

provide Ukraine with the material support required to change the correlation of forces on the ground and force Putin's hand.

The Europeans would like to take a more aggressive approach to supporting Ukraine, but they lack the capabilities themselves to do so. European leaders, including Macron, also proclaimed at MSC that they must play an integral role in securing any eventual peace in Ukraine, including with respect to security guarantees. But, as Zelenskyy made clear, Russia has little respect for Europe. So, Europe might not be in the room where it happens but ultimately has to pay for and secure whatever is negotiated there.

Finally, there is the China question, which was the source of much debate. Will Europe derisk from the United States by pursuing more robust ties with Beijing, particularly on trade and technology? European leaders, including Merz and Macron, have certainly feinted in this direction, with the former set to lead Germany's largest-ever delegation — including a record number of German CEOs — to the Middle Kingdom next week. But I am dubious that the right response to being wary of the United States is to ignore the facts underlying the challenge China poses to Europe's manufacturing and, with China's active support of Russia's war



President Emmanuel Macron of France (L), Chancellor Friedrich Merz of Germany (C), and Prime Minister Keir Starmer of Britain talk to photographers at the Munich Security Conference, Germany, on February 13, 2026.

outmaneuver the United States in Munich. Instead of deepening transatlantic fissures by laying out a concrete framework for cooperation with Europe and positioning China as the more "stable" superpower, Wang's mainstage appearance will be remembered for his fiery rebuke of Japan's new prime minister. Japan, Wang said, "has lingering ambitions for invasion and colonialism of Taiwan, and the ghosts of militarism are still haunting the country". It felt like a reprise of wolf warrior diplomacy.

To end on an optimistic note, I found myself in several discussions about what concretely could be done over the next year to make progress on this array of challenges. One issue came up repeatedly: cooperation between the United States, Europe, and others in pursuing innovative ways to reduce dependence on China for critical minerals.

President Obama had a sign on the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office that read, "Hard Things Are Hard." Making progress on any number of these hard issues — from reforming Europe to securing Ukraine to reducing dependence on China — could create some much-needed confidence and momentum in Europe.

The article was first published by the Council on Foreign Relations.

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KAY NIETTFELD/REUTERS

West vs West at Munich Security Conference



By Bronwen Maddox

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OPINION

Half the hall in Munich gave US Secretary of State Marco Rubio a standing ovation following his speech — out of relief at his declaration that "the fate of Europe will never be irrelevant to our own". This, at least, was not another fight picked by the Trump administration with its NATO allies.

But there was immediate unease too, at the explicit limits Rubio placed on American support for Europe and Ukraine. And non-European countries were furious at what they saw as a tribute to white European civilization and a call to protect it from the rest of the world.

Rubio was followed by Wang Yi, Beijing's top diplomat, who deployed stately phrases to describe China's rivalry with the US, before erupting into a verbal fusillade against Japan, for its temerity to support Taiwan.

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer freshened up his "friends with all sides" diplomatic pitch; the US is still "an indispensable ally". But he would now like more trade and defence deals with Europe too. The UK would deploy its carrier strike group to the Arctic soon "as part of our commitment to Euro-Atlantic security," he promised his security-minded audience.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rounded off the morning, reminding his audience that the four-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale attack on his country is fast approaching. He was more overtly appreciative of European contributions to his country's war effort than at Davos three weeks ago, but just as urgent in calling on the US to send more missile defences and press Russia for concessions.

The elephant

That line-up on the second day of the Munich Security Conference captures the uneasy state of the world. Countries are trying to position themselves safely and profitably between two superpowers that are in rising economic conflict but not at war — at least, not yet.

But the conference focus, on the theme "Under Destruction," has been the rift between the US and its former allies,



DAVID PARKINS/ASPENIA ONLINE

captured in the title of one event I was moderating: "The West vs the West".

Delegates were invited to address the "elephant in the room"; screens around the halls and corridors showed a lumbering elephant heading for the viewer (with a resemblance, intended or not, to the Republican Party symbol). And they were given Lego models of an elephant to assemble.

The Munich conference is the logical place to begin to discuss the Atlantic rift. It was here a year ago that US Vice President JD Vance shocked European leaders by stating the greatest threat to

Europe was not from Russia, but "from within".

The Rubio speech marked a deliberate contrast to Vance's broadside at European cultural decline. But there was a clear warning that the Trump administration would go its own way in pursuit of US interests if it did not find Europe sympathetic. "It is our preference to do it together with you," said Rubio, but the US would not wait around to wrestle diplomatic agreement from reluctant allies.

The secretary of state offered scathing words for the United Nations, which

"has no answers and has played virtually no role" in Gaza and Ukraine. There was a now-familiar attack on migration as an "urgent threat to the fabric of our societies and the survival of our culture".

Most surprise — and controversy — flowed from his paean to European civilisation. Europe gave the world the rules of law, universities, science, Beethoven, and the Beatles, he said. No, we had our own civilisation millennia ago, was the retort from other continents.

The UK prime minister has perfected his bid to be on good terms with all sides — at least for audiences outside the UK — even when the rival representatives for his petition are in the same room.

The pitch to the EU, however, represents a concerted attempt behind the scenes to improve the terms on which the UK deals with trade and, if possible, another attempt to enter the arrangements on joint defence procurement.

This was then a more diplomatic gathering on the surface than last year, when the German defence minister shouted out loud in the hall, "What are you saying?" during the vice-president's speech. But the tensions are clear and explicit. The elephant is not only in the centre of the hall but trumpeting loudly.

The article was first published by Chatham House.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio leaves after speaking at the Munich Security Conference on February 14, 2026.

ALEX BRANDON/AFP



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