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‘It’s actions now that count, not words’

Political scientist Stephen Walt on America’s shift toward predatory hegemony and the dangers of short-term strategic thinking

At the Munich Security Conference (MSC), German chancellor Friedrich Merz talked about Russia and China as driving the return of great power politics, while the US was merely reacting to this development. You, however, have called the US under Trump a predatory hegemon – why?

The difference between a predatory hegemon and a regular great power is that a predatory hegemon is trying to extract concessions and asymmetric benefits from everyone. All great powers are predatory to some degree, but usually it’s towards your rivals. You always try to get the better of your adversaries, to make sure that even when you’re cooperating with them, e.g., on arms control, you get a deal that’s in your favour. It’s a competitive relationship. But smart great powers don’t behave that way most of the time towards their partners. They’re looking for mutual benefits. What’s unusual about Trump, in his second term in particular, is that he’s acting in a predatory fashion towards long-standing partners and allies, including countries like Canada, Denmark, and Germany, and some of our Asian partners.

Friedrich Merz talked about a rift in the transatlantic relationship and distanced himself clearly from the MAGA worldview of unfettered freedom of speech and protectionism. He embraced multilateralism and expressed his desire to ‘repair and revive’ transatlantic relations as a partnership of values. Any chance of that happening?

The only possibility of that happening is for Europeans and other like-minded countries to work very closely together. But the instinct of many American allies has been to accommodate and appease the Trump administration, to flatter the President in various rather demeaning ways and make concessions in the hope that that will make him a friend. This reinforces a general sense of contempt that many in the Trump administration have for Europe. They want to take advantage of the collective action problem: it’s hard to get countries

to get together to push back against the US. They want to play divide and rule. Trump hates the EU, which he has described as an enemy, because it has comparable weight to that of the US. He wants to deal one-on-one with everyone, because that maximises American leverage. The only way you're going to get this administration to take Europe seriously is to speak with one voice as much as possible and indicate that there are things that you simply won't do, regardless of US pressure. This is what Prime Minister Carney of Canada was saying at Davos: we didn't start this fight, but if the US picks these quarrels with us over and over again and won't stick to any agreements, then we have to protect our interests and our values by working together with those we can rely on. I hope that that is where Chancellor Merz is trying to take Germany: we'd like to continue to cooperate, but that has to be a two-way street.

Balancing, instead of bandwagoning. Will this have to include partnerships with countries whose values we do not completely share?

That's going to be part of this emerging multipolar order. The US is very important but it's not the only game in town. The EU trade deals with India and Mercosur, Carney's and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's trade talks in Beijing are signs that countries want to reduce their economic dependence on the US as much as they reasonably can. The first preference would be to deepen ties with countries who have similar values. But countries will also do business with those that they disagree with on various values and political questions when they feel they have to and when the benefits are great enough. In fact, the US has a rather flexible attitude in this respect.

The post WW II global institutions and networks that the US helped to create are beneficial to its status as a great power. You argue that their demise ultimately weakens the predatory hegemon. Any chance that the US will go back to being a supporter of those international institutions?

I don't think we're going to turn the clock back to the world of the 1990s or even 2015, or even to Biden's policies. But one of the reasons the US can act like a predator today is that we built up an overlapping set of security and economic relationships over 75 or 80 years: The military protection that the US provides its allies, America's dominant rule of the dollar in international finance, US control of a lot of the nodes by which international finance takes place, and a set of rules-based trading relationships. But countries are beginning to diversify away from the dollar, not in a dramatic or big way, but reducing their dependence because they're not as confident that the dollar is as reliable a store of value, and that buying T-bills is the safest

investment you can make. This trend will accelerate over time.

There is something of a paradox here. If the US keeps trying to extract concessions by threatening to withdraw from NATO, but it never actually does, sooner or later people will realise that it's just a bluff. On the other hand, if the US were to leave NATO, then they've lost all that leverage. It is a strategy that can work in the short term, but it contains the seeds of its own destruction. The longer you do it, the more incentive you give others to start reducing their dependence by cooperating with each other. Also, even if the US is no longer committed to global institutions or rules, the international system still needs some rules and others are going to write them. While the US is closing embassies and withdrawing from over 60 international organisations, China is right there, and will end up forging rules, both formal and informal, that others are going to follow.

Where is Europe in all this?

Europe has all the latent power potential it needs to deal with the possible threat from Russia. It is in Europe's interest to assemble those capabilities in an effective military package that doesn't depend very much, if at all, on the US. That is a project of five to ten years duration, but easily doable as Europe is much wealthier than Russia. The Trump administration is rightly or wrongly forcing Europe to essentially make that choice. But there's a difference between having a new division of labour between Europe and the US while remaining partners, and a situation where you no longer are regarded as an ally but as a potential threat. A recent poll shows that 51 per cent of Europeans now regard the US as an enemy.

At the MSC, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio delivered a kind of 'good cop' speech, much less confrontational than JD Vance last year. Still, while he received standing ovations, possibly due to audience's relief more than to the speech's substance, he clearly articulated a different vision than Chancellor Merz. What did you make of it?

Trump picked Rubio to be Secretary of State because he was a mainstream senator who would do what he was told. He's been very obedient, some of what he's been doing or saying is not what he believed before he had the job. But, yes, Rubio was less confrontational than Vance was, and less confrontational than Trump was at Davos. He said Europe and the US 'belong together,' but his reason, that they share similar cultural and religious roots rather than common strategic interests, echoed Vance and others' view of Europe as facing 'civilizational decline.' So, the speech was a mixed performance.

More importantly, we are now at a point where Europeans should not take words all that seriously. They should be focusing on actions. What are the American policies, and does the US stick to them? If the issue of Greenland disappears and never comes back, then Europeans have some reason to say, Okay, that was just an episode. But if six months later, there's another round of US pressure on Denmark and NATO over Greenland, it's a sign that the words meant nothing. There are enough reasons for Europeans to be wary. Listen to the speeches, take them seriously, but it's actions now that count, not words.

The lack of support for Ukraine and US demands for compensation fit very well with your analysis of a predatory hegemony. Overall, what can Volodymyr Zelensky take away from Munich? In the context of a disintegrating international order, can anything still come out of conferences like this?

President Zelensky is probably not too happy. Although he got reassuring words from European leaders, Rubio didn't pledge more backing from the US and didn't offer much criticism of Russia. As for the future of conferences such as these, it depends almost entirely on whether the US wants Europe to be an equal partner in addressing major security issues, or whether it wants to exacerbate and exploit European divisions. If it is the latter, future Munich conferences will focus less on transatlantic ties and more on what Europeans must do together.

This interview was conducted by Thomas Greven.



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