

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer

Dinner/scene setter NextGen Security Conference 26 May 2026

A few remarks by way of scene setter by someone who clearly looks like, and beyond reasonable doubt is a boomer and a usual suspect. So much for a NextGen Conference.

2026, A two superpower world where geopolitics and geo-economics have merged, where trade, tech, minerals and more specifically rare earth metals are being weaponized. Where we witness the “coming out” of the middle nations and where the language of power, “might makes right” seems to have the upper hand. A world characterised by a relatively new word: Asymmetry.

Where one nation can hold a large part of the world economy hostage with a few drones and fast patrol boats. Where Ukraine chases the Russian navy out of the Black Sea with drones this time under water. And where, I must add, in an exercise NATO battalions were no match for a few experienced Ukrainian drone pilots.

A world where AI develops with lightning speed, where one can ask a chatbot to develop a pathogen (virus, bacteria or fungus) including the means of delivery, for use as a weapon of mass destruction. Where US company Anthropic released its most sophisticated Mythos model to a limited group of selected US companies. This to check on potential danger when digital defensive systems might be easily penetrated and compromised by the sheer power of this model.

I hope that sooner rather than later a way will be found to also include wider European participation in this crucial exercise. Governments cannot afford the luxury to look the other way in the domain of AI. Technological sovereignty will be more and more linked to national security. A whole new generation of weaponry depends on AI. The US and Europe should work together in this all important domain and should not be in each other's crosshairs.

Accountability is the key word here, both from the perspective of the tech companies as is political accountability as we are used to in our democracies. And accountability cannot be built without regulation. Self-regulation cannot be the preferred solution

The Transatlantic community must find an answer here, be it only for the geopolitical competition with superpower China. AI should be welcomed but this is the moment to discuss the rules of the road. Computing power has grown into a major foreign policy and defence tool and AI companies should not be or become sovereign geopolitical actors in their own right as Ian Bremmer CEO of Eurasia wrote recently.

2026. We Europeans have found out that history did not end with the fall of the Berlin wall. That hubris and complacency are not very effective foreign policy tools; that decades of non-investment in defense and subcontracting our security to the US has led to uncomfortable forms of European dependency in non-defense related important domains like trade. President Trump is right in castigating his Allies and it is my hope that the upcoming NATO Summit in Ankara will see the birth of a NATO 3.0 by which I mean a "Europeanized" NATO in which the European Allies and Canada bear the brunt (and pay for) what is militarily necessary to maintain a credible conventional deterrence and warfighting capability.

This, hopefully, with the ultimate nuclear protection provided by the US.

Important to add here that in my opinion the NATO Alliance has always served and should continue to serve both European but certainly also American vital interests. A continued US military presence in Europe and US participation in conventional deep strike capabilities would enhance the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture. Not a luxury with Vladimir Vladimirovitsj at the helm in the Kremlin.

Should NATO become politically blocked for one reason or the other, improbable but not impossible, Europe should strengthen and better connect existing minilateral security arrangements into a more coherent framework to enable coalitions of the willing to act effectively. Here I speak Europe and not the EU given the necessity to involve non-EU nations like the UK and others. If there ever was a time, dear ambassador Rampling to get the UK as close to the European Union as possible, it is now. But I know, like you, don't you that "unfortunately" all politics is local....

2026, as I said earlier, the language of power is omnipresent. Hard power is a notion which is still rather unfamiliar to us Europeans. Our institutions are based on a foundation of peace and stability. We all remember: "Nie wieder Krieg", never war again as the principal argument for what is now the EU. Our problem is that at 2 hours flight from Schiphol Airport Ukrainians are fighting our war. Countless soldiers are dying on the battlefield, countless civilians die in their apartment blocks. To quote Mario Draghi we should continue to support Ukraine, financially, politically and militarily, "whatever it takes". Easier said than done, I realize, being a former politician. Democracies have short memories after all.

A “cri de coeur”:

I spoke about hard power but let me honour the late Harvard Professor Joseph Nye, who passed away last year. An icon. He reminded us that next to soft and hard power we should also have smart power in our diplomatic inventory. The horrible and devastating Ebola outbreak in the DR Congo, Uganda and Rwanda shows that cutting back on development co-operation funding, soft power, which we witness on both sides of the Atlantic, including in this country, has resulted in insufficient prevention and monitoring which has made the crisis much worse. Soft and smart power work. Saving lives where we can is what civilized nations should never forsake.

So, for Europeans the message is: Yes, we have to learn to speak the language of power, but hard power only will not get us where we want to be. Professional diplomacy, perhaps we should also say “traditional” diplomacy is what we need. We should be smart in using our influence and power but, and here comes the difficult part, also ready to follow up with military force, when necessary. We could ask our Ukrainian friends for advice how one does this.

Dear Next Gen,

Do I leave you on a gloomy note of pessimism? The answer is no. I am leaving you with the notion that NATO has been declared terminally ill or dead many times in its 78 years of existence. Yes, the old NATO will not come back and needs a fundamental refurbishment that started here in the Hague last year and will hopefully be continued in Ankara coming July. This process will be quite a challenge for the European NATO Allies but at the end of the day they will realize that they must play the crucial role of defending their own continent, with a US backstop.

Europe, and now I refer more specifically to the EU, has the capacity to rise to the occasion. One would almost say the EU needs crises or at least should follow the principle: “Never waste a good crisis”.

In her most recent book, called in Dutch: “Zondagskinderen” which translates as: “Born under a lucky star”, Caroline de Gruyter argues that Europeans are spoiled by eighty years of peace and stability and a decades long geopolitical holiday. “Never war again” is not nature’s law, she says. I agree.

I am convinced that this still unique project we call the European Union, together with a “Europeanized” and refurbished NATO can keep the Old Continent safe in a world where the old order has left for good and the new is not yet on the horizon.

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, 26 May 2026