

Opinion **Geopolitics**

Europe should hijack Trump's revolutionary plans for the world

Liberal nationalists must respond with imagination to US policies rather than gripe at being cut out of Ukraine talks

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, left, meets JD Vance, the US vice-president, in Munich. Europeans are wasting precious time pondering about America's plan for Ukraine © Matthias Schrader/AP

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Listening to US vice-president JD Vance's address in Munich and looking at the results of Germany's subsequent parliamentary elections, I was reminded of East Berlin in 1989 and the collapse of the communist regimes across eastern Europe. It was during the final weeks of the Soviet empire in Europe that Mikhail Gorbachev, the reformist Soviet leader, told his hardline East German comrades that they risked being on the wrong side of history and "danger awaits those who do not react to the real world". Vance made a similar speech, telling Europeans that they were on the wrong side of President Donald Trump. But this message did not have the expected effect.

It turned out that Germany's radical leftist Die Linke party, and not the far-right Alternative for Germany, was the major beneficiary of Elon Musk's social media posts and Vance's warning. The other unexpected result was that Friedrich Merz, Germany's likely next chancellor, has been transformed overnight from an old-fashioned Atlanticist into a European Gaullist. Straight after the vote, Merz declared his readiness to fight for Europe's independence from the US.

The Trumpian revolution has already changed the nature of European politics. Less than two months into the new White House administration's term, the European political scene has been transformed into a clash between Trump-allied revolutionaries and Trump-resisting "do not bully us" liberal nationalists. Now it is for the far right to justify Trump's anticipated tariffs on Europe, threatened this week at 25 per cent, and to ask Europeans to follow Washington's leadership in foreign policy. By contrast, mainstream parties are acting as defenders of national sovereignty who hope to mobilise support by appealing to national interest and national dignity.

The Munich conference also put an end to the heated debate about whether Trump should be taken seriously (meaning, not literally) or literally (meaning, not seriously). Now we know that he should be taken both seriously and literally. As Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, has aptly observed, Trump "does not simply say what he thinks, but he says what he wants". His comments about taking control of Greenland or the Panama Canal represent not signalling, but intention. The US president is convinced that America's strategic interest lies in making Canada the 51st US state. He strongly believes that he can split Russia from China, and he blames America's "deep state" for preventing him from achieving this in his first term.

In this context, Europeans are wasting precious time pondering what will be Trump's plan for Ukraine and complaining about not being at the negotiating table.

Getting Trump right necessitates first and foremost recognising that it is a revolutionary government in power in Washington, albeit one organised as an imperial court. Revolutions never have detailed plans. They run by timetables: meet the moment; don't project steps ahead. It is unclear what exactly Trump wants to achieve in his negotiations with Putin, but he wants to achieve something very big, and he wants to achieve it fast, very fast.

What Trump offers Putin is not simply the prospect of ending the war in Ukraine on terms broadly favourable to Moscow, but a grand bargain to reorder the world. This includes America's presence in Europe, and also in the Middle East and the Arctic. Trump promises Putin that Russia will be rapidly reintegrated into the global economy and that Moscow will regain the status of a great power that it lost in the humiliating 1990s. Trump hopes that this will convince Russia to sunder its alliance with China. The US refusal in a UN vote to condemn Russia's aggression in

Ukraine shocked even some of the president's most devoted admirers. But it was meant to persuade the Kremlin that the American leader is ready to do the unthinkable — and reconfigure the world as shaped by Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev in the late 1980s.

What will happen to Trump's revolutionary dreams is a separate question. It is one of those ironies of history that Russians are greeting Trump's determination to remake the world with a guarded enthusiasm that recalls the cautious US response to Gorbachev almost 40 years ago. What Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, is saying today is not so different to what Dick Cheney, then the US defence secretary, said in 1989: "We must guard against gambling our nation's security on what may be a temporary aberration in the behaviour of our foremost adversary."

George Orwell once observed that "all revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure". What kind of failure the Trumpian revolution will be, we do not know. But what history teaches us is that the best strategy is not to resist the revolutionaries but to hijack their revolution. In doing this, Europe's success will mostly depend not on its ability to resist but on displaying a talent to surprise. Could Europe find a way to benefit from not being at the US-Russian negotiating table? Should Trump be left to own his great peace plan for Ukraine and its implementation?

In a moment of existential crisis like the present one, there is one valuable resource for the weaker party that stands out: political imagination.

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