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Munich Security Conference: Ukraine war takes center stage

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The Munich Security Conference is set to convene, one year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In its annual report, the MSC warns of a growing divide between 'competing world orders.'



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By its own measure, the [Munich Security Conference](#) has had a difficult year. [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#) is a blow to the high-profile event, whose mission is to "contribute to the peaceful resolution of conflicts."

Last year, the prestigious and powerful participants of the annual conference had barely returned home from the luxurious venue in Munich when Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an invasion of his neighbor on a scale that European powers thought was history.

The war has not only smashed Ukrainian cities, leaving untold thousands dead, but also dearly held security assumptions. Navigating a new reality, and fusing global "fault lines," is at the center of this year's MSC. In the view of its chairman, [Christoph Heusgen](#), the threat posed most immediately to Europe is a reason to double down on dialogue.

"Revisionist actors are trying to undermine the status quo and change the international order in many different ways."

"Revisionist" is a jab at countries like China and Russia, who are pushing harder against the American-led "status quo" that has dominated global economics, politics and security since the end of the [World War II](#).

The war in Ukraine is at the center of the 176-page report, as it is likely to be at the conference. Yet the brutal events of the last year there, which are set to intensify as the winter thaws, are taken less as an isolated end than a means for posing broader questions about power dynamics in the international community.

For the report's authors, global security is intrinsically tied to economic prosperity, [climate change](#), conflicting national interests, and a sense that inequities are baked into a world order whose "rules" do not always apply equally to everyone.

"If we do not address the resentment that countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia feel towards the international order, which has not always served their interests," Heusgen goes on in the report, "we will struggle to win the fence-sitters as allies in the defense of key rules and principles."



Western allies are steadfast in their support of Ukraine

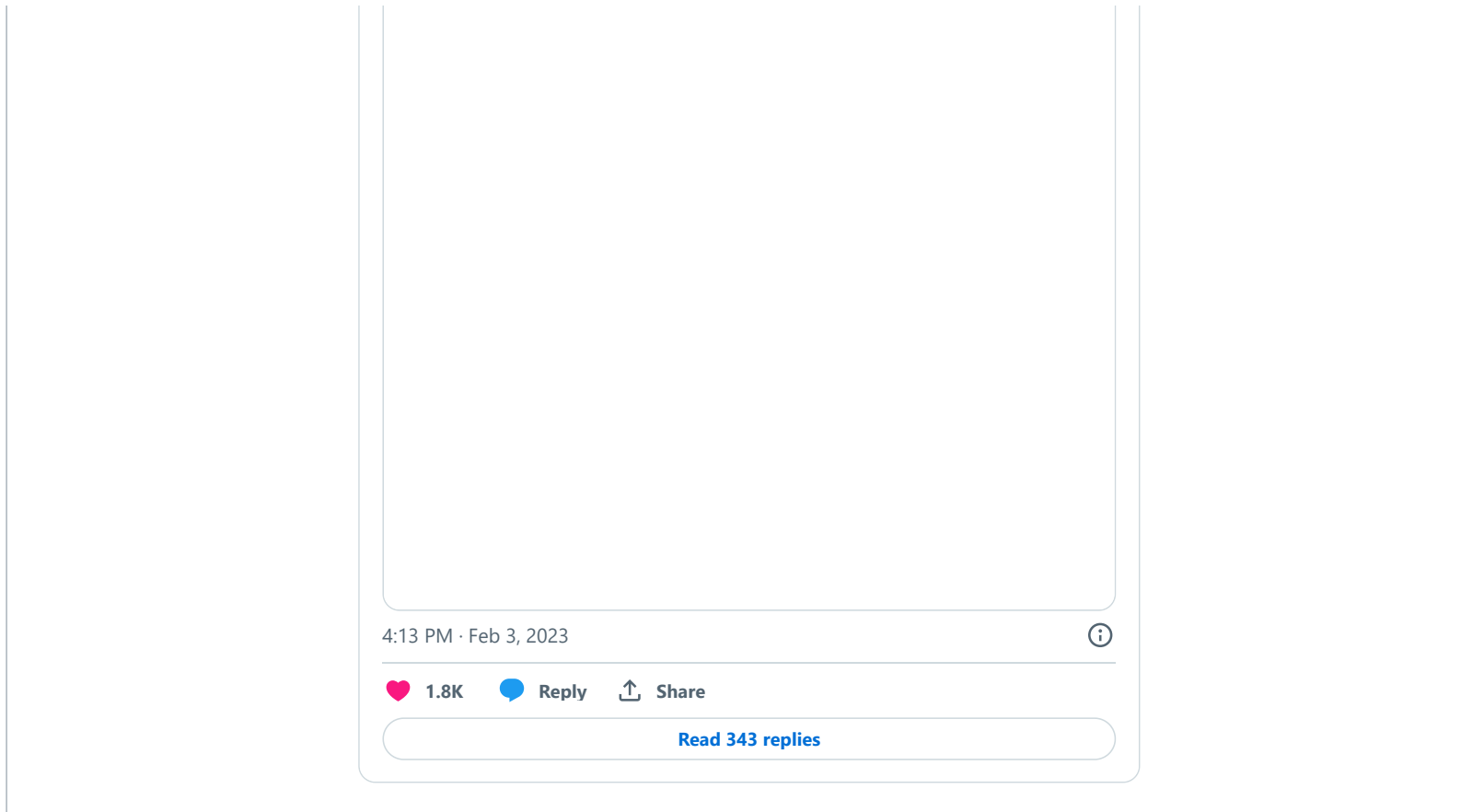
Image: Steffen Hebestre/Bundesregierung/dpa/picture alliance

Democracy, autocracy and something in-between

The report suggests what the conference's German hosts and international participants are likely to ask as they head into MSC 2023: What laid the groundwork for [Russia's](#) invasion? Why are many states outside the rich and Eurocentric spheres hesitant to support Ukraine and condemn Russia? And, what lessons apply to growing tensions between the United States and [China](#) in the Indo-Pacific region?

The MSC, with its close financial and political ties to the German government, is not proposing any radical change to the liberal underpinnings of a Western-led world, which the conference is itself a part and defender of. The report largely tracks with the worldview of US President [Joe Biden](#), who sees a growing confrontation between democracies and autocracies.

Alliances, policies and public sentiment, however, do not break between the two so cleanly. The report points to governments of all stripes making decisions on an issue-by-issue basis.



Not so black-and-white

On Ukraine, most of the world — as a measure of GDP — has condemned Russia's actions, according to data crunched by the *Economist*. But countries neutral or Russian-leaning are home to most of the global population. The discrepancy speaks to a concentration of wealth that the Munich Security Report notes is a driver of divergent public opinion and policy decisions.

How governments decide where to throw their support is not as clear-cut as the US-led backing for Ukraine might like. A complex set of interests are at play.

"We might not really be supporting, say, UN Security Council resolutions, but that does not mean that we are supporting Russia," Gaurav Sharma, an India security analyst currently at the Academy of International Affairs in Bonn, told DW. "When people abstain, it is thought of as indirect support. But it's not really."

India, which takes pride in its history of non-alignment and bills itself as the world's largest democracy, instead views Russia, an autocracy, less as an ally than a "strategic partner," Sharma said. Defense cooperation and technology transfer go back decades. Meanwhile, the US has a long history supporting Pakistan, India's archenemy.

"We never trusted — and I think nobody should trust, still not — the United States of America. And that's the biggest thing," Sharma said. "We have a huge trust deficit."

Building trust is results-based and takes a long time, he added.

with quotation marks, the authors said in response to a DW query, in a nod to its nebulous meaning.

The report lays out a number of long-held grievances. They include agricultural, energy and trade policies that have exacted a steep price to participate in the global economy; failed promises to improve infrastructure that would boost competitiveness; and the unfair burden of climate change mitigation, including the financial tools needed to compensate poorer countries, in particular, for the consequences of a warmer planet.

The climate crisis

Iraq legacy

And there are "double standards." It was **at the Munich Security Conference 20 years ago** that then German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said, "I am not convinced" by the US rationale to invade Iraq. The decision to do so, a violation of international law, has not been forgotten by critics of American global primacy, who draw a parallel to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The report sidesteps a potential whataboutism by specifying that Russia's war is an attempt "by an authoritarian power to eliminate a democracy as a sovereign nation-state."

Many parts of the world, however, are not so keen to see the distinction.

"It was quite a wake-up call for the Western community to realize after Russia's invasion of Ukraine that not all countries would immediately jump to condemning Russia," Liana Fix, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C., told DW. "This is not based on pro-Russian sentiment. ... But it's rather some kind of anti-Western mentality."

From Yemen and Syria to Ethiopia and Mali, to **India's hot borders with Pakistan and China**, the war in Ukraine can look like just another brutal, but distant, conflict. Countries from those regions are asking why they should lend the West a hand in a war on its doorstep when the West has done little, if not actively fueled, those on their own.



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That applies not only to the West's efforts to defeat Russia in Ukraine but also its desire to contain an increasingly assertive China in the Pacific. The US will need non-Western countries, such as tiny island nations scattered across the Pacific that it has long overlooked, on its side.

If and how such a renegotiation shapes events in Munich could make this year's MSC one to watch.

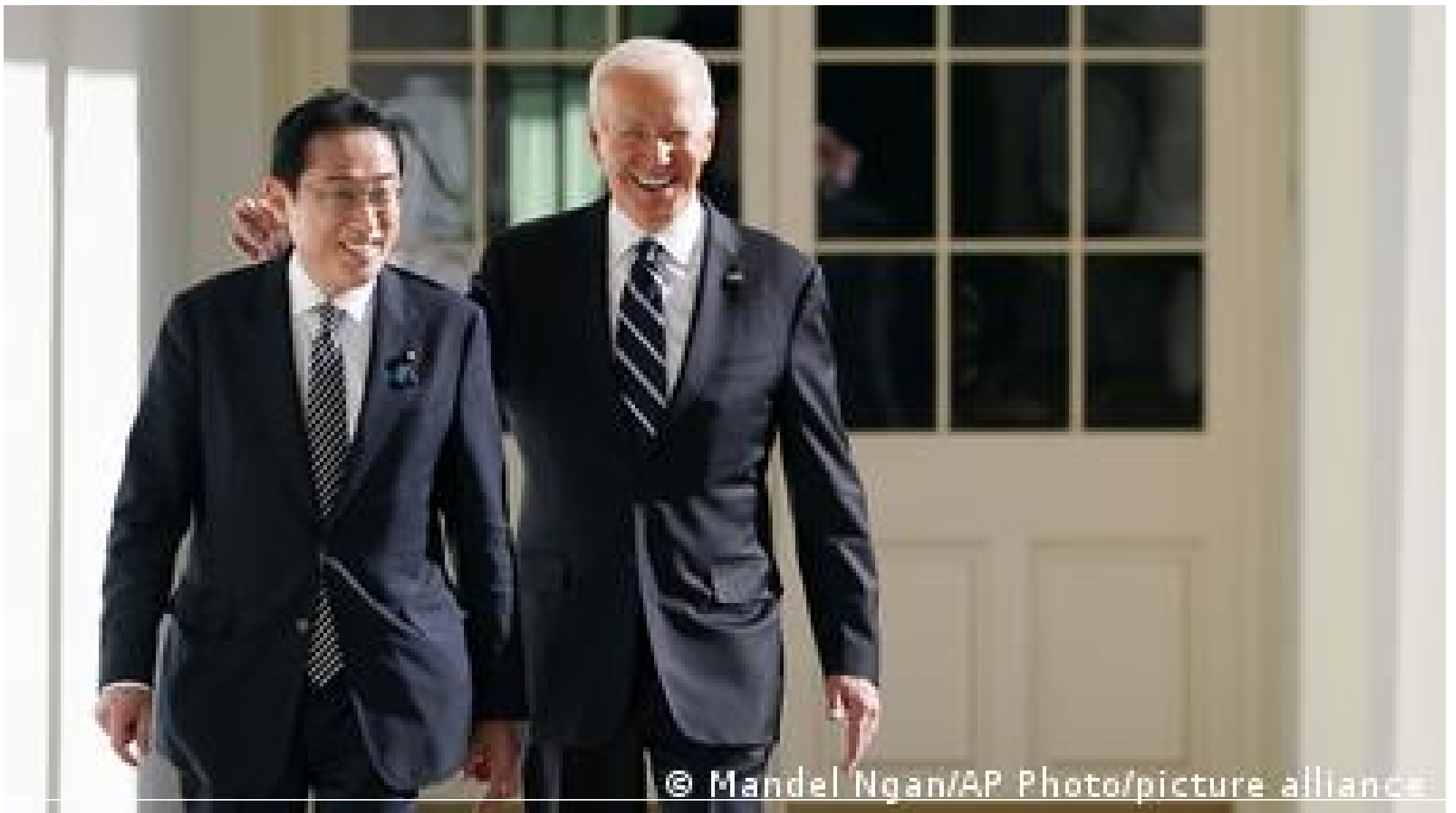
"For the first time, Western countries are relying on 'Global South' countries," Fix said. "For the first time, those countries can use the leverage that they have towards the West."

Edited by: Rina Goldenberg

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