The United States is rising; Europe is stabilizing; and both are moving closer together. That was the principal message earlier this month at the annual Munich Security Conference (MSC), a high-powered gathering of defense ministers, foreign ministers, senior military officials, parliamentarians, journalists, and national-security experts of every variety.

The participants come primarily from Europe and the US; indeed, when the conference began in 1963, it was focused entirely on NATO members. This year, however, senior government officials from Brazil, China, India, Nigeria, Singapore, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia also joined, an important sign of the times. John McCain, the US senator and 2008 presidential candidate, always leads a large congressional delegation to Munich. The US administration also typically sends the Secretary of Defense or the Secretary of State to deliver a ritual speech reassuring the Europeans of the strength of the transatlantic alliance. This year, Vice President Joe Biden did the honors, bumping the US representation up a notch.

The conference also featured a panel on an unusual subject – “The American Oil and Gas Bonanza: The Changing Geopolitics of Energy.” US Special Envoy and Coordinator for International Energy Affairs Carlos Pascual described “the US internal energy revolution”: a 25% increase in natural-gas production, which should push down US gas prices, and enough oil output to reduce oil imports from 60% to 40% of consumption, with an additional 10% increase projected.

Pascual projected that the US will be able to import all of its energy needs from within the Americas by 2030. A recent confidential study by the German Intelligence Agency raises the possibility that the US could actually become an oil and gas exporter by 2020, in contrast to its present position as the world’s largest energy importer. That honor would likely fall to China, which would become increasingly dependent on the Middle East. As an extra bonus, the higher US proportion of gas use has reduced US carbon emissions to 1992 levels.

The sense of US good fortune, a phrase that is not often heard around the world these days, increased with the panelists’ description of how lower energy prices for US manufacturing has a broad positive impact on the American economy’s competitiveness. As a result, the country’s energy reserves have also become an investment magnet. German Minister of Economics and Technology Philipp Rösler said that many German firms are already relocating to the US because of lower energy prices.

Equally important, the panelists reported on the rising importance of liquid natural gas relative to pipeline gas, which has enormous geopolitical implications. In a nutshell, if gas is exported in liquid form, it is fungible. In other words, if Russia restricts the flow of gas to Ukraine for political reasons, but the rest of Europe has gas from other sources, they can simply resell their gas to Ukraine and export it via the Baltic Sea.
Jorma Ollila, Chairman of Royal Dutch Shell, described the global map of major shale oil and gas deposits. Ukraine itself has the third-largest reserves in Europe; other countries with large deposits include Poland, France, China, Indonesia, Australia, South Africa, Argentina, and Mexico. And the US has already taken over from Russia as the world’s largest gas producer.

All of this data got Brazilian Foreign Minister Antonio de Aguiar Patriota’s attention. On a panel entitled “The Rising Powers and Global Governance,” Patriota referred to the energy discussion and noted that the rising powers should remember that “the established powers are not sinking powers.” In short, the pervasive narrative of Western decline suddenly reversed itself.

The horizon seemed brighter on the European side as well. In the opening panel on “The Euro Crisis and the Future of the EU,” cautious optimism prevailed. No one thought that the European Union’s troubles were resolved, but no one thought that the eurozone was coming apart, either. On the contrary, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble made clear that German resolve to see the eurozone through its troubles was firm. And a prominent economist in the audience who has often predicted the eurozone’s demise was backtracking rapidly.

Aside from reports of a rising US (fiscal woes notwithstanding) and a stabilizing Europe (despite the common currency’s troubles), the conference featured a speech by Biden that went far beyond the reassuring rhetoric that US policymakers typically offer in European capitals. Biden told the audience that he and US President Barack Obama believe that “Europe is the cornerstone of our engagement with the rest of the world” and “the catalyst for our global cooperation.”

Biden pointed out that “Europe is America’s largest economic partner,” recalling figures that the Asia-focused Obama administration has often seemed to forget: “over $600 billion in annual trade that creates and sustains millions of jobs on the continent and at home, and a $5 trillion overall commercial relationship.” Biden went on to suggest a “comprehensive transatlantic trade and investment agreement”; a week later, in his State of the Union Address, Obama announced the launch of negotiations for precisely such an agreement.

Biden concluded with a flourish. “Europe remains America’s indispensable partner of first resort,” he declared. “And, if you forgive some presumptuousness, I believe we remain your indispensable partner.” Those strong words reflect a new sensibility in Washington. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in one of her last foreign-policy speeches, the US is not planning to pivot away from Europe to Asia, but rather with Europe to Asia.

Western fortunes are rising, slowly but surely. Together, Europe and the US account for more than 50% of global GDP, have the largest military force in the world by many multiples, and control a growing proportion of global energy reserves. They also have a formidable diplomatic and development-assistance capacity, representing a peaceful community of democracies that share a common commitment to the rights, dignity, and potential of all human beings.

Imagine that community spreading down the east coast of Latin America and the west coast of Africa. It might be an Atlantic century after all.