

Opinion US foreign policy**Marco Rubio still owes Europe answers about America's intentions**

The US secretary of state's recent speech in Athens evoked a shared destiny but offered no vision of a common future

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Europe was listening intently to the speech in Athens this month by Marco Rubio, someone who may inherit the Republican mantle © Mark Schiefelbein/Reuters

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Marco Rubio's speech in Athens in early October was in effect his first post-Trump address. He was speaking not for the administration he currently serves but to the era that will follow it.

It wasn't a particularly brave or eloquent speech, but for many Europeans it had the hallmarks of a homecoming. Donald Trump's secretary of state, who described himself as the "great-grandson of settlers who arrived in the new world from Spain", had arrived in Athens rather as Odysseus returned to Ithaca: announcing that the western alliance had not been dissolved but merely left unattended, its hall overrun by suitors — and that if he was back, it was back as well.

The timing of the speech helps explain the warmth of its reception more than the text itself. Rubio spoke at a time when the Strait of Hormuz had been closed for months; when Trump's (mis)handling of Ukraine has further diminished Kyiv's chances of survival; and as Republicans nervously anticipate a Democratic "blue wave" in the midterm elections.

Europe was listening intently to someone who may inherit the GOP mantle at a time when his Democratic opponents know what they can no longer endorse on foreign policy — military aid to Israel and crusades in defence of democracy — but say precious little about what they are prepared to do.

A Europe that is moving rightward yet is deeply disillusioned with the US president was particularly eager to know what the post-Trump American right has to offer. What they got was a message of shared destiny but no vision for a common future or common strategy. Rubio stressed the Christian inheritance of the west but invoked it as ancestry rather than a political programme.

Unlike vice-president JD Vance, he did not genuflect to the leaders of the European far right. He mentioned mass migration only once in his speech and then as a matter of border security. There was no reference to the "great replacement" theory and other cult phrases of the extreme right. And he chose to deliver his message praising the west for daring to change the world not in the capital of one of Europe's former colonial powers but in modern Greece — a state born out of an anti-imperial struggle.

The "west" in Rubio's speech was not that of Maga's fever dream. Here was a civilisational account of it that a European Christian Democrat could recite without discomfort. But will that story of common culture and the appeal to the courage of the Ancients be enough to restore Europe's trust in America?

Rubio's appeal to warrior virtue is as out of touch with modern European and American societies as is Vance's appeal to religious revival. It is not that European or US elites don't want to be heroic; but they don't know how. The idea of personal sacrifice has mostly disappeared from Europe's political vocabulary — unless, that is, you regard increased levels of defence spending, real or imagined, as a modern version of ancient courage, or see in the burning of cars and the sacking of buildings in Paris or Tirana the contemporary equivalent of the wrath of Achilles.

Rubio misunderstands Homer: identity is never claimed; it is demonstrated. Odysseus does not announce himself in the hall; he proves who he is by stringing the great bow that no suitor can bend and sending an arrow through 12 axeheads. He convinces Penelope by acknowledging that their bed, cut from a living olive tree, cannot be moved. He is recognised by an old dog who finds the strength to lift its head and then dies. Dogs, of course, don't respond to disguises, even less rhetoric.

For too long European leaders have invested in reading signals and managing their relationship with Washington. What they have got in return has been style rather than substance. The question they should be putting to Rubio is not whether he cares about the western alliance but what in his house counts as the bow, the bed and the dog. What do the Americans understand as a credible commitment? How many US troops will remain on the continent and under whose command? What happens to support for Ukraine the day after an armistice? Does Article 5 of the Nato treaty mean what it says before it became a subject of negotiation?

A secretary of state who chooses to address Europeans from the Pnyx — the hill where Athenian citizens voted, not where allies were received — presumably understands that it will be his courage to stand up for his convictions now that will define whether Europeans trust him tomorrow. Real courage in Trump's America is to dare to stand up for allies even when the gods — or the president — are ready to throw them under the bus.

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