

## America's bullied allies need to toughen up

To avoid being crushed, they need a better plan than flattery and concessions



image: Julia Dufosse

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For decades America has stood by its friends and deterred its enemies. That steadfastness is being thrown upside down, as Donald Trump strong-arms allies and seeks deals with adversaries. After freezing all aid to Ukraine on March 3rd, his administration restored it when Ukraine agreed in principle to a 30-day truce. It is unclear how hard the White House will press Vladimir Putin [to accept this](#). On the same day, Mr Trump briefly slammed even more tariffs on Canada. Its new prime minister, Mark Carney, warned that a predatory America wants “our water, our land, our country”. And don’t forget Asia. The president has just raised doubts about the value to America of the US-Japan defence treaty, which Eisenhower signed in 1960. Around the world, allies fear that America First means they come second, third or even last.

Mr Trump and his supporters believe his frenetic actions enhance American power, breaking deadlocks and shaking up deadbeat or parasitic allies. The proposed ceasefire in Ukraine is evidence that he can change countries’ behaviour. But at what cost? His trade war is panicking financial markets. The 40-odd countries that have put their security in America’s hands since 1945 are suffering a crisis of confidence. They dread Team Trump’s inconsistency and short-termism: a ceasefire in Gaza that is rather like the Ukrainian one may soon collapse. At home, Mr Trump faces checks and balances. Abroad, much less so. Allies are asking whether they are certain that Mr Trump or a President J.D. Vance would fight alongside them if the worst happens. Unfortunately, the answer is: not certain enough.

This loss of faith also reflects a dawning realisation that coercing allies is an inevitable consequence of the MAGA value-free agenda. Allies’ interdependence means that America has more leverage over them than over foes such as Russia or China. For decades Canada, Europe and parts of Asia have trusted America’s “superpower stack”—defence treaties, trade deals, nuclear weapons, the dollar banking system—because it is mutually beneficial. Tragically Mr Trump sees it as a liability.

The administration’s economic nationalism and the repudiation of its global security role may go further. Foreign firms are being bullied to shift capital to America. Some White House advisers want reciprocal tariffs, a radical form of protectionism. On Wall Street there is talk of schemes to [depress the dollar](#). Elon Musk says America should quit NATO; although Mr Trump has not gone that far, he has not contradicted him. Europeans are exploring new, once-unthinkable risks: does America have kill switches for F-35 fighter jets? Might it refuse to maintain Britain’s nuclear deterrent?

Asian allies worry that Mr Trump will turn on them next. Australia, Japan, South Korea and others hope his hostility to China runs deep enough that he will not abandon them. But his grievances over trade and defence

treaties [do not have geographic limits](#). Given his determination to avoid world war three with Russia over Ukraine, negotiations with China or North Korea could see him offering concessions that weaken allies and make Taiwan more vulnerable.

If you admire America and its transatlantic and Pacific alliances, this shift is so extreme and unfamiliar that it is tempting to deny it is happening and to assume that Mr Trump must backtrack. However, when your people's safety is at stake, denial is not a plan. America's allies have a GDP of \$37trn, but they lack hard power. Sucking up in the Oval Office and offering to Buy American gets them only so far. Making concessions can encourage more demands, as [Panama has found](#). If allies are unable to defend themselves, some will seek an accommodation with China or Russia.

America's allies should try to avoid that dismal outcome, starting today. One idea is to deter America from [mutual harm](#). That means identifying unconventional retaliatory measures while calibrating their use to avoid a 1930s-style downward spiral. One option is to slow co-operation on extraterritorial sanctions and export controls. Allies could use their "choke-points" in trade, which we reckon account for 27% of America's imports, including nuclear fuels, metals and pharmaceuticals. Hidden in the semiconductor-production chain are firms such as Tokyo Electron and ASML in Europe, which are crucial suppliers to America's tech giants. Smart retaliation against foolish tariffs worked for Europe in the first Trump term. Allies should also identify military pressure-points, such as radars and bases, though they should stop short of exploiting them except in extreme circumstances.

As an insurance policy allies will have to build up their own economic and military infrastructure in parallel to America's superpower stack. Creating this option will take years. Europe is highly likely to issue more joint debt to finance extra defence spending, and it may keep its own sanctions on Russia even if Mr Trump lifts America's. All this could split American and European capital markets and ultimately boost the euro's role as an international currency. In defence, Europe is scrambling to fill gaps in its forces. It is also discussing a [continental nuclear deterrent](#) involving France and perhaps Britain. In Asia, South Korea and perhaps Japan may move closer to the nuclear threshold, in order to deter China and North Korea.

### **The new night watchmen**

Last, America's allies should seek strength in numbers. Europe needs a plan to take over the leadership of NATO, join the CPTPP, an Asian trade deal, and co-operate with Japan and South Korea more closely on military and civilian technology. That would create scale and help manage rivalries. It would also preserve an alternative liberal order, albeit vastly inferior to the original. Allies should be ready to welcome back America under a new president in 2029, though the world will not be the same. Nuclear proliferation may have been unleashed, China will have grown stronger and America's power and credibility will have been gravely damaged. For its allies, there is no point whingeing: they need to toughen up and get to work. ■