

A Parting of the Ways

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There is no doubt that U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's [contribution to the Munich Security Conference](#) was like a bucket of cold water. He began by claiming that what he wanted was to talk about shared values but he did nothing of the kind.

Vance treated delegates like recalcitrant schoolchildren and lectured them on free speech. However, he got to the point and declared that in Washington there is a new sheriff in town and talked of burden sharing, that the Europeans should step up while America focuses on areas of the world that are in great danger (read: China and Taiwan).

There was no mention of the threat from Russia and Ukraine but instead Vance asked a rhetorical question. He claimed he had heard a lot about what Europeans need to defend themselves from but instead he asked, what exactly is it you're defending yourselves for?

Vance rounded off his harangue by mentioning the threat from mass migration and put in a pitch for political leaders e.g. the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany), who promise to put an end to out-of-control migration. Pointedly, Vance [preferred to meet with AfD leader Alice Weidel](#) rather than German chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Two days earlier Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth had [made it clear to the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in Brussels](#) that returning to Ukraine's pre-2014 borders is an unrealistic objective. Further, Hegseth ruled out the prospect of Ukraine's NATO membership and insisted that any security guarantee should be backed by capable European and non-European troops.

If these troops are deployed as peacekeepers to Ukraine at any point, they should be deployed as part of a non-NATO mission. And they should not be covered under Article 5.

So there was no need for Vance to labour the point. However, what sticks in the gullet of most European leaders is the mandatory fashion in which President Trump has without consultation with either the EU or the UK, not to forget Ukraine, decided to open bilateral talks with Russia to put an end to the war. In European ears this smacks both of the Munich conference in 1938, where Czechoslovakia was excluded, or the Yalta conference in 1945, where Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin divvied up post-war Europe.

But Henry Kissinger had a point when he asked, who do I call if I want to speak to Europe? In [a panel discussion with Polish foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski](#), he explained, "It isn't really absolutely clear when America wants to deal with Europe who exactly the authorized voice of Europe would be. Most importantly, on many issues, there doesn't really exist a unified European strategic approach."

The same disarray was apparent in [the crisis meeting held in Paris](#) when a number of European leaders intended to reach a consensus on President Trump's peace talks with Russia. Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain were reluctant to send peacekeeping forces to Ukraine. German chancellor Olaf Scholz thought the discussion "highly inappropriate" and said he was "a little irritated."

UK prime minister Keir Starmer stated he was prepared to consider committing British forces on the ground but insisted a US security guarantee was the only effective way to deter Russia from attacking Ukraine again.

J.D. Vance in Munich also said that what he worried about was the threat from within, the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values, values shared with the United States of America. However, whatever Vance meant by the threat from within is different from how it is understood in Europe.

In July a far-right group that called itself [Patriots for Europe](#) was created in the European Parliament and recently held its first summit in Madrid. This movement was headed by Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban and Marine Le Pen, leader of France's Rassemblement National. Under the slogan "Make Europe Great Again", this includes Santiago Abascal, leader of the Spanish Vox party, Geert Wilders from the Netherlands, Matteo Salvini, the Italian vice president, and the Austrian Freedom Party.

And then there is the issue of Muslim immigration, which has caused turmoil in a number of European countries.

The fundamental values shared both by Europe and the USA are enshrined in [the NATO treaty](#), founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. Member states also express their resolve to unite their efforts for common defence and for the preservation of peace and security.

A number of member states are remiss in their commitment to defense spending as 2% of their GDP, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine has acted as [a wake up call](#). Nevertheless, there is the fear that the USA under the Trump administration is on the retreat from the fundamental values proclaimed by Vance.

In 1997 Fareed Zakaria warned about [the rise of illiberal democracy](#), which has since been confirmed by the emergence of leaders like Chávez in Venezuela, Orban in Hungary, Modi in India and Erdogan in Turkey. There is evidence that Trump's America is joining the club.

[Federico Finkelstein](#) claims that populism, which is the hallmark of Trump's rule, in short is an authoritarian form of democracy, and Foreign Affairs gives an alarming account of [the path to American authoritarianism](#).

In *Autocracy, Inc.* Anne Applebaum quotes Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, who shortly after Russia's invasion stated, "This is not about Ukraine at all, but the world order. The current crisis is a fateful, epoch-making moment in modern history. It reflects the battle over what the world order will look like."

The fact that Donald Trump sings from the same hymn sheet as Putin when he calls Zelensky a dictator and blames Ukraine for Russia's invasion does not augur well. If Trump acquiesces to Putin's terms, it will not only be Europe and Ukraine but also the rest of the world that faces hard times ahead.