

A Message to Europe From Western Disunion

Will Trump's actions wake Europe up or destroy the trans-Atlantic alliance?

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U.S. Vice President JD Vance at the Munich Security Conference in Germany, Feb. 14. Photo: Sven Hoppe/Zuma Press

It was a dramatic week in Europe. President Trump reached over the heads of North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies and Ukraine to begin direct conversations with [Vladimir Putin](#). At the Munich Security Conference, Vice President [JD Vance](#) highlighted the political divide between Mr. Trump's America and the European Union while doing everything possible to humiliate his German hosts. As shell-shocked European leaders gathered in Paris for an emergency summit, it was an open question whether the trans-Atlantic West will survive as an active force in global affairs.

Behind all this is a brutal and ugly fact. Despite cheerleading by intellectuals and democracy activists and concern in countries like Poland and the Baltic states, leading Western governments on both sides of the Atlantic are unwilling to provide Ukraine with enough aid to make victory a realistic prospect, and Mr. Putin knows it. Given these realities, the U.S.-German partnership driving NATO's war policy wanted to engineer a soft defeat for Ukraine that would avoid further dividing the West. Washington and Berlin hoped that Ukrainians would tire of fighting a seemingly hopeless war and reach out to Mr. Putin for peace. A united West could congratulate itself on its heroic devotion to democratic values, and the war would end. For now.

The likely end result for Ukraine of the Trump policy is the same as for [Joe Biden's](#) policy. Ukraine will shrink, and there won't be an Article 5 in its future. The question is what comes next. Will Mr. Putin, bloodied by the cost of the war, worried about his growing dependence on China, and sobered by his failure to take the whole of Ukraine, be content with his gains? Or will he see opportunities for further advances given the disarray and irresolution so evident in NATO?

This is where the difference between the Biden and Trump approaches begins to matter. Mr. Biden thought NATO unity was the best way to deter Russian attacks. Team Biden believed that its success in holding NATO together after the Russian invasion was the key to stability in Europe.

Team Trump's view could not be more different. The EU has more people and more money than Russia, it argues, and should be easily able to contain Russia with, at most, nuclear backstopping from the U.S. Given the urgent calls on American resources in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere, and given the state of U.S. public opinion, Washington cannot be dragged into extended responsibility for Ukraine's future. Deterring Russia is a European problem.

Mr. Vance's visit was intended to drive this point home. His combative speech at the Munich Security Conference, his refusal to meet Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and his taboo-busting meeting with Alternative for Germany leader Alice Weidel all sent the same message. After more than 30 years of presidents from Bill Clinton through Joe Biden asking Europe nicely to assume more responsibility for the common defense, America has had it. Europe in general, and Germany especially, can no longer count on an eternal snuggle rug of American protection.

Can Western unity survive this brawl? For many Europeans and their American allies, Mr. Trump's presidency is an assault on democracy as well as on trans-Atlantic solidarity. For the president's supporters, it is the Europeans who have betrayed the West. Foolish national-defense strategies, self-defeating economic policies, censorship, and suicidal cultural and immigration measures have eroded both the strategic and moral commonalities that once united the West. Europeans think Mr. Trump is betraying democracy by punching it in the face; Team Trump argues the Europeans have betrayed it with a kiss.

For decades, U.S. presidents and the foreign-policy establishment have regarded the development of Europe after World War II as America's greatest foreign policy success and the basis for our continuing efforts to build a rules-based global order. But what if the Europe we helped build is just a selfish community of decadent states locked into terminal decline? What if falling short of building a genuine security partner in Europe was America's most tragic foreign-policy failure?

Mr. Trump's Europe policy is likely to have one of two outcomes. It could function as shock therapy, jolting Europeans into making the changes that could renew European strength and offering hope for a new and more realistic alliance. Or it could mark the beginning of the end of the trans-Atlantic community that gave Europe its longest era of relative peace since the peak of the Roman Empire.

Either way, the Trump administration's first foray into European policymaking won't be soon forgotten. Europeans now know that Charles de Gaulle was right, that the Continent cannot count on American blank checks forever. Let us hope that our shocked and angry European friends draw some wise lessons from a harsh week.