Prime Minister Theresa May sought to strengthen her hand in negotiations with the EU by focusing on the UK’s role in Europe’s collective military and security structures. May urged Europe’s leaders not to let Britain’s intention to leave the EU’s common foreign and security policy prevent agreement on a new security treaty that would have “damaging real-world consequences.”

May was fully backed by the US, which views the UK, which has the second biggest defence budget in NATO, as a valuable check on Germany and France.