



COMMENTARY

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Munich Security Conference Harks Back to the Cold War

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Over the weekend roughly 300 security experts from over dozens of countries met in Germany for the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy (formerly known as Wehrkunde). This year's topic was "Peace through Dialogue." From a transatlantic perspective, the theme rang true, with notably less tension than in recent years over Iraq and the U.S.-led war on terror. But the conference organizers put the conference theme to the test by inviting both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani. Both men delivered hard-hitting critiques of the United States and the West more broadly that had a striking resemblance to exchanges during the Cold War.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the formal proceedings with a speech on global challenges. She started with energy security, signaling a new era in the transatlantic relationship, one that will increasingly stretch beyond traditional security issues. She also made a push for what she called "networked security" or greater collaboration between civilian and military actors in stabilization and reconstruction operations around the globe. Gone were the stinging accusations of U.S. unilateralism and the over-militarization of the war on terror that have become commonplace in transatlantic forums over the last five years.

The American speakers' remarks over the three days were also forward-looking and upbeat on the state of the relationship. Germany and other NATO allies were encouraged to send more troops to Afghanistan. But that message was delivered gently, probably because German officials repeatedly hinted in sidebar meetings that troops might be forthcoming in another six months. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also reminded the audience that only 6 of NATO's 26 members were spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, a target that is outlined in a number of NATO planning documents. Secretary Gates drew loud applause, however, when he called the notion of an "old" and "new" Europe – a term his predecessor used – part of the past. There was no question that his speech and others, including Senator John McCain's remarks and Senator Joseph Lieberman's, were well received.

The mood darkened, however, with President Putin's keynote address, which, unlike Chancellor Merkel's, opened with a sharp attack on U.S. unipolarity. Putin questioned the motives behind NATO's continuing enlargement and U.S. plans to build an anti-missile defense system on Polish soil. He also criticized America's disregard for international law in its war on terror. The audience responded with pointed questions on Russia's human rights record, democratic reforms (or lack thereof), and troubling incidents of journalists disappearing or being killed. By the end, the room bore an eerie resemblance to the Cold War, with Europeans and Americans united and the Russians on the defensive. Senator Lindsey Graham was quoted as saying that Putin did more to bring Europe and the United States together than any single event in the last several years.

Iran's Ali Larijani triggered a similar reaction when he too talked about the United States undermining global security and condemned America's "warlike attitude." Americans and Europeans shot back with questions about Iran's nuclear ambitions, recent statements regarding Israel's right to exist, and the denial of the holocaust. Larijani tiptoed around most of those questions while repeating his country's interest in resuming negotiations over his country's nuclear program (which few felt was genuine). While the exchange between Larijani and the audience made clear that Iran remains one of the biggest challenges for the transatlantic partners, virtually everyone present – perhaps minus the U.S. government officials who decided to skip Larijani's address – agreed that having him come was helpful.

Thankfully, the transatlantic partners have found a way to move beyond their differences over Iraq (although that war will continue to haunt the relationship from time to time). What Putin and Larijani did in Munich, though, was serve as a reminder of the long list of global challenges facing European and American policymakers in the coming months. Grappling with Iran's nuclear ambitions, the rolling back of democratic reforms in Russia, Darfur, Afghanistan, the Arab-Israeli conflict, radical extremism, energy security, and climate change will require much more than goodwill, however. What the two partners need today is a new strategic dialogue that will enable Europe and the United States to craft common strategies and match their ambitions with real capabilities.

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