

Video Bundeskanzler Merz bei der Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz  
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## **Speech by Chancellor Merz at the Munich Security Conference**

### **"We will defend our freedom together with our neighbors"**

Friday, February 13, 2026 in Munich

Read the transcript of the speech here:  
Google translation:

Dear Wolfgang Ischinger, Dear Markus Söder,

Dear colleagues from the governments and parliaments,

Excellencies, esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I have been coming to Munich for the Security Conference for more than 30 years, with some interruptions. The Munich Security Conference has always been a seismograph of the political situation, in its early years a seismograph for relations between America and Europe, and for many years now a seismograph for the entire global political situation. In earlier years, I came here primarily to cultivate relations with our American friends, but also to meet new actors in foreign and security policy from many countries around the world.

For some years now, there has been an atmosphere in this hall marked by increasing tensions and conflicts in the world. At the latest with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine four years ago, we entered a new phase of openly erupted wars and conflicts that keep us on edge and are changing our world more profoundly than we, even here in this hall, had thought possible for so many years. Against this backdrop, dear Wolfgang Ischinger, it was important for me to open the conference today. Because we must talk to each other, more urgently than ever.

Before we do that, allow me, on behalf of the Federal Government, to thank Wolfgang Ischinger for once again taking on the chairmanship of the conference this year. I may say so, dear Wolfgang: Thank you very much for your work, especially this year!

This conference bears a somber motto: Under Destruction. This motto likely means: The international order, which rested on rights and rules, is on the verge of being destroyed. – I'm afraid we need to put it even more clearly: This order, imperfect even in its best days, no longer exists in its original form.

And what about us, Europe? – Well, Europe – as Peter Sloterdijk wrote a few weeks ago – has ended a long hiatus from world history. Together, we have crossed the threshold into an era once again openly defined by power and, above all, great power politics.

First and foremost, there is Russia's violent revisionism, a brutal war against Ukraine, against our political order, with daily, horrific war crimes. But this is only the most blatant manifestation we see every day. We are witnessing other developments in the world that are different from those we have often discussed here in this very room over the past years and decades. China is asserting its claim to global dominance. China has laid the groundwork for this over many years with strategic patience. In the foreseeable future, Beijing could meet the United States militarily

on equal footing. China systematically exploits the dependencies of others. China is reinterpreting the international order to suit its own purposes.

The international order is being redefined by China. If there was ever a unipolar moment in history after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is long gone. The United States' claim to leadership, at any rate, is challenged, perhaps even lost.

This return to power politics, however, is not solely due to the rivalry between great powers. Ladies and gentlemen, it also reflects restless, driven societies in times of great upheaval. It is an expression of a need, even in many democratic states, for strong leadership in a world where democratically constituted states are reaching the limits of their capacity to act. Great power politics - or so it seems - offers strong, simple answers, at least to the great powers, and at least initially.

Disillusioned, great power politics turns away from a world whose increasing interconnectedness has been translated into the legal regulation and pacification of relations between states.

Great power politics operates according to its own rules. It is fast, harsh, and often unpredictable. It fears its own dependencies. But it utilizes the dependencies of others, and if necessary, it exploits them. The focus shifts to the struggle for spheres of influence, dependencies, and allegiance. Raw materials, technologies, and supply chains become instruments of power in the zero-sum game played by the powerful. This is a dangerous game, first for the small players, but later probably for the large ones as well.

Our friends in the United States are adapting to this at a rapid pace. They have recognized their own need to catch up with China. In their National Security Strategy, they draw radical conclusions. They are doing so in a way that is not slowing down the trend but rather accelerating it.

We Europeans, too, are making our preparations. We are preparing for this new era. In doing so, we are arriving at different conclusions than, for example, the administration in Washington.

Our first task today, our task as Europeans and, of course, as Germans, is to acknowledge this new reality. This does not mean that we simply accept it as an unalterable fate. We are not at the mercy of this world. We can shape it.

I have no doubt: We will preserve our interests and our values in this world, at least if we resolutely, collectively, and confidently rely on our own strength. In this way, we will weather the storm and preserve our freedom. We will open new doors, seize new opportunities, and, if we do it right, even emerge stronger from this ordeal.

Ladies and gentlemen, let's be quite frank: We should first consider our goals and then our capabilities.

**The major goals** of German foreign and security policy derive from our Basic Law, our history, and our geography. Above all else stands our freedom. Our security makes this freedom possible. Our economic strength serves this freedom. The Basic Law, history, and geography compel us to always consider our goals in a European context. This orientation corresponds to our interests. Only in this way can it open up the best opportunities for our country. German foreign policy and German security policy, in particular, are rooted in Europe. This Europe is more valuable today than ever before.

How we pursue our goals is something we are now reconciling with our own capabilities.

A frank word: Measured against its power, German foreign policy in recent decades - let me put it this way - has had a normative excess. With the best of intentions, it has criticized violations of the international order worldwide. It has often warned, demanded, and reprimanded. But it was not sufficiently concerned that the means to remedy the situation were often lacking. This gap between aspiration and possibility has widened too much. We are closing it. Only in this way can we better do justice to reality.

**Let us therefore take stock of our own capabilities.** A brief example: Russia's gross domestic product currently amounts to about two trillion euros. That of the European Union is almost ten times higher. And yet, Europe is not ten times as strong as Russia today. Our military, political, economic, and technological potential is enormous. But we are far from having fully exploited it.

The most important thing now is this: We are changing our mindset. We have understood: In the era of great powers, our freedom is no longer a given. It is under threat. It will take resolve and willpower to uphold this freedom. This will demand from us a willingness to embark on new paths, to change, and, yes, even to make sacrifices - not someday, but now.

For compelling reasons, we in Germany do not take state power lightly. Since 1945, the idea that we must contain this power has been firmly ingrained in our thinking. – Let me add: Not only does too much state power destroy the foundations of our freedom; too little state power leads to the same result by a different route. – This question has a profoundly European dimension. Fifteen years ago, Radek Sikorski already wrote a cautionary tale for Germany – and I may quote him –: "I fear German inaction more than German power." – This, too, is part of our responsibility, which arises from the Basic Law, history, and geography. We accept this responsibility.

For this, we need a strategy that resolves an obvious dilemma. The reorganization of the world by major powers is happening faster and more profoundly than we can strengthen ourselves. For this reason alone, I am not convinced when there are sometimes overly reflexive calls for Europe to write off the United States as a partner. Ladies and gentlemen, I understand the unease and doubt that surface in such demands. I even share some of them. And yet, these demands have not been fully thought through. They simply ignore harsh geopolitical realities in Europe, and they underestimate the potential that our partnership with the United States still holds, despite all the difficulties.

It will therefore not suffice to react rhetorically as cleverly as possible to the maneuvers and whims of the powerful. In these challenging times, we are setting our own agenda. We are focusing on ourselves. This agenda is still in the making. How could it be otherwise? And yet its implementation is already well underway. We are using the pressure we are under to create something new and, hopefully, good.

However, great power politics in Europe is not an option for Germany. Cooperative leadership – yes; hegemonic fantasies – no. We Germans will never again go it alone. That is a lasting lesson from our history. We assert our freedom with our neighbors, only with our neighbors, our allies, and our partners. We are building on our strength, our sovereignty, and our capacity for mutual solidarity in Europe. We are doing so with principled realism.

Dear friends – if I may say so – ladies and gentlemen, this program of freedom comprises four points.

**First.** We are strengthening ourselves militarily, politically, economically, and technologically.

This reduces our dependencies and our vulnerability. Our highest priority is to strengthen Europe within NATO. We are investing massively in credible deterrence.

As a reminder: Germany has amended its constitution. At the Hague NATO summit last June, all allies – almost all allies – committed to investing five percent of their gross domestic product in security in the future. Germany alone will invest several hundred billion euros in the coming years.

We support Ukraine in its courageous resistance against Russian imperialism. We do this diplomatically, we do it politically, we do it economically, but of course also militarily. Incidentally, Germany and Europe have been providing crucial leadership here for a year now. We have imposed unforeseen losses and costs on Moscow. If Moscow finally agrees to peace, it will be partly because of this. This is an expression of European self-assertion.

We have initiated major conventional procurement projects: in air defense, for deep precision strikes, and in satellite technology. We are revitalizing our defense industry. New factories are opening, new jobs are being created, and new technologies are emerging. As the Bavarian Minister-President has said, here around Munich, for example, a cluster of highly innovative defense tech companies is booming, developing disruptive technologies, some in close cooperation with Ukraine.

Mr. Defense Minister, the reform of our military service is underway. We will make adjustments if necessary.

We are strengthening NATO's eastern flank. To this end, our brigade is being established in Lithuania – the first time in the history of the Bundeswehr that an entire large unit is being deployed outside our own territory.

We will ensure greater security in the far north. The first German Eurofighters have been reported, and more are to come.

We will – as I have often said, and I repeat it here – transform the Bundeswehr into the strongest conventional army in Europe as quickly as possible – an army that can stand its ground when necessary.

At the same time, we are making our society and our economy more resilient. We are introducing new legislation to harden our networks and our critical infrastructure against hybrid attacks. We are forging resilient supply chains and reducing one-sided dependencies on raw materials, key products, and technologies. We are protecting our free and democratic order against its enemies, both internal and external. Among other things, we will strengthen our intelligence services.

In this new world, competition policy is security policy, and security policy is competition policy. Both serve our freedom. That is precisely why we want to be drivers of progress in future technologies. Artificial intelligence will play a key role in this.

**Secondly**, we are strengthening Europe.

A sovereign Europe is our best answer to the new era. Uniting and strengthening Europe is our most important task today.

Our Europe must focus on the essentials: preserving and increasing our freedom, our security, and our competitiveness. We must put an end to the proliferation of European bureaucracy and regulation. European standards must not shackle us in ways that paralyze and hinder our competitiveness. They must bring our strengths to the fore. They must fuel innovation and entrepreneurship, encourage investment, and reward creativity. Europe must not retreat to avoiding risks. Europe must create opportunities and unleash its potential.

Dear Ursula von der Leyen, we discussed these issues intensively yesterday with the European heads of state and government, and together we are now developing a common roadmap for a strong and sovereign Europe. Europe must become a global political force with its own security strategy.

As a reminder, and also for those who may not know: Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union commits us to assist one another in the event of an armed attack in Europe. We now need to spell out how we intend to organize this at the European level, not as a replacement for NATO, but as a self-sustaining, strong pillar within the Alliance.

I have begun initial talks with French President Emmanuel Macron on European nuclear deterrence. Ladies and gentlemen, let me be clear: We are adhering to our legal obligations. We are considering this strictly within the context of our nuclear sharing within NATO, and we will not allow zones of differing security to emerge in Europe.

The European defense industry must ultimately deliver on its promises. We will therefore organize three key S's – standardization, scaling, and simplification of weapons systems – at the European level. This will unlock tremendous potential.

We will translate this strength into a unified external presence that includes our strategic partners. This includes a strong trade policy. The EU-MERCOSUR agreement negotiated between the European Union and four South American states is to be provisionally applied – this is the right decision by the European Commission. The free trade agreement with India has been finalized. Further agreements will and must follow quickly.

Diplomatically, we in Europe are thus achieving a remarkable feat these days. This is also evident in our work for peace in Ukraine. Where we need to be agile, we are moving forward in small groups – with the E3, that is, with Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, but also with Italy and Poland as key European players. We know that in the long run, we will only succeed if we bring the other Europeans along. We are doing so, and for us Germans, there is no way around it. We are the heart of Europe. If Europe is torn apart, Germany is to be torn apart.

But I also appeal to our partners: Recognize the gravity of the moment; pave the way for a strong, sovereign Europe.

**Third:** We want to establish a new transatlantic partnership.

Let me begin with the uncomfortable truth: A chasm, a deep divide, has opened up between Europe and the United States of America. Vice President J. D. Vance said this here in Munich a year ago. He was right in his assessment.

The culture war waged by the MAGA movement in the USA is not ours. Freedom of speech ends here with us when that speech is directed against human dignity and the Basic Law. And we do not believe in tariffs and protectionism, but in free trade. We stand by climate agreements and the World Health Organization because we are convinced that we can only solve global challenges together.

Now, the transatlantic partnership has apparently lost its self-evidence – first in the United States, then here in Europe, and presumably here in this room as well.

Ladies and gentlemen, if our partnership is to have a future, then we must re-establish it in two senses. This re-establishment must be concrete, not esoteric. We must come to the conclusion on both sides of the Atlantic: Together we are stronger. We Europeans know how precious the trust is upon which NATO is founded.

In the age of great powers, the USA, too, will depend on this trust. Even they reach the limits of their own power when they act alone. The strategists at the Pentagon, at least, seem to understand this. NATO is not only our competitive advantage, but, dear American friends, yours as well.

(in English) I would like to reiterate this point for our American friends. For over three generations, the trust between allies, partners, and friends has been what has made NATO the strongest alliance of all time. Europe is fully aware of how valuable this is. In times of great power rivalry, even the United States will not be powerful enough to do everything alone. Dear friends, being part of NATO is not only a competitive advantage for Europe, but also a competitive advantage for the United States. So let us repair and revitalize transatlantic trust together. We Europeans are doing our part. (In German) I would like to echo the statement made by Wolfgang Ischinger: Autocracies may have followers; democracies have partners and allies.

This statement, by the way, also applies to us Europeans. A true ally takes its obligations seriously. No one forced us into the excessive dependence on the United States in which we recently found ourselves. This immaturity was self-inflicted. But we are now leaving this state behind us, and preferably sooner rather than later.

We are not doing this by abandoning NATO. We are doing it by building a strong, self-sustaining European pillar within the alliance, in our own interest.

This new beginning, ladies and gentlemen, is right under all circumstances. It is right if the United States continues to distance itself. It is right as long as we cannot guarantee our security on our own. Finally, it is also right to establish a healthier transatlantic partnership.

I suspect that in the future we will disagree more often than in the past. We will have to negotiate and perhaps even argue more often about the right path forward. If we do so with renewed strength, respect, and self-respect, it will benefit both sides.

I sensed something of this, by the way, in the discussions about Greenland that we've had in recent weeks. I'm addressing myself in particular to Mette Frederiksen, the Danish Prime Minister, who knows she can rely on European solidarity without any reservations.

**Fourth:** and last, but not least, we are forging a strong network of global partnerships.

As important as European integration and the transatlantic partnership remain for us, they will no longer be sufficient to preserve our freedom. Partnership is not an absolute concept. Partnership does not require complete agreement on all values and interests. This, incidentally, is one of the lessons of these days, weeks, and months.

In this way, we are approaching new partners with whom we share not all, but nonetheless important, concerns. This avoids dependencies and risks, and at the same time opens up opportunities and possibilities for both sides. It protects our freedom.

Canada and Japan, Turkey, India, Brazil, and also South Africa, the Gulf States, and others will play a key role in this. We want to work more closely with these countries, with mutual respect and a long-term perspective.

We share a fundamental interest in a political order in which we can rely on agreements, in which we are capable of jointly addressing global problems, and in which, above all, we resolve conflicts peacefully.

We share the experience that international law and international organizations serve our sovereignty, our independence, and also our freedom.

We Germans know: A world where only power counts would be a dark place. Our country followed this path in the 20th century to its bitter and tragic end.

Today, we are embarking on a different, a better path.

Our greatest strength remains the ability to build partnerships, alliances, and organizations based on law and rules, founded on respect and trust, and believing in the power of freedom.

After 1945, it was primarily our American friends who inspired us Germans with this powerful and insightful idea. We will not forget that. On this foundation, NATO has become the strongest political alliance in history.

We remain true to this idea. With all our strength and passion, with decency and solidarity, with creativity and courage, we carry this idea into the new era, so that this time does not become dark, but, ladies and gentlemen, a good time for us, but above all for the generation of our children and grandchildren, who rely on us to do the right thing in these days and weeks. We are determined to do so.