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How Europe must respond as Trump and Putin smash the post-war order

The PAST week has been the bleakest in Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Ukraine is being sold out, Russia is being rehabilitated and, under Donald Trump, America can no longer be counted on to come to Europe's aid in wartime. The implications for Europe's security are grave, but they have yet to sink in to the continent's leaders and people. The old world needs a crash course on how to wield hard power in a lawless era, or it will fall victim to the new world disorder.

Speaking in Munich last week, America's vice-president, J.D. Vance, offered a taste of how the home of fine wines, classical architecture and welfare cheques faces humiliation, when he ridiculed Europe as decadent and undemocratic. Its leaders have been excluded from peace talks between the White House and the Kremlin, which began officially in Riyadh on February 18th. However, the unfolding crisis goes far beyond insults and diplomatic niceties.

Mr Trump appears ready to walk away from Ukraine which he falsely blames for the war. Calling its president, Volodymyr Zelensky, a "dictator", Mr Trump warned him that he had "better move fast or he is not going to have a country left". America may try to impose an unstable ceasefire on Ukraine with only weak security guarantees that limit its right to re-arm.

That is bad enough, but Europe's worst nightmare is bigger than Ukraine. Mr Trump intends to rehabilitate Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, ditching a long-standing policy to isolate him. Without any obvious geopolitical benefit to America, he is angling to restore diplomatic relations. He may soon be feted at a glitzy summit. Offering up concessions in Riyadh, Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, gushed about co-operation and "historic economic and investment opportunities". (Trump Tower Red Square?)

Mr Trump's shakedown of Europe and pandering to Russia have cast doubt on America's commitment to defend NATO come what may. One fear is that American forces could be cut, or pulled back to leave eastern Europe exposed. The problem is not that Uncle Sam's priorities lie in Asia. The problem is that if Europe comes under Russian attack and seeks American help, Mr Trump's first and deepest instinct will be to ask what is in it for him. He is due to meet Britain's prime minister and the French president next week. But don't take that as a signal that this is just clever talk from a dealmaker: Mr Trump's readiness to trade everything away is precisely the problem. NATO's deterrence rests on the certainty that if one member is attacked the rest will come to its aid. Doubt is corrosive; it leaves Europe dangerously exposed.

Let us spell out the reality Europe faces. It is an indebted, ageing continent that is barely growing and cannot defend itself or project hard power. Global rules on trade, borders, defence and technology are being ripped up. If Russia invades one of the Baltic states, or uses disinformation and sabotage to destabilise eastern Europe, what precisely will Europe do?

So far the answer is to curl up in a defensive crouch. After the MAGA onslaught, a group of European leaders hastily met in Paris on February 17th but managed only to advertise their differences. Three years after Russia's invasion Europe has not raised military spending nearly enough. It is trapped in an obsolete worldview of multilateral treaties and shared values.

Europe's urgent task is to relearn how to acquire and wield power; it must be prepared to confront adversaries and sometimes friends, including America, which will still be there after Mr Trump. Instead of cowering, it needs an objective appraisal of the threat. Russia is a war machine with a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons, but also a medium-size economy that is declining. Europe also needs an equally objective appraisal of its own strengths: although it is slow-growing, Europe is still an economic and trade giant with great reserves of talent and knowledge. It needs to use those resources to reinvigorate growth, rearm and assert itself.

What does that mean? In the short term Europe needs a single envoy to talk to Ukraine, Russia and America. It should tighten its embargo on Russia even if America loosens sanctions. Europe should unilaterally exploit the €210bn (\$220bn) of Russian cash frozen in European banks. That would pay for Ukraine to fight on or rearm as American funds dwindle.

In the medium term a huge defence mobilisation is needed. If Europe cannot rely on America, it must have its own heavy-lift aircraft, logistics, surveillance: the lot. Talks must start on how Britain and France can use their nuclear weapons to shield the continent. All this will cost a fortune. Defence spending will need to rise to the 4-5% of gdp that was normal during the cold war. Higher defence outlays, particularly if some are spent on American weapons, may persuade Mr Trump to stay in NATO, but the assumption now must be that American support is not guaranteed.

Paying for this rearmament will take a fiscal revolution. The new target will require extra spending of upwards of €300bn a year. Some of this must come from issuing more common and individual debt. In order to bear that, Europe will have to cut welfare: Angela Merkel, Germany's former chancellor, used to say that Europe accounted for 7% of the world's population, 25% of its GDP but 50% of its social spending. To raise growth, Europe must press ahead with obvious but endlessly delayed reforms, from unifying capital markets to deregulation.

A new dream for an old continent

The nightmare that Mr Putin and now Mr Trump have conjured up may ultimately force Europe to change how it organises itself. Its pedantic obsession with process and groupings, including the euro zone, the EU and many others, slows decision-making, omits key actors like Britain and gives weight to countries such as Hungary, which want to sabotage European defence, or Spain that is hesitant to rearm.

All this sounds outlandish. NATO has been the world's most successful alliance: its disappearance is hard to imagine. But the old things have passed away; all things have become new. Europe needs to face up to that before it is too late. ■