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Environment seen from the defence sector : what's brewing at the MSC?

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Last year in Munich, United States Vice-President JD Vance's unprecedented attacks on European leaders and values highlighted the growing divide between the US and the European Union, including on security issues. This year's Munich Security Conference (MSC), which will take place next 13-15 February, will address topics such as "European security and defence, the future of the transatlantic relationship, the revitalization of multilateralism, competing visions of the global order, regional conflicts, and the security implications of technological advances".

In an unsettling, daunting geopolitical context, IDDRI asked Dr. Pia Fuhrhop, Head of the International Security research division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP-Berlin), her insights into what will be at stake in Munich, and what role environmental issues can play within the global security challenge.

What are, in your perspective, the key priorities or issues that structure the agenda of international security? For instance, what will be at the centre of the Munich Security Conference, considering that the MSC 2026 Report is quite tough—or simply clear—with the US Administration? To what extent do those priorities seem contradictory with the possibility to preserve or foster multilateral cooperation, international solidarity, and global public goods like the environment?

I think there are three priorities that should be dealt with at the conference.

The first one is being picked up by the MSC report that you just mentioned: three big powers are increasingly pursuing a policy of spheres of influence, with varying degrees of success. Russia certainly pursues it very violently in Ukraine, but not very successfully, to be honest. China pursues it in its region, less violently, but probably very successfully. And I think the elephant in the room that is being addressed by the MSC report is the United States. The Trump Administration's unilateralism and selective use of force violating international law is a direct threat to the international order. So the novelty is that the US, too, is an actor that wants a sphere of influence in its own right in the Western Hemisphere.

Secondly, we can see a global arms race in full swing. If you look at the [SIPRI data](#), global military expenditure is at 2.7 trillion dollars (2024). That's the biggest increase since the late 1980s, and European expenditure is the one that has risen most sharply. It's an enormous amount of money, and I think most importantly, really global.

And that coincides with the third issue or priority that we have to deal with in security policy: we observe an increasing number of and increasingly violent conflicts. In 2023, the world witnessed more violent conflicts than at any time since the end of the Second World War. And those conflicts have more civilian casualties, or the most civilian casualties, since the mid-1990s.

So we are in a situation in which many countries feel that they need to prepare for potential adversaries to pursue their goals with military force. That's why they buy so many weapons and spend so much on security. We have to deal with a situation in which, in every corner of the world, big and the small powers find themselves in conflict or confrontation. I think that's a very explosive mixture. So, yes, these are developments that make the idea of transnational cooperation in pursuit of common policy making just way more difficult.

The security agenda, which has been a legitimate focus of media and political debate, particularly in Europe, for the past four years, has centred on defence and military issues, tending to overshadow environmental issues, that are still major and urgent issues. And yet these two dimensions—security and the environment—cannot be separated. For instance, resource dependencies create vulnerabilities, and hence circularity or reduced resource consumption increases security, as shown by the EU's dependency on Russian gas. How do defence actors integrate issues such as climate, energy, water, biodiversity and air into their strategic visions? Is this a priority for the sector (what is being said at the Munich conference) and what is your opinion on this subject?

The first way in which environmental issues appear in strategic thinking is as drivers of conflict. Often it has been said that climate change, for example, is a threat multiplier, because we assume that communities and States will more intensively compete over the control of natural resources once they become scarce, whether it's an issues of biodiversity, water—I think water is always the most prominent one—or climate change as a source for forced migration, and forced migration then as a source for conflict.

As for the military side, environmental issues matter greatly, too. Defence planners and militaries seek advantage in battle. Environmental issues are an important condition for success. Military equipment has to work in extreme heat, or in extreme weather, or in extreme cold. You have to account for the fact that, as of now, militaries use a gigantic amount of fossil fuels. So military planners have to think about a world in which fossil fuels might not be so easily

obtained anymore. Militaries, too, will have to adapt to alternative fuels to maintain their advantage. So all kinds of changes in the environment have a vital role in military planning.

Lastly, energy dependencies and the consequences of environmental damage caused by wars are important as they point to the resilience of the society that one wants to defend in conflict. So that maybe is a third dimension in which it figures, but it's a very specific perspective that's different from cooperation on environmental issues for the benefit of all.

Recent geopolitical upheavals have been described by some politicians as a real turning point. The foundations of international law and multilateral institutions are under severe attack. Nevertheless, long-term, structural, pluri- or multilateral cooperation could be considered to work better for economic security than pure transactional bilateral power grab. For instance, economic security in supply chains (as for raw materials) is better ensured through structural cooperation with producing and importing partners than by bilateral deals. What do defence, political and industrial players have to say about this?

In the long term, equitable, structural, reliable cooperation does indeed reap better benefits for those that cooperate. But I think when you look at the security realm and the world that we live in today, we have to account for the fact that many States do not think long term anymore. With threat perceptions being intense, States look for relative gains. They want to be better off than their perceived adversary. And they feel that they need to be quite fast in achieving the advantage, so there is immense time pressure. And under these two conditions—if States look for relative gains, and if they feel they don't have the time to build up cooperation—then those suboptimal ways of cooperating—the transactional deal, the short bilateral agreement—become more attractive than the solution that would work better in the long term.

I think raw materials for defence goods is such a good example because it's also such a bottleneck. China controls most of the raw materials and the refinement that you need for modern defence equipment. We have seen that almost everything in cooperation is being weaponized these days, whether it's trade or raw materials. And once you have done that, that cannot be undone. You cannot undo the fear instilled with exploiting dependencies. That's why I think politicians in the defence realm look for security in supply chains by diversifying from different sources, by trying to onshore as much as possible, and by cooperation among allies. Twelve NATO countries cooperate on the extraction of raw materials. But the more States feel their security is threatened, the more they will go for the relative gain, and will go for it alone.

For industrial players, I think it's even more difficult. Demand for supply chain security is high, and must be addressed, but prices for secure raw materials are much higher than those for materials coming from China on short notice.

Do you think multilateralism is an outdated concept? Should we talk about 'international relations' in the broader sense of 'relations between countries', to be rebuilt on an ad hoc basis between (new) allies? And could we do so by integrating security while maintaining the values of solidarity and protection of common goods? What alliances could be envisaged?

I personally don't think that multilateralism is an outdated concept. And I think we would be ill-advised to throw it overboard. It's true that some powerful countries seek to undermine some of the common rules, to challenge them, they want exceptions, and they increase the costs of cooperation for everyone else. But so far, they came with a wrecking ball and they haven't built much. And I think for all other actors—smaller countries, middle powers—there is still a lot to gain from solving problems in a cooperative manner.

We also know from research that cooperation in other spheres may have positive effects on the security perception of States. It would be an absolute mistake to give up on multilateral cooperation. What may be needed under the current circumstances is an adapted sense of ambition. What can smaller coalitions achieve? How much solidarity can remain if big spenders withdraw their money? What if those that have been big spenders feel that they need to spend on something that hits closer to home? Ambition might have to be downscaled without giving up on principles.

I would also not use the term international relations as I think it's a mistake to think it's only about the States. The State level is usually very prominent, but a lot of Non-State Actors are so important even in the security realm.

You were talking about middle powers, as did the Canadian Prime Minister in his speech in Davos last January, arguing that medium powers and partners should align to get stronger together.

Essentially, if you sum up the capabilities of a lot of countries that we roughly consider middle powers—which encompass very big States like India, very rich States like Germany, countries with a lot of diplomatic clout like France, or countries with large populations such as Brazil—I think one can make the case that if these countries agree to cooperate on problems that are public goods or transnational problems that cannot be solved by one of them, the world will be a better place.

From a security perspective, such cooperation is helpful even if it reaches a suboptimal outcome compared to what cooperation would be like if everyone joined. From a security perspective, whenever one can stabilize international relations, wherever one can agree on principles, wherever one can find more predictable relations again, and solve problems or at least alleviate them, I think we're on a good path.

Most countries still abide by a lot of international rules and norms. It's the stark violations that you see, and you don't see the compliance. But still, there is a lot of compliance. And you see it more in your climate and environmental sphere, I'm sure, than we do.

I would like to add that in its core, the MSC still is a very transatlantic, Western-oriented endeavor, and that's why it's so important how big the American delegation is that's coming, who is coming, and what messages are being sent. We have an immediate security problem in Europe with Russia's war on Ukraine, and we haven't found any solution yet.

But I think what will be interesting to watch is in what relation these actors set themselves to the big delegations that are coming from the rest of the world. Because what we also see, and it's increasingly clear for us Europeans, is that for us to be more secure, we need international support. We're not capable of doing it on our own, especially when we cannot trust the Americans the way we did.

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