

“To the Brink – and Back”: German Delegation at the 2018 Munich Security Conference, Munich 16–18 February, 2018

On February 16–18, 2018, the 54th Munich Security Conference (*MSC 2018*) took place in the Bavarian capital city of Munich. The delegation of the German federal government consisted of Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, and Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière. One of the hosts of this year’s conference was Bavarian Minister Horst Seehofer. Also, at least 30 members of the German Parliament and general Volker Wierer, the General Inspector of the German Armed Forces, also appeared this year in the south of Germany. Defense Minister U. von der Leyen and Interior Minister T. de Maizière were the most active members of the German delegation. They both participated in several informal meetings and official side events during the 3-day-gathering.

In a speech during the kick off the *MSC 2018* on February 16, 2018, German Defense Minister U. von der Leyen stressed the importance of political and military cooperation between Germany and France within the European Union (*EU*) and the Normandy format leading to the peaceful solution of the Donbas conflict. She recognized the initiation of permanent structural cooperation (*PESCO*) with the participation of 25 EU member countries and the creation of the European Defense Fund (*EDF*) by the European Commission in June 2017. In her opinion, they are the leaven for the future of “European Defense Union” and “the army of Europeans.” At the same time, she stressed that *PESCO* is not a competition for NATO, and there is no threat of duplication of the Alliance’s tasks and organizational structures. Mrs. U. von der Leyen repeated the postulate of establishing a mechanism of enhanced civil cooperation, comparable to *PESCO*, within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (*CFSP*). According to U. von der Leyen, actions taken within the EU last year could allow the EU to increase its strategic independence in the field of security and defense, as well as to benefit NATO by strengthening the European pillar of the NATO Alliance.

Despite emphasizing the importance of the German-French tandem and efforts taken by both countries to strengthen cooperation in the field of security and defense within the EU, U. von der Leyen clearly emphasized the need to maintain strong transatlantic bonds, which are the basis of NATO’s strength. Von der Leyen also appreciated the U.S. efforts to increase its military presence across Europe as part of the Atlantic Resolve Operation and financing the European Deterrence Initiative (*EDI*), which increased from 3.4 billion USD in 2017 to 4.8 billion USD in 2018. She drew attention to the efforts currently being made by Germany to strengthen collective defense in NATO, including German participation in the VJTF (*Very High Readiness Joint Task Force*), Baltic Air Policing, and the enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states (*eFP*). She also stressed the importance of German participation in the “out-of-area” missions in the Middle East and Africa (*MENA*). It includes the German engagement in Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, Inherent Resolve Operation carried out from Jordan and Iraq, MINUSMA in Mali, as well as the in-

volvement of German civilian observers to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (*SMM*) in eastern Ukraine.

Defense Minister U. von der Leyen also underlined the role of the United Nations (*UN*) in resolving conflicts in both regional and global dimensions. Germany, apart from applying for the place of a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, also undertakes efforts to reform it. Mrs. U. von der Leyen pointed out that currently, in many cases, the activities of the UN Security Council are paralyzed by its permanent members (the US, the UK, France, Russia and China) with the „right of veto.“ She spoke in favor of the need to strengthen the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (*UNHCR*), the World Food Program (*WFP*) and UNICEF. At the same time, Mrs. U. von der Leyen criticized President Donald J. Trump regarding his announcement on cutting U.S. contribution to the UN budget.

U. von der Leyen repeatedly stressed the need to continue efforts to modernize the German Armed Forces. It should include the acquisition of modern weapon systems, the transformation of military communication systems toward the full digitalization of the Bundeswehr. She also suggested that the German Armed Forces, in the coming years, will be more keen to cooperate with the private sector, for instance, startups companies. German Defense Minister described cooperation between the US Defense Department and enterprises from the Silicon Valley companies as a model solution for Germany.

U. von der Leyen also referred to the need to strengthen the Bundeswehr’s cyber defense capabilities due to the growing number of foreign attacks on the German IT infrastructure, as well as the implementation of recommendations issued by NATO. She repeated that NATO, since the 2016 NATO Summit, has recognized cyberspace as one of the modern battlefields alongside land, air, and sea. As a positive signal in the development of German cyber defense capabilities, Defense Minister U. von der Leyen appreciated, therefore, the decision to establish of cyberdefense units (*Cyber- und Informationsraum, CIR*) within the Bundeswehr last year.

Speaking at the panel titled “Jihadism After the Caliphate,” on February 17, 2018, German Interior Minister T. de Maizière stressed that despite the military successes reached by an international coalition fighting against the so-called Islamic State (*IS*) in the Middle East in recent months, there is still a serious terrorist threat to Germany and other EU countries. Both individual operatives and terrorist cells generate this threat. This factor demonstrates the attractiveness of *IS* ideology, especially among young Europeans. T. de Maizière also pointed out that a large percentage of German jihadists went to other regions where Islamic terrorist organizations operate using the breakdown or weakness of local state structures, for instance, in Libya, Yemen or Afghanistan. In his opinion, since the 2016 Brussels terrorist attacks in Brussels, there has not been any significant terrorist attack within the EU, which marked a sophisticated level of operational planning. The assaults that occurred after the Brussels attacks characterized by organizational simplicity. Nevertheless, they also had the high death toll and a wide response of mass media worldwide. It shows a clear decline of the operational capabilities of Islamic terrorist cells and individuals across the EU.

T. de Maizière also focused on problems in the circulation of intelligence information between law enforcement of EU countries. These obstacles depend on both technical problems related to the use of various IT systems by EU countries, and different national legal regulations. He also called for changes them by expanding the Schengen Information System (*SIS*) with the possibility of collecting biometric data. T. de Maizière declaimed to continue efforts to counteract Islamic terrorism effectively. In his opinion, currently ava-

ilable means and tools at the EU level should be used more effectively, including *SIS* and the passenger name record database (*PNR*). It is also necessary to continue the cooperation between special services and law enforcement within the EU, as well as in the framework of multilateral cooperation with the United States and the countries from the Middle East and North Africa (*MENA*).

EU countries should faster implement de-radicalisation plans by involving the non-governmental sector and religious communities. The EU should also increase its commitment to resolving regional conflicts in the MENA region, which have fueled Islamic fundamentalism. According to the German Interior Minister, it could be achieved by intensifying economic support to countries remaining under this threat.

T. de Maizière also emphasized that the 2015 migration crisis no have direct links to the growth of terrorist threat in Germany. He noted, however, that strongly radicalized individuals associated with the IS and Al-Qaeda, trying to hide among refugees, attempted to slip into the EU. The German authorities also spotted some cases of radicalization of people who have sought political asylum in Germany. He also stressed that the vast majority of terrorist attacks occurred in the EU in recent years were arranged and carried out by people permanently residing in EU countries and frequently having citizenship one of the EU countries, most notably France, Belgium or the UK.

Foreign Minister S. Gabriel used the *MSC 2018* to pay attention to the need to revitalize the system of both conventional and nuclear disarmament. At his speech and then press conference on February 18, 2018, he referred to the *2018 Nuclear Posture Review* conducted by the Trump Administration in January 2018, describing it as a serious threat to international order. Mr. Gabriel also said it was now up to Europe to take the lead in pushing for worldwide nuclear disarmament. As expected, he also mentioned the breakdown of the conventional arms control system within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (*OSCE*). Finally, Minister S. Gabriel called for taking steps to establish regulations at EU level to tighten arms industry exports to third countries outside the EU and NATO, especially to countries involved in ongoing armed conflicts.

The 54th Munich Security Conference traditionally focused on international conflicts happening around the EU and NATO neighborhood, the condition of the armed forces of NATO countries, and disarmament issues. The German agenda primarily included topics related to Franco-German military cooperation within EU, the future of *CSDP* and its new initiative known as *PESCO*, transatlantic ties as well as the terrorist threat from the *IS* and Al-Qaida. As expected, Defense Minister U. von der Leyen played a leading role among all German politicians who appeared in Munich. She was also the only one among members of the federal government presented in Munich, who was sure about the future in the next German cabinet. Finally, both S. Gabriel and T. de Maizière ended up on the sideline of the new government. Heiko Maas and H. Seehofer replaced them as Foreign and Interior Ministers respectively. This year Chancellor Angela Merkel did not decide to come over to Munich, leaving the stage for U. von der Leyen.

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