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We no longer have a “West”, but do we have a “Europe”?

Donald Trump’s pivot to Russia means we no longer have a “West”, writes Kevin Featherstone. Yet there is still time for Europe to come together and create a new security system in its place.

Following Donald Trump’s surprise phone call with Vladimir Putin, we may no longer have a “West”, in the sense of a stable political and military alliance. We live in a defining moment. Our leaders scramble to make sense of what President Trump means. His messages appear chaotic.

He has spoken of Canada becoming the 51st state and of America taking possession of the Panama Canal, Greenland and Gaza. Some advocate staying calm and hoping dialogue will bring a return to a more sensible path. But Vice President Vance’s speech at the Munich Security Conference last month opened a window on to the alt-right-inspired thinking at the heart of the White House and it should scare every capital in Europe.

Warnings from history

Trump’s admirers see a purpose in Trump’s chaotic messages. They shake things up and create a new range of possible outcomes to protracted problems. Ignoring Europe and reporting a warm conversation with Putin and a set of bilateral talks with Russia in Riyadh forces allies to talk about spending more on their own security, long a concern of successive administrations in Washington. We are to admire Trump’s negotiating prowess – his “art of the deal”.

But, in the words of Radek Sikorski, Poland’s foreign minister, it is certainly **an unorthodox approach** to tell the other side that you’re willing to concede, in advance, to their key demands: Russia to keep the territory it has won, Ukraine not to be allowed to join NATO, and ruling-out any US troops to defend Kyiv. And, so far, the “Negotiator-in-Chief”, has not accompanied these concessions with any

threat to Moscow. What would Trump do if Putin didn't keep his promises, if he launched another invasion?

There are warnings from history. The closest parallel is the agreement Neville Chamberlain signed with Hitler in September 1938. "Herr Hitler" had given Chamberlain his word. This proved worthless: nine months later, the British PM was forced to offer a security guarantee to Poland. Hitler's invasion – on a weak pretext, like Putin's attack on Ukraine – led to the Second World War.

There is no longer a West

History doesn't easily repeat itself, but it does underline that today's uncertainties sustain an alarming range of possible outcomes. Vance's signal at the Munich Conference was clear: Washington would deal directly with Moscow and Europe would be ignored. Conversely, Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Riyadh rolled back the position: both Europe and Ukraine would be parties to any peace deal with Putin. By the time you read this, there will almost certainly have been further confusing signals.

More deeply, the kind of attack on Europe launched by Vance suggests that there is no longer a "West" that shares basic values. The West has proudly identified itself with the inheritance of Ancient Athens – as defenders of democracy. Yet, on this and many other political and social issues, we risk a divide in how we act on our beliefs between the two continents that built the "West".

Whatever the normative fallout, students of history were taught that Stalin was the "father" of European unity after 1945. Fear of Moscow gave birth to what became the European Union. Today, the actions of both Trump and Putin provide the rationale for Europe becoming the agent of its own defence.

Risks and opportunities

How bold the short-term steps must be for Europe depends on Trump. At one extreme, **as the financier Bill Browder has advocated**, the EU could use some of the \$300 billion of frozen Russian assets to keep funding Ukraine's military, independently of Trump. Such a move would give Europe leverage to deploy in Washington. It may elicit a US security guarantee for Ukraine, a key instrument in us not repeating Chamberlain's mistake.

Trump is asking Europe to raise its defence spending to 5% of GDP. For many, that is unrealistic in fiscal terms: the UK would have to find more than €90 billion and to sustain it every year, for example. Instead, another option for the EU is to replicate its post-COVID financing, lifting its debt rules and creating new EU borrowing.

Overarching these options, a new European security system has to be created, comprising both the UK and France – its two biggest defence forces – to compensate for the collapse of the Atlantic alliance and must be enabled to act decisively. Crises create opportunities and crisis responses may be ranged over different stages. But who in Europe will feel more comfortable if we leave Ukraine to Trump and Putin?

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