Fasching, Family Reunions, and Hard Power

The Munich Security Conference, the Alliance, and International Security—A Very Personal Remembrance

Josef Joffe

Above all, the Munich Security Conference, née Wehrkunde, has been a family reunion of the Western strategic community, though it expanded in the nineties to bring in the entire world: presidents and prime ministers, princes and potentates from the Near to the Far East.

Yet in the beginning, it was strictly “family”—NATO, the West. Membership in this august grouping was not easy. I remember my botched attempt to break into the Wehrkunde Conference as a young graduate student. My colleague Dieter Mahncke and I had both studied with Robert E. Osgood, one of the greats of the strategic craft, at the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. To see our mentor and teacher again, we resolved to crash the 1968 Wehrkunde at the Regina Hotel, an enchanted place that is no more.

The two of us at least got a bit farther than anyone would today, when security at the Bayerischer Hof, the new venue, is tighter than in the Kremlin or the White House. Today, interlopers would not even manage to breach

Fasching, Family Reunions, and Hard Power | 403
the perimeter, about four hundred meters out. In those days, though, Wehr-
kunde was a bit more intimate, with perhaps sixty participants, and it had to share cramped quarters with the Fasching (carnival, mardi gras) crowd carousing into the wee hours of the morning.

So we made it into the hall, but that was the end of the foray. Lowly graduate students rubbing shoulders with the Great and the Good? Good-bye, boys. We huffed and we puffed, but then we realized: why bother with the masters of missiles and munitions when a Fasching party was swirling all around us? We grabbed bits of the decoration here and there to fake a costume and repaired to the bar, where we were privy to a little vignette that could no longer unfold today.

There, at the bar, was another great of the field, Morton Kaplan of Chicago: huge horn-rimmed glasses, a crew cut, flood pants, and a tie as thin as a shoestring. “Great Fasching disguise,” we needled him, “you dressed up as an American.” Today, Americans and Europeans dress and look alike, and the gravitas of today’s security conference forbids the intrusion of scantily clad young women and their inebriated beaus.

Today, what with 400 participants, 200 observers, and 700 reporters guarded by 3,500 police, the “family reunion” has lost some of its intimacy. An iron law of conferencing has again claimed its due: the more successful the gathering, the more it will expand into a highly ritualized and highly “hierarchized” assembly. As a result, the more informal contacts take place elsewhere: during coffee breaks, in the upstairs suites of the Bayerischer Hof, in dinners around town. The World Economic Forum started out with some thirty thinkers in the snowy seclusion of Davos, now it has expanded to three thousand who meet at “private dinners” and invitation-only cocktail parties.

No history of the conference could be written without putting its chairman of more than three decades, Ewald von Kleist, into the limelight; indeed, there would be no such confab without this Prussian officer who entered German history as a twenty-two-year-old would-be assassin of Adolf Hitler (as part of the July 20th plot). It was a suicide mission—a man in a dynamite vest who would blow himself up next to Der Fuhrer. Postponed several times, the meeting was finally cancelled. Von Kleist survived the Gestapo, concentration camp, and the Eastern front. After the war, he published a defense-policy magazine appropriately called Wehrkunde (an archaic German term for “military science”) and then, in 1963, founded the eponymous conference.

It was a bold, perhaps slightly crazed venture. Bringing the luminaries of Western strategy—academics, officials, politicos—to a country still eyed with suspicion, even disdain? This man with the bearing of a Prussian noble
right out of central casting, with the clipped speech and the stand-offish demeanor? There was a lot more to him. First of all, von Kleist was a man who had been ready to save German honor; as a convener he had impeccable credentials. Second, behind the façade of diffident hauteur, there lurked a brilliant mind, a wondrously wry wit, and an incorruptible character. Third, he was a uniquely gifted impresario who picked the right participants and then prevailed on them to make the Munich trek. Each fall, he made the rounds on Capitol Hill first and then went off to hunt bear in Alaska.

When Ewald von Kleist retired as chairman of the conference in 1998, eight defense ministers showed up, showering him with half a dozen medals. In due time, his gaze fell on me, who found favor in his eyes and, now equipped with the proper credentials, was allowed to join the august assembly. I have attended almost every Wehrkunde/MSC meeting since the eighties. As board member of the American Academy in Berlin, I was fortunate to be able nominate Ewald von Kleist as recipient of the Henry A. Kissinger Prize in 2013 (previously bestowed on Kissinger himself, Helmut Schmidt, Richard von Weizsäcker, and Helmut Kohl). To everybody’s dismay, von Kleist died just before the ceremony at the age of ninety. His daughter accepted the prize in his name.

Von Kleist was followed as chairman by Horst Teltschik (1999–2008), formerly Kohl’s national security adviser, and Wolfgang Ischinger, previously state secretary in the German Foreign Office in Washington and London. Ischinger has been running the conference since 2009.

Let us dwell above all on the “family-reunion” theme. Today, the Munich Security Conference is the world’s most important meeting on international security. The once secluded gathering has burgeoned into a happening in front of the klieg lights—complete with the obligatory demonstrations against the “warmongers” and “conspirators.” But its original function remains what von Kleist had wanted and safeguarded.

Like a NATO summit, the MSC offers those set-piece speeches by premiers, presidents, and ministers which are carefully vetted by their advisors to evade diplomatic imbroglios. These speeches lay out familiar talking points or unassailable principles like “peace” and “cooperation.” But the confab is informal enough to let trial balloons drift through the ballroom—a new proposal, a new idea. More important is the fairly free-floating discussion, which will occasionally transcend the “let’s keep it civil” confines of the conference choreography. As in a real family, familiarity does not necessarily breed consent. Often enough, it is “let the brickbats fly!”

One of the most deliciously dramatic moments is owed to German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer at the thirty-ninth conference in 2003. Having
Josef Joffe listened to Donald Rumsfeld, the US secretary of defense, lay out what he believed to be compelling reasons for the Second Iraq War, Fischer burst out: “Sorry, I am not convinced.” A lively discussion ensued, and Fischer had made history.

It got tougher as the alienation between Germany and the America of George W. Bush progressed. In 2005, Peter Struck, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s defense minister, practically committed blasphemy when he decreed: NATO “is no longer the primary venue where the transatlantic partners consult about and coordinate their strategic conceptions.” So, no more family? To add insolence to injury, Schröder’s Kanzleramt had leaked Struck’s speech to the Süddeutsche Zeitung. Promptly, the Munich paper regaled the conference on the first full day with what Schröder had in mind for the longest-lived coalition of free nations. That was too much even for his foreign minister, who tried to pour a little oil on the roiling waters. Fischer was not amused, because his foreign office minions had provided the usual soothing boilerplate for Struck’s speech.

Donald Rumsfeld was not shy, either, repeating a classic shibboleth: “Of course, the mission determines the coalition.” Different speaker, same message: NATO is no longer the Una Sancta of Western defense. In the previous year, Fischer had flung a clear “no” at the Americans. No, the Germans would “not dispatch troops” to Iraq. But, he added diplomatically, if the alliance so decided, Germany would not “defy the consensus.” Thus, the security conference delivered what it has done since the early von Kleist days: to serve as a sounding board and to provide the kind of “kitchen table” where family members occasionally slug it out.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has been invited as a kind of distant cousin. In 1999, Vice Foreign Minister Gusarov insisted that Moscow would not just look on if NATO enlarged eastward and so crossed a “red line.” Yet, at this point, the Munich family had already expanded to the East. And so, the assembled Ukrainians, Romanians, and Georgians furiously protested. Gusarov pedaled back. “Esteemed NATO members,” he wheedled, please respect “our sensitivities.”

President Putin would not be socialized so quickly. In 2007 he showed up at Munich, delivering a speech in the tradition of Nikita ("We shall bury you") Khrushchev. Whereupon I got up to ask politely whether Putin had just declared a “new Cold War.” Let history record that the Cold War remains safely buried.

The nineties belonged to what used to be called “out-of-area” engagements. The Cold War was over; the great strategic threat was gone. Now, “small wars” moved in on the West, or what later came to be known as
“responsibility to protect.” It was also a time of growing up for Germany, now safely reunited and facing no serious enemy as far as the eye (and the satellites) could see. It was the decade of the Balkan wars, or the war of the Yugoslav succession, to use the vocabulary of the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

It was also the decade of hand-wringing: the United States did not want to intervene while Germany suffered paroxysms of pacifism. It had lost two wars, and now it was “never again.” Naturally, the conference was given to endless debates over what moral duty demanded and cold-hearted interest defied. The 1993 meeting stood out. Here were Chancellor Kohl and the Social Democrats’ foreign policy spokesman Hans-Ulrich Klose both proclaiming “without us!” A grand coalition of abstentionism unfolded. One German participant cried out: “You have robbed me of a democratic human right. I don’t know for whom to vote anymore.”

Both Kohl and Klose were for “peace-establishing measures” (that is, intervention) in general. But not in the Balkans! Kohl demurred. Why not? In so many words, the chancellor defined a “Kohl Doctrine”: German troops could not tread where the Wehrmacht had once raged. I meekly interjected: “But that doesn’t leave us any place to go except for Switzerland, Portugal, and Sweden.” We stayed on good terms nonetheless, and in 1999, Joschka Fischer courted the revolt of his pacifist Greens by belting out “Never again Auschwitz” and taking Germany into the air war against Serbia.

The eighties were overshadowed by Nachrüstung—the 572 US Pershing II and cruise missiles the Alliance had decided to deploy in response to the Soviet SS-20 missiles and Backfire bombers. These were systems that could hit European targets but not the United States. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt had raised the “separate threat” in his fabled 1979 speech before the International Institute for Strategic Studies, but it was so carefully hedged that it could not be used in evidence for a German call for compensatory deployments. NATO gave the Soviets a way out by offering the “dual-track” decision of 1979: if you go to zero, we will not deploy. Moscow chose to unleash a full-press propaganda campaign playing on Europe’s, especially West Germany’s, nuclear angst.

While the Social Democrats preached abstention, détente, and cooperation, Christian Democrat Werner Marx, a member of the Bundestag’s defense committee, cringed at the 1981 Wehrkunde: “The supporters of Nachrüstung are caught in a difficult psychological situation”; there was a lack of “spiritual readiness and courage.” Frank Carlucci, the US defense secretary, orated: “We want to be able to say at home that a new consensus has arisen in Europe that endows the defense of freedom with the highest priority.” It was
not an easy victory. The war for Europe’s soul contributed to Schmidt’s fall in 1982. Nonetheless, Helmut Kohl won the 1983 election, and the deployment began on schedule. We know how this story ended. Gorbachev relented, and the Euromissiles are history.

Were these battles fought and won during the Munich Fasching? No; the decisions were made elsewhere, as befits representative government. Yet while the conference allowed for grandstanding and well-worn formulas, it also made for deliberation in tough times. Die Zeit once wrote: “The conflicts between Europe and America have rarely been sharper.” That was during the 1981 gathering, but it could have been written at almost any time since the Wehrkunde’s lowly beginnings in 1963.

A family that fights together stays together—that is the moral of this tale. As its members hash it out, thinking improves. It is a learning experience above all: this is how they think, this is how we think. In Munich, “they” were often enough members of one’s own national camp who thought for themselves, as befits a liberal democracy. Just to know that Americans and Europeans also argue among themselves breaks up monolithic positions on both sides while increasing the supply of insight all round. Upon his retirement in 1998, Ewald von Kleist had it right: “It would be shortsighted to neglect the [European-American] relationship. We have to mend it continually because we will be confronting problems that we can only solve together.” Good advice for the next fifty years.

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