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Forewarned is forearmed

Trump represents a longstanding yearning for authoritarianism in America

Donald Trump's vow to encourage Russia to do 'whatever the hell they want' to NATO isn't a threat. It's a promise. Speaking on Wednesday at a campaign rally in South Carolina, Trump didn't back down from his previous comments. Instead, he doubled down on them, stating that he would not 'protect' NATO countries if they 'don't pay the bills.'

Given that Trump has not exactly been known for paying his own bills, it's fair to wonder how much indignation he really is mustering for the failure of a number of NATO members to spend more on their military defence. Instead, the issue of military spending serves as a convenient pretext for Trump to prepare the ground for eviscerating America's security guarantees to Europe. In December 2023, Congress passed legislation preventing a president from exiting NATO without its approval, but Trump is already undermining the organisation. As president, he wouldn't have to exit officially. He could simply announce that as far as he is concerned, Article V is null and void. His dream isn't to bolster relations with Europe and fend off Putin's ambition. It's to say *Auf Wiedersehen* – or is it *Dosvedanya*? – to Europe.

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Still, there are some impediments to be overcome. The Putin wing of the Republican party is not yet dominant. As Trump and his sidekick Tucker Carlson (fresh from his mission to Moscow) cosy up to Putin, a rear-guard of hawkish Republicans is seeking to outflank the 'America First' wing of the party. The announcement by Congressman Michael R. Turner, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, that Russia's development of space weapons technology poses a 'serious national security threat' has upended Washington. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will brief congressional leaders on Thursday.

Meanwhile, House Speaker Mike Johnson, who is desperately trying to avoid a vote on Ukraine aid, has put the House of Representatives on recess until 28 February. His hope is that the alarm over Russian ambitions to place nuclear weapons in space to take out American satellite systems will have faded by then — and any impulse to assist Ukraine in its struggle against Putin's murderous invasion along with it. 'Ironically,' writes David Ignatius in the *Washington Post*, 'it's the Ukraine conflict — and the role of space systems in helping Kyiv survive the initial Russian onslaught in 2022 — that likely triggered Russia to rush development of its new space tactics.'

A credo as old as time

Whether this latest development will be enough to create second thoughts among the Make America Great Again faction of the Republican party is dubious. Senator Lindsey Graham, a quondam hawk, is now refusing to visit the Munich Security Conference. Other Senators such as J.D. Vance, a possible vice-president on the 2024 Trump ticket, have nothing but scorn and contempt for Ukraine. As a minority of Republican senators prepared to approve aid to Ukraine, he warned in the *American Conservative* magazine about 'the Republican plot against Donald Trump' – as though simply voting to assist Ukraine were tantamount to a conspiracy.

The true plotters, of course, are Trump and his camarilla. It is Trump who has been threatening House Republicans should they vote for Ukraine aid. And it is Trump who is intent on withdrawing not only from NATO, but also from America's Asian alliances. He wants to allow Russia and China to control their own spheres of influence so long as he can focus on Central and South America, where he wants to halt immigration into the United States. A fortress America. In the Trump vision, authoritarian strongmen would maintain order — he among them.

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For all the shock and awe that Trump is creating abroad and at home, none of this is new. His credo is an old one. After World War I, a wave of revisionism emerged in which politicians, intellectuals and journalists on the right decried wars for democracy and called for a return to splendid isolationism. By the 1930s, sympathy for Hitler, a foe of communism who could create order in Eastern and Central

Middle East and Africa.

Europe, became widespread among Republicans, including former President Herbert Hoover who met with Hitler in 1938, on the eve of the Anschluss, and who warned President Franklin D. Roosevelt to stop demonising the Third Reich. At the 1940 Republican presidential convention, Hoover declared, 'there must be an end to provocative speech by our officials.'

Others such as the aviator and leader of the America First movement Charles Lindbergh decried military aid to Great Britain, which they said was a lost cause, much as Tucker Carlson and others claim that Ukraine is doomed to lose against Russia. The America First contingent of yesteryear wanted to make common cause with Nazi Germany, a bulwark against Soviet communism. Today's 'America First' adherents idolise not only Putin but also Hungary's Viktor Orbán as defenders of traditional family values and foes of immigration from the Middle East and Africa. They have become political pilgrims, seeing in foreign societies ones superior to their own. They are, in short, the new fellow-travellers of autocracy.

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Perhaps no one has demonstrated more consistency over the decades in badmouthing democracies and praising autocracy than Trump. In 1990 in an interview with *Playboy* magazine for example, he sketched out his *Weltanschauung*: 'we Americans are laughed at around the world for losing a hundred and fifty billion dollars year after year, for defending wealthy nations for nothing, nations that would be wiped out in about 15 minutes if it weren't for us. Our 'allies' are making billions screwing us.' His targets, then and now, were Germany and Japan — predatory mercantile economies that were ravaging a defenceless and innocent America. Trump knew better. It was time to hit back.

Decades later, he has triumphed, returning the Republican party to its old traditions of nativism and isolationism. No one has grasped the menace he presents better than President Biden who correctly called Trump's latest remarks about NATO 'shameful' and 'dangerous.' Forewarned is forearmed: Trump represents a longstanding yearning for authoritarianism in America that can only be suppressed, not eliminated.

His palpable yearning to become an autocrat and his veneration of foreign tyrants puts American ideals, American independence, and the American people last, not first.



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