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‘He who comes too late is punished by life’

Rather than lamenting the perceived irrationality, corruption or indecency of Team Trump, Europeans must recognise what is truly at stake

At the Munich Security Conference, two starkly opposing visions of order collided. Future historians may mark this moment as the definitive end of the US-led liberal world order and the point when the erosion of liberal hegemony within Western democracies became undeniable.

US Vice President JD Vance delivered two key messages to Europeans. First, America is fundamentally reshaping its governance, and its allies are expected to follow. Second, if Europe does not undertake this transformation, the shared values that underpin the transatlantic partnership will vanish- along with America’s security guarantee.

The European reactions were revealing. Many commentators failed to grasp the epochal nature of the American’s statement, dismissing it as outrageous interference — coming from a Trump administration official, and therefore ‘right-wing’ and ‘evil.’ Cynics might argue this ignores the imperial logic that views vassals’ affairs as inherently internal matters. This mindset was evident when Trump referred to Canada’s Prime Minister as a ‘Governor,’ as if administering an American province.

More astute observers recognised this not as a discussion among equals but as an ultimatum from a patron: fall in line or face Russian aggression alone. Some even speculated that America’s true aim was to dismantle the European Union, paving the way for US oligarchs to have free reign in a fractured Europe of weak mini-states.

Sketching the outlines of the new world order

There is little to add to this geopolitical reading. The US is openly questioning the transatlantic alliance, the main pillar of (Western)

Europe's security for over 80 years. Even if renewed — its very uncertainty already weakening deterrence — Europeans will be expected to shoulder the primary burden of conventional, and possibly even nuclear, defence of their continent. Meanwhile, the US will shift its full focus to its hegemonic struggle with China.

Globally, the US is no longer willing to serve as the guarantor of multilateral institutions and international law once framed as the 'rules-based liberal world order.' This not only foreshadows the paralysis of the United Nations system but also calls into question the openness of the world economy. The hegemon is, in effect, declaring obsolete the very order it once built.

For Europeans, with their miniature armies deliberately intertwined with the American military machine and their export economies deeply embedded in global supply chains, the foundations of their security and prosperity are shifting dramatically.

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What remains largely unexplored is the clash between two radically different visions of order — both globally and domestically. While many are only beginning to grasp the end of the liberal order, few truly understand what is meant to replace it. It is no surprise, then, that many Europeans and progressive Americans struggle to interpret the US government's message — we have yet to learn the vocabulary of this emerging order.

In Europe, the American president's proposals to annex Greenland, Panama, and Canada were largely dismissed as bizarre provocations. Yet beneath them lay the potential revival of the Monroe Doctrine — a strategic retreat into the Western Hemisphere, where US dominance remains unchallenged. If coupled with a willingness to 'sell' Ukraine to Russia, this signals a return to spheres-of-influence thinking, long familiar to Europe but side-lined during America's unipolar moment. It is even conceivable that Washington could reach an understanding with its great-power rivals, China and Russia, agreeing to stay out of each other's respective spheres of influence. If so, the fate of Taiwan would be as sealed as that of the Caucasus.

Europeans cry betrayal, but it is worth recalling that they once stabilized their own multipolar order through spheres of influence and agreements — successfully so in the 19th century. Whenever a single power pursued hegemony by force, the result was catastrophic world wars.

The need to think beyond

Today, American neoconservatives believe they can win a war against nuclear-armed China. Notably, Trump withdrew personal protection from their most prominent figures, effectively side-lining them politically. The US government now seems to recognise that victory in a military conflict with China is unattainable — eliminating any path back to a unipolar world. The true turning point, then, lies in the shifting global balance of power. The Americans have simply accepted this reality faster than the Europeans.

It takes no prophecy to predict that Europe will soon abandon its defiant 'now more than ever' stance on Ukraine. Likewise, efforts to impose Western values on the world are likely headed for the dustbin of history. If Europe wishes to avoid becoming a mere pawn in great-power competition, it must push forward with bold internal reform. Only through a newly negotiated social contract — one that fairly distributes immense costs — can it build the military and political strength needed for true self-assertion.

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The restructuring of America's internal governance system is just as radical, with Trump wielding the Musk-style sledgehammer. In Europe, the common view is that he seeks revenge against the so-called Deep State or even aims to reshape the US into an authoritarian regime — perhaps even a monarchy. Indeed, some within his administration believe that Western liberal democracies can no longer compete with China's state capitalism and envision a new form of technocratic rule. Trump's reliance on executive orders reflects this mindset.

Yet European critics are too quick to dismiss the US Vice President's call for free speech and respect for the will of voters as merely 'right-wing' and 'intrusive.' Even within Europe, a growing number of citizens decry these trends and are increasingly vocal in demanding change.

More importantly, this criticism overlooks that governance systems have always evolved in response to new challenges and technological shifts. The French Revolution and the Prussian reforms were different manifestations of this process. Today, the bureaucratic states built in the late 19th century are visibly struggling to manage the complexities of a globalised, networked, and rapidly accelerating world. This is especially

evident in their response to global flows — whether pandemics, migration, data, or financial crises — that ripple across the world at unprecedented speed.

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Silicon Valley's tech elite, led by Elon Musk, envisions a solution: replacing sluggish, analog bureaucracies — often criticized for inefficiency and corruption — with AI-driven governance that is more efficient, competent, and responsive. In short, in its systemic competition with China, the US is betting on an operating system upgrade.

Yanis Varoufakis rightly warns that these developments are not merely benign public services - just as the world's richest man is not cutting aid for millions of starving children out of selflessness. Beneath it lies the oligarchs' vision of embedding techno-feudalism within the institutional framework of the American state. The goal is a hyper-efficient technocracy, insulated from democratic oversight, dedicated solely to sustaining the fiscal and material infrastructure of digital capitalism.

This is why constant warnings about a return to historical fascism may be unhelpful — such comparisons overlook that the transformation unfolding today is uniquely shaped by our time.

Other 20th-century labels don't fit either.

What will come remains uncertain

Elon Musk's dismantling of old bureaucracies is by no means a return to neoliberalism — after all, it cannot keep up in the geoeconomic competition with Chinese state capitalism. Elon Musk's dismantling of old bureaucracies is not a return to neoliberalism, as that model struggles to compete with Chinese state capitalism. Likewise, JD Vance's rhetoric on free speech and respect for the will of the voters does not reflect a truly 'liberal' mindset when the Trump administration simultaneously challenges the rule of law and the separation of powers.

However, the power struggles within this new formation are far from settled. The public feud between Steve Bannon, the intellectual force behind the MAGA movement, and Elon Musk, the tech overlord, gave us a glimpse into brutal battles raging within the Trump coalition. As long

as the goal is to dismantle the old order, this alliance holds. But in a striking interview with the The New York Times, Bannon made it clear: if the tech oligarchs attempt to institutionalise techno-feudalism, he will wage war against them. From the geostrategic orientation and internal redistribution of the American empire, nearly everything is fundamentally contested. Which factions — and which ideological models — will ultimately prevail remains entirely uncertain.

We Europeans must urgently learn to decode what these power struggles are actually about. Interpreting them through the lens of outdated liberalism is futile. Rather than lamenting the perceived irrationality, corruption, or indecency of Team Trump, Europeans must recognise what is truly at stake — and use their rapidly shrinking influence to protect their own interests. One thing is certain: we have already entered the next epoch of world history. If we fail to grasp its dynamics quickly, we risk being crushed by it. As Gorbachev famously warned, 'He who comes too late is punished by life.'



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