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REPORTING

CAITLIN L. CHANDLER
Arms Race in Munich

Beer and bewilderment at the international security conference.

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On the first morning of the Munich Security Conference, February 14, I arrived at the press office to request an escort to enter the Bayerischer Hof, the opulent hotel that hosts this annual convening of politicians, generals, weapons manufacturers and technology companies. The room looked like an airport lounge — gleaming white tables with copies of *Foreign Policy*, an inaudible conference livestream — and vibrated with the energy of journalists from around the world begging to get inside. Many attendees were willing to speak to the press, but the staff had been instructed to deter them.

I approached the desk, explaining that I had an appointment with Hichem Khadhraoui, the head of the global Center for Civilians in Conflict, an NGO that works with communities and armed groups to protect civilians in wars. “He wants to talk to you for an hour?” the conference staffer replied, incredulous. “Does he have a suite? We can only let you in if you’re going to a suite.” “Only rich people have suites,” I answered reflexively. (A suite at the Hof generally runs from around 700 euros a night to more than 12,500.) Eventually a young, serious woman whom I’ll call Jessa was assigned to accompany me.

The Munich Security Conference, created in 1963, once brought together German military officials with their United States and NATO counterparts to discuss countering the USSR. In its early years a few dozen people attended, but in 2025 some 450 CEOs, generals, and politicians were crammed into the Bayerischer Hof for what participants often call “Davos with guns.” As I waited to head through security, wearing a yellow badge that indicated I didn’t carry a firearm, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who occupies a ceremonial role in the government, opened with a [speech](#) committing his nation to European unity, trans-Atlanticism and the defense of liberal democracy. “The absence of rules must not become the guiding principle of a new world order,” he said sternly, omitting any reference to German leaders, who [had refused to commit](#) to implementing an arrest warrant for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued by the International Criminal Court.

Profits from arms and military services by the hundred largest defense companies reached \$632 billion in 2023, a 4.2 percent increase from 2022, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. In 2024 the U.N. disarmament chief warned that new technologies were outpacing regulation and that the threat of a nuclear weapon being used was the highest it had been since the Cold War.

Steinmeier was a warmup for the afternoon's main event: a speech by U.S. Vice President J. D. Vance. Steinmeier conceded that the U.S. would likely withdraw some of its troops from Europe. But he'd met with Vance earlier, he reassured the crowd, and "told him that, regardless of what your decision may be, discuss it with us."

When he took the stage, Vance did not talk about war. The crises were not in Ukraine, or Gaza, or Sudan, but within. He criticized European countries for restricting free speech. He noted that "almost one in five people living in this country moved here from abroad" and brought up an attack the preceding day, when a male Afghan asylum seeker drove into a crowd near the Munich central train station, killing two people and injuring more than 25 others. "How many times must we suffer these appalling setbacks before we change course and take our shared civilization in a new direction?" He then tried to make a joke at the expense of the climate activist Greta Thunberg, but no one laughed.

"There is no room for firewalls," he continued — an allusion to the fact that German parties had, until recently, sworn off cooperating with the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the Bundestag. Later the German press would report that, before entering the security conference, Vance had met in Munich with the AfD's co-leader Alice Weidel, who was banned from the proceedings. German politicians were especially horrified by Vance's speech: In the audience were Friedrich Merz, leader of the Christian Democratic Union, and members of the current government, some of whom later made impromptu statements defending German democracy and vowed to ramp up defense so as not to rely on the U.S.



The push for European militarization started long before Donald Trump's second term. Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the EU has raced to funnel money toward weapons. "I'm not saying we are at wartime, but we cannot say we are at peacetime anymore," said Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on stage in Munich. This reveals a wider trend. Profits from arms and military services by the hundred largest defense companies reached \$632 billion in 2023, a 4.2 percent increase from 2022, [according](#) to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. In 2024 the U.N. disarmament chief [warned](#) that new technologies were outpacing regulation and that the threat of a nuclear weapon being used was the highest it had been since the Cold War.

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As shock spread among Germany's political elites that the U.S. was meddling in a European (rather than an Asian, African, or Latin American) election, Jessa brought me to meet Khadhraoui. The softly lit basement room smelled like French fries and grilled meat. Jessa grabbed a table directly across with a clear line of sight and told me to notify her as soon as we were done. Khadhraoui, who's negotiated with armed groups in major conflicts, watched our discussion amusedly.

I wanted to understand how we could think about the future of the Geneva Conventions — the rules governing warfare — given the increased normalization of war crimes such as bombing hospitals and targeting civilians. "In the past years, the respect of international humanitarian law, and I would say even the basic humanitarian principles, have been completely disregarded by major actors on the planet," Khadhraoui told me bluntly. One turning point, he said, came when the U.S. and European allies illegally invaded Iraq in 2003; since then, armed groups around the world have drawn their own lessons from seeing powerful countries disregard humanitarian law in wartime. Khadhraoui's vision of security differed from most of those I heard bandied around the conference: "You cannot have security over protecting civilians. You cannot have security over peace."

As Khadhraoui raced off to his next meeting, Jessa indicated I could finish my coffee. "Can we go to the toilet together?" she then inquired. I asked her if she was studying journalism, but it turned out that she and most of the minders were students at the nearby military

academy. When she exited the bathroom and saw I had not fled, her shoulders noticeably relaxed. As Jessa negotiated with the MSC staff to let me attend a panel next door, she started to grow on me.

Inside, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda discussed how to increase European defense spending. Security personnel scanned the room, which was full of men in military uniforms lounging in blue velvet chairs. Finnish President Alexander Stubb, also on stage, said he thought we were witnessing the “birth of NATO 3.0.” Whereas Nato 2.0 was focused on peacekeeping, after Russia’s attack on Ukraine the new NATO can’t be “no action and talk only.” The panelists agreed that the new American administration was correct to ask Europe to take responsibility for its own defense. The U.S. provides most of NATO’s capabilities, including housing nuclear weapons [in NATO bases in Western Europe](#), and has some 100,000 troops deployed there. “We might sometimes dislike the tone of the ask, but it’s a serious one,” Stubb said.



The MSC calls itself “the world’s leading forum for debating international security policy.” In addition to the annual February convening, it runs closed retreats at venues like a chateau in southern Germany and the Rockefeller Bellagio villa in northern Italy. On the plane to Munich, I read its flagship annual report, this year titled “Multipolarization.” The chapter headings were off-putting: “India: Modi-fied Status.” “Brazil: Lula Land.” “South Africa: The Fate of Good Hope.” Most of the articles made the same simple points: In the aftermath of the Cold War the world was unipolar, dominated by American power, but now more actors were competing for influence.

A parallel cybersecurity convening — sponsored by companies like Airbus, Google, and Meta — was underway, while a dinner hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations featured “a three-course meal featuring foods under threat from climate change, from red prawn carpaccio to Norwegian cod fillet confit with chive butter blanc [sic] and caviar.”

In 2014 the MSC had 27 staff and an annual budget of some 1.2 million euros. Its 2023 annual report listed 83 staff, and its annual budget has ballooned to more than 18 million euros, with 5.5 million for the conference alone. (This doesn't include the cost to the German police, which sends officers from other districts to Munich.) Some 74 percent of those funds come from the private sector, many from technology companies. Although they were not seen often publicly on panels, I was shown an official MSC participants list this year that included tech and defense leaders like Alex Karp of Palantir, Chris Lombardi from Oracle, and Roisin Kennedy from Lockheed Martin. In the areas I was occasionally allowed to access, like the Politico lounge, few watched the mainstage discussions. Most were in Munich to have side meetings and presumably make deals. Inside the secure zone but outside the Bayerischer Hof were lounges run by Deloitte, McKinsey and other corporations.

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As the conference proceeded, I heard more European defense leaders remark that they hoped they had finally gotten the push from the Americans they needed to militarize. “Can Europe get its shit together?” a delegate asked. For Oliver Stuenkel, a political scientist currently based at Harvard's Kennedy School, it might not be possible. When we chatted toward the end of the first day in the Politico lounge, he suggested that the bloc “lost an opportunity to actually push toward more unified stands at a time when these far-right parties were still not emerging.” In that sense Vance's remark that Europe faced internal threats was correct, just not in the way he intended it.

In 2024 Germany spent 2 percent of its GDP on defense, the NATO target, but Trump has called for countries to spend five. To increase spending to even 3.5 percent “would change the country in ways that I think many Germans don't want to,” said Stuenkel. The social returns of defense spending are low, and to increase defense budgets European leaders would have to either go into debt, cut social programs or raise taxes.

Germany's international reputation, Stuenkel said, was tanking quickly. He cited a “ridiculous video” in which German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's spokesperson “would not explicitly say [that] if Netanyahu comes to Germany, he will be taken into custody” because of the ICC warrant. “It's not to say that anyone is an angel in the international order or doesn't use violence against their own people. But I mean to say that you uphold an international rule-based system and then not follow it...” His voice trailed off.

But in closed door meetings analysts doubted some of these spending plans, calling for more tailored strategies like scaling up emerging defense technology firms.

The head of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who came of age during the Ethiopian Civil War and later served in the winning Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) government, also had a pointed critique. “I know firsthand how war feels,” he told an auditorium at a side event at the Technical University on the eve of the MSC. “I hate war.” Asked about recent cuts to global health, he replied: “Even funding, to be honest, is not the issue. It's how the world actually prioritizes its issues. For instance, the world as we speak is now spending \$2.43 trillion on defense. That's too much.”

It was a rare dissent. At the MSC, few people publicly questioned whether increasing military budgets would make Europe more secure. After the German election in late February anointed him as the next likely chancellor, Friedrich Merz has pushed to pass a constitutional amendment that would allow the government to raise its borrowing limit in order to dramatically increase military spending before an influx of new parliamentarians from both the leftist Die Linke and the AfD can block such a measure. After the conference, the U.K. also announced it would cut foreign aid to fund defense.

But in closed door meetings analysts doubted some of these spending plans, calling for more tailored strategies like scaling up emerging defense technology firms. The problem was not just that Europe relies on countries like the U.S. for specific weapons, such as Patriot air defense missiles, but also that it lacked a vision for using new technology that

other countries — among them the U.S., China, Russia, Israel, and Ukraine — were racing to develop. The AI defense market is booming — in 2024 it was valued at \$4.956 billion, with growth projected at 30 percent by 2029, or \$18.558 billion. In the months preceding the MSC, powerful U.S. tech companies like [Google](#) dropped “do no harm” commitments that they would not use AI to develop bombs or surveillance. European companies, however, have mostly been absent from this acceleration toward automated war machines.

“Even the U.N. is operating like it was in 1955,” she said. No African countries were among the Security Council’s five permanent members — the U.S., the U.K., China, France and Russia — who have veto power over resolutions, including on conflict negotiations, sanctions and authorizing the use of force.

The Kiev-based journalist Tim Mak — who runs a pair of publications covering the war in Ukraine, *The Counteroffensive* and *Counteroffensive Pro* — pointed out to me that the future of conflict could already be glimpsed on the battlefield. It can cost up to \$50 million to produce a traditional F16 fighter jet, but only \$1,000 for “a pretty decent frontline drone,” he said. While operating fighter jets takes at least a year of training, “anyone with a PlayStation” can operate a small drone. Ukraine and Russia have invested heavily in tiny FPVs — the propellers are around five inches — as well as other remote devices. A [story](#) by *Counteroffensive* documented how, in December 2024, Ukraine launched a fully drone-led attack in northeastern Ukraine against Russian forces, which included kamikaze and machine-gun-mounted ground models as well as FPVs, one of which had a mounted assault rifle. (It [shared](#) its drone technology with the rebel forces who toppled the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.) Earlier in the year, an [investigation](#) by +972 magazine revealed that the Israeli military had used AI to create kill lists in Gaza with little human oversight. There was no public session at the MSC with technology and defense companies about how humanitarian law could be programmed into these new weapons systems.



On the second day of the conference I entered the AmerikaHaus, a square, four-story building with a pearl-gray limestone exterior some 10 minutes from the Bayerischer Hof.

After World War II the U.S. government created AmerikaHäuser across Germany, initially as libraries. The Haus was hosting an MSC side event called “Addressing Double Standards” organized by the Club de Madrid, an organization of former democratic presidents and prime ministers. Among them were Danilo Türk, the president of Slovenia from 2007 to 2012; Aminata Touré, the prime minister of Senegal from 2013 to 2014; and Elena Motta, a Guatemalan congressmember.

Touré pointed out that the U.N., the only place where countries could discuss on an equal basis, was rapidly weakening, in part because western world powers — the U.S. and the U.K. — had refused to grant equal participation to countries from the global south. “Even the U.N. is operating like it was in 1955,” she said. No African countries were among the Security Council’s five permanent members — the U.S., the U.K., China, France and Russia — who have veto power over resolutions, including on conflict negotiations, sanctions and authorizing the use of force. Many African countries were turning toward strengthening regional mechanisms based on shared interests, such as the African Union, rather than prioritizing global institutions. Although we were at a security conference, Touré felt that no one was talking about the root causes of conflicts, which in Africa included extreme injustice and poverty. “Now it’s all about arms.”

Later I found Touré taking a short break from the main sessions in the Politico lounge, decorated with games of battleship and chess on the side tables. I asked her what she thought of the MSC. “It seems to be a business,” she replied. Much of the MSC’s and the Trump administration’s rhetoric struck her as outdated, meant to conceal commercial interests.

At the end of the session Graham reminisced about an earlier era: He missed John McCain and Joe Lieberman, with whom he used to come to Munich. “I’m the last amigo,” Graham said, “but my goal is to create an army of amigos.”

As if to prove her point, shortly after we spoke Republican Senator Lindsey Graham took to the Politico stage to discuss Ukraine. “We better make sure that we economically integrate with Ukraine as a trip wire,” he said, referring to U.S. economic interests there. “If we do a minerals agreement where there are American businesses all over Ukraine, it’s harder to invade.” The path to peace was in American profit. “Ukraine has value — literally has value.... These people are sitting on literally a gold mine.”

Graham took credit for Donald Trump's so-called plans to end the Ukraine war, saying that he'd shown the U.S. president a map and explained there were "trillions of dollars" in precious metals underground. These include the nickel and cobalt used for electric vehicles. It was a taste of the extortion that was to follow — the Trump administration's demand that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky give the U.S. 50 percent ownership of these rare earth minerals as "repayment" for U.S. aid, followed by contentious negotiations that included a Russia-U.S. meeting without Ukraine, and culminating in a bizarre and terrifying press conference at the White House where Vance and Trump publicly berated Zelensky. (Trump has seemed to harbor a grudge since his first term, when Zelensky rebuffed his request to investigate Hunter Biden's dealings in Ukraine.)

At the end of the session Graham reminisced about an earlier era: He missed John McCain and Joe Lieberman, with whom he used to come to Munich. "I'm the last amigo," Graham said, "but my goal is to create an army of amigos." It was McCain who introduced Graham to Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, of whom he spoke fondly. "Then you had the Khashoggi thing — horrible." He paused, only for a second. "But things are changing. Women are driving."

A friend texted me that Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek finance minister who co-founded a progressive pan-European movement called DiEM25, was about to address an anti-NATO protest called the Munich Peace Rally. I raced out of the secure zone to get to the demonstration. The metallic clapping of drums announced the arriving brigade of a few hundred people — some [2,500](#) had turned out across the city in three demonstrations.

"By allowing international law to die in Palestine, they've killed international law everywhere, in Germany as well," Varoufakis shouted from the stage. "For international law to mean anything, it must be applied to everyone, because if it doesn't apply to everyone, it doesn't apply to anyone." Earlier that day I had attended a press briefing with Philippe Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA, the U.N. agency that supports Palestinian refugees, in the gleaming MSC press center, housed in a former bank. About 15 people were there. Two hundred and seventy-three of his staff had been killed in Gaza. After a targeted [misinformation](#) campaign by the Israeli government, UNRWA had lost most of its funding. His team's lives were still at risk. The agency was functioning, he said, "hand to mouth."

Toward the end of the day, after the most important guests had already left Munich, the organizers began to let journalists into the Bayerischer Hof, although still accompanied by minders. We filed into a discussion on "(C)overt Custodians: Intelligence for the 21st Century" as people grabbed free wine. Afterward we hoped to speak with guests, but the

MSC handlers told us they were off duty — we had to leave immediately. I missed Jessa, who had been assigned elsewhere.

As I left the building and wandered around the secure perimeter, Senator Tim Kaine headed toward the Hof with his staff. Some 30 minutes later I glimpsed the same press minders who had forced us out at a packed party inside the LiteraturHaus, where mostly white and European-looking attendees drank and played foosball. The outgoing head of the MSC, Christoph Heusgen, was there, and I heard that John Kerry had passed through. Men wore different colors of military uniforms and emitted heavy cologne. The wooden stairs leading to and from the reception were sticky with spilled beer.

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CAITLIN L. CHANDLER is a writer and journalist based in Berlin. Her work has appeared in *Harper's*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, *Guernica*, *The Washington Post*, *Africa is a Country* and elsewhere. She teaches journalism at the Council on International Education Exchange.

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