CCEW Symposium 2026

Symposium Report 2026

Center for
Crisis Early Warning

der Bundeswehr
Universität München

CCEW Symposium 2026

Symposium Report 2026

1. Introduction

The international security order in 2026 has been shaped by events such as Russia's continuing war against Ukraine, heightened tensions across the Taiwan Strait, intensifying US–China rivalry, Syria's fragile political and security transition, North Korea's repeated ballistic-missile launches, the increasingly regionalized and internationalized war in Sudan, and the growing use of hybrid tactics by state and non-state actors (Douglass et al., 2026). These evolving conflict dynamics have clarified the importance of consolidating and expanding conflict early-warning systems. Whereas early-warning efforts have traditionally concentrated on intrastate violence and state fragility, contemporary power competition is expanding the principal object of analysis to include interstate escalation, proxy involvement, hybrid coercion, and the internationalization of domestic conflicts.

Against this backdrop, recent years have been marked by the resurgence of large-scale interstate warfare, the erosion of multilateral conflict-management mechanisms, growing uncertainty surrounding USA-led alliance frameworks, and the normalization of coercive competition below the threshold of open war (Haggag, 2026). In this fragmented and increasingly multipolar order, the central question is therefore how crisis early warning can move beyond its traditional focus on intrastate conflict and conflict fatalities to capture latent interstate tensions, geopolitical rivalries, shifting alliances, and emerging conflict trends, including cyber operations and other hybrid tactics.

This unresolved challenge was at the heart of the CCEW Symposium 2026, held at the Federal Academy for Security Policy in Berlin: How can conflict early warning provide reliable and actionable guidance in an era of intensifying power competition - and where do its limits lie? With the Federal Ministry of Defence serving as the lead ministry for this year's Symposium, alongside the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development as funding partners, the Center for Crisis Early Warning made this challenge the central theme of the sixth edition of the CCEW Symposium. The event gathered experts from academia, policymaking and practice from Germany, Europe and beyond. On this note, its panels explored conflict early warning in times of geopolitical competition and shifting conflict dynamics, hybrid threats and their implications for conflict early warning, the use of language models and other emerging methodologies in crisis early warning, as well as informative signals for early warning and innovative data sources.

The 2026 Symposium was based on the previous edition while shifting its emphasis. Whereas the 2025 Symposium focused primarily on how data, AI and interdisciplinary analysis could strengthen situational awareness and decision-making, the 2026 edition situated these tools within the broader context of geopolitical and power competition. The discussion consequently expanded from improving forecasting methods to examining interstate escalation, proxy involvement, hybrid threats and the political and institutional limits of translating warning into action. Machine learning and methodological innovation were

considered important instruments, but not solutions in themselves.

The interdisciplinary exchange demonstrated that effective early warning cannot be reduced to a technological challenge. It also depends on reliable data, critical analysis and, above all, sustained dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

2. Structure and Content

The CCEW Symposium 2026 comprised two days of policy dialogue, academic exchange and applied workshops. The event started on 13 October with welcoming remarks by Markus Woelke, Vice President of the Federal Academy for Security Policy, underlining the historic relevance of this year's event location

Major General Wolfgang Ohl, Deputy Director-General for the Armed Forces at the German Federal Ministry of Defence, then delivered further welcoming remarks. He stressed the need for a 360-degree view on Germany's global developments, noting that crises can emerge suddenly and that a comprehensive situational picture - supported by information from across government branches - is essential for Germany's National Security Council. He highlighted the armed forces' contribution to situational awareness and emphasized the importance of data, artificial intelligence, interdisciplinary analysis, and cooperation between government and academia, particularly through the Center for Crisis Early Warning at the University of the Bundeswehr Munich.

Professor Carlo Masala, Project Lead of the Center for Crisis Early Warning, formally opened the Symposium. In the opening remarks, he situated the Symposium within an increasingly fluid international order characterized by geopolitical competition, hybrid threats, and the erosion of the distinction between peace and war. Furthermore, he emphasized the need to broaden crisis early warning beyond armed conflict and highlighted the Center's role in connecting academia and government, developing transparent data-driven methods, and translating advances in machine learning, language models, and conflict research into practical support for decision-makers.

The keynote address was delivered by Major General Dag Baehr, Vice President and Senior Officer of the German Federal Intelligence Service. He emphasized that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence underscoring the need to account for uncertainty, intelligence gaps, and weak or ambiguous signals in crisis early warning. He further underlined the time pressure analysts face to provide in-time assessments that is even further challenged with the advancements of AI. The high-level opening highlighted the policy relevance of the event and established its central concern: how research-based early warning can capture evolving geopolitical and hybrid threats and support timely decision-making in times of growing uncertainty.

The **opening policy panel**, entitled **"Change, Complexity, Uncertainty—Quo Vadis Conflict Early Warning?"**, was moderated by Carlo Masala. It brought together Colonel (GS) Ulrich Schmidt-Narischkin of the German Federal Ministry of Defence, Adrian Pollmann of the German Federal Foreign Office, Astrid Irrgang of the Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), and Philipp Rotmann of the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) for an interactive discussion. Setting the broader framework for the Symposium, the panel examined how geopolitical competition, interstate conflict, hybrid threats, and data-related constraints are reshaping crisis early warning. The discussion addressed the limits of existing approaches, the challenges posed by ambiguous or contested signals, and the conditions under which information can support timely and effective decision-making.

The first day continued with three research panels. The first of them, **Inter-State Conflicts and Geopolitics in Crisis Early Warning**, examined how conflict early warning can be adapted to renewed interstate rivalry. The contributions introduced methods for tracking changes in bilateral relations, detecting external support to conflict parties, and assessing the risks associated with sanctions, militarized disputes and major-power war. Together, they demonstrated both the value of new measurement approaches and the continuing difficulty of forecasting rare but highly consequential interstate conflicts.

In addition, the second panel featured **Language Models in Crisis Early Warning** and explored how they can support early warning without being treated as autonomous forecasting systems. The papers used LLMs to extract structured information from conflict reports, explain why forecasting systems raise alarms, and translate conflict theories into prospectively testable predictions. Across these applications, the contributions emphasized the importance of transparency, provenance, abstention, reproducibility and human validation.

The last panel of the first day introduced **Informative Signals for Crisis Early Warning.** It showed how they can emerge from demographic, economic and media environments. Studies of ethnic balance and civilian victimization, energy investments and external intervention, and Chinese and Japanese reporting on maritime disputes showed that warning signals acquire meaning only when interpreted within their political and institutional contexts. The panel therefore highlighted the importance of understanding

the mechanisms and source systems behind apparently predictive indicators.

The second day of the CCEW Symposium 2026 began with the fourth research panel on **Hybrid Threats**, that approached hybrid threats as relational, cross-domain and highly context-specific processes. Research on foreign malign influence in EU candidate countries combined quantitative forecasting with expert-based foresight, while the cyber-focused papers demonstrated that escalation patterns differ across conflict dyads and interact with physical violence. These findings cautioned against universal indicators and supported more actor- and relationship-specific monitoring.

Moreover, the research panel on **New Approaches and Methodologies** presented methodological innovations intended to make early warning more anticipatory and actionable. These included graph-temporal deep learning for subnational conflict forecasting, forecasts of the economic and humanitarian consequences of violence, and historical-analogy methods for distinguishing genuine conflict onsets from similar cases that did not escalate into conflict. The panel thus expanded the analytical focus from whether violence will occur to where and when it may emerge, what consequences it may produce, and how confidently it can be anticipated.

This year's last research panel, **New Data and Data Limitations,** considered both the possibilities and the limitations of emerging data sources. One contribution used weekly music-streaming charts as a societal "mood barometer" for detecting latent tensions before mass mobilization in autocracies. Another compared UN operational records with public conflict datasets, demonstrating how event detection and measurement can be influenced by geography, connectivity, event intensity and media reporting. Together, the papers showed that new data can reveal otherwise hidden warning signals, but only when questions of representativeness, reliability and source bias are addressed systematically.

3. Participation

The CCEW Symposium 2026 underlined the **increased interest** in crisis early warning from different disciplines, fields, and professions. For this year's Symposium, more than **100 participants** registered to take part in the two-day event. The majority of the participants was made up by researchers from different universities and other research institutions from Germany, Europe, United Kingdom, and the United States of America. As the CCEW Symposium 2026 was designed to be research focused this is a positive outcome. In addition, a third of the group was made up by policy-makers, security officials, and practitioners from Germany, the European Union, and Great Britain. They represented a great variety of institutions, including ministries, international organisations, private sector actors, and humanitarian aid organisations. This share has been considered a great success for the CCEW Symposium as it aims at bringing together these different stakeholders.

While the welcome and opening speeches have been positively addressed by participants in the aftermath, the **keynote speech** by Major General Dag Baehr of the German Federal Intelligence Service left a particularly lasting impression among the audience. Several times during both Symposium days, panelists and chairs took up the points raised by the Vice President of the German Federal Intelligence Service in contextualizing and framing their contributions.

In each **research panel** three papers have been presented to the audience in the plenary. The panelists represented a great variety of different institutions, including Aarhus University, the Barcelona School of Economics, Charles University in Prague, the Institute for Economic Analysis (IAE-CSIC), Georgia Institute of Technology, the German Institute of Development and Sustainability, the Global Public Policy Institute, Heidelberg University, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, the Peace Research Institute Oslo, the Swedish Defence University, University College Dublin, the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, University of Konstanz, University of Texas, and Uppsala University. The audience made great use of the opportunity to ask questions, share experience, and discuss emerging ideas after each paper presentation.

As in previous years, the **seminars** enriched the CCEW Symposium by offering an even more focused room for exchange and discussion. About thirty people took part in each of the three seminars. Participants were free to choose which seminar to attend. Eventually, stakeholders from different professional backgrounds and disciplines interacted in each seminar, presenting different interests and needs in the discussions. The LLM-based seminar received positive feedback in particular due to its hands-on, interactive group activity.

4. Key Learnings and Insights

As every year, the CCEW team gathered feedback from the audience and within the CCEW team regarding the event. This concerned the content, formats, as well as administration and logistics. In the following, some insights will be outlined in more detail.

Balance of Methods and Topics

The vast majority of the participants positively underlined the balanced mix of panels dealing with detailed methodological questions on the one hand and panels rather focussing on content-related insights on the other. Consequently, different panels naturally resonated differently to each participant depending on their background. This opportunity has been mentioned to be highly valued among the audience.

Apart from that, suggestions came up to spread the policy spotlights and policy panel over the two days instead of clustering them at the beginning of the first day. Moreover, questions and answers formats for policy contributions could be a valuable addition. This way the exchange between policy and academia could even more improve.

CCEW Symposium as Unique Exchange Platform

The reactions to both the spotlights at the beginning of the CCEW Symposium 2026 and the seminars showed that the Symposium is a rather unique event that provides a relevant exchange platform for different stakeholders in crisis early warning. While the Center for Crisis Early Warning finds itself at an exceptional position between research and policy-making, this is often not the case for other universities, research institutions, and non-governmental organisations active in the field of crisis early warning. Therefore, participants expressed appreciation for the variety of presented perspectives and the audience's openness. Moreover, they repeatedly stressed the need for comparable opportunities and formats in order to advance united efforts and improve results.

A great advantage of this year's Symposium was that creators and authors of commonly used datasets were present during the event. This includes among others the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), the European Repository of Cyber Incidents (EuRepoC), and Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). This way, several discussions revolved around how these datasets can be used, what are remaining limitations and what are ideas for improvement.

Added Value of Seminars and In-Between Exchanges

Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming part of the audience emphasized the great added value of exchange formats that included smaller group settings, like the seminars and exchanges in-between panels. These formats offer time for detailed discussions, hands-on exercises, and interdisciplinary brainstorming.

In these smaller contexts, participants often seem less hesitant to openly address different needs and interests. For example, researchers regularly expressed interest to learn what practitioners understand by crisis early warning, to grasp what processes and responsibilities there are in practice, and to reflect on requirements for their crisis early warning efforts.

At the same time, practitioners clearly asked for interpretable and intuitive results, costumer-oriented science communication, and more cooperation for knowledge transfer.

As the program of the CCEW Symposium 2026 was quite ambitiously scheduled with a lot of contributions, the Center for Crisis Early Warning will consider allocating more time for these more informal forms of exchange and for smaller group formats next year.

5. Challenges and Areas for Improvement

When bringing together the crisis early warning community from academia, policy-making and practice, key questions refer to the **transfer of research insights into practice** and useability. This closely relates to the inclusiveness of the event that differentiates the CCEW Symposium from other purely academic events. While some panelists and speakers directly addressed this question, other contributions left the transfer open. As research-practice-transfer is an expectable question in the CCEW Symposium context, the Center for Crisis Early Warning will specifically address it for next year.

In addition, participants asked for **more interactive or dynamic formats**. During this year's seminars, the audience specifically liked those sessions with hands-on group tasks or small workshop formats. The Center for Crisis Early Warning will allocate more time to these formats in the event upcoming in 2027. Besides, the Center will consider similar and new interactive formats for next year to increase the added value even more.

Although there are some external restrains that are out of the Center's control, like panel applications or spontaneous replacements for last-minute cancellations, the Center for Crisis Early Warning will try again next year to find a balanced **gender and career stage distribution** in the program.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the sixth CCEW Symposium was a great success. The group of participants showed that the crisis early warning community is continuously growing. The Center for Crisis Early Warning was delighted to see participants known from the previous events but also happy to welcome new colleagues. Moreover, the program offered diverse insights in methods, conflict dynamics, and emerging trends that advance early warning by dealing with newly arising phenomena and contemporary challenges. Furthermore, bringing

together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers clearly enriched the exchange and discussions. The open atmosphere was a conducive environment for the networking at the CCEW Symposium 2026.

The Symposium demonstrated that responding to a changing security environment requires continuous monitoring of emerging developments, greater awareness of evolving risks, and the development of adaptive approaches through methodological innovation, contextual expertise, and cross-institutional cooperation.

The Center for Crisis Early Warning thanks the funding partners, all Symposium contributors, and participants for their valuable contributions and insights. The exchange in Berlin will continue to shape ongoing research and collaboration in support of more effective crisis early warning.

To conclude, the Center for Crisis Early Warning is looking forward to next year's CCEW Symposium and to host the international crisis early warning community again.

Publication Bibliography

Douglass, R.W., Gartzke, E., Lindsay, J.R., Gannon, J.A. and Scherer, T.L. (2026) 'What is escalation? Measuring crisis dynamics in international relations with human- and LLM-generated event data', in Wilkenfeld, J., Beardsley, K. and James, P. (eds.) A Century of International Crisis Behavior. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, pp. 372–395. Available at: Project MUSE (Accessed: 22 October 2026).

Haggag, K. (2026) 'Reflections on the challenges of systemic disruption and the future of peace research', SIPRI Yearbook 2026: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security. Oxford University Press. Available at: https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2026/01 (Accessed: 22 October 2026).

Center for
Crisis Early Warning

Imprint

Publisher
Center for Crisis Early Warning
University of the Bundeswehr Munich
unibw.de/ciss/kompzkfe

Proofreading & Editorial Design
Zum Staunen*
Creative Studio for SciComm
zum-staunen.de

Image Credits
Cover: based on original image from
Bittedankeschön on Adobe Stock

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution – Non Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International license.