

MAGA's Approach to Europe Hasn't Change

di Mark Leonard

Although the speech that US Secretary of State Marco Rubio delivered to this year's Munich Security Conference was softer in tone than the one that Vice President JD Vance gave last year, the Europe he celebrated was that of the ethno-nationalist far right. Europe is on its own, and it must start acting like it.

MUNICH – At last year's Munich Security Conference, JD Vance gave a performance worthy of his boss in both its theatricality and its virality. Not only did he break the norm of transatlantic comity and forego the usual bromides that previous US vice presidents brought to the MSC; he also snubbed his German guests by meeting with Alice Weidel of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) instead of then-Chancellor [Olaf Scholz](#).

By contrast, the American tone was much more conciliatory this year. But though the optics have changed, the core message has not. The US delegation's two big interventions, by Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Under Secretary of "War" (Defense) Elbridge A. Colby, displayed the two sides of the Trumpian coin. And each, in its own way, underscored the long-term challenge facing Europeans.

On the surface, Colby's remarks seemed to pose the more direct challenge. A hard-nosed realist, he is America's third-highest-ranking defense official, with responsibilities that include deciding where and how US troops are deployed. In a question-and-answer session that I mediated, he argued that Europeans and Americans no longer have any shared values to stand on. For him, the highlight of the conference was that he had heard the term "rules-based order" mentioned only twice.

Colby made clear that although the US remains committed to its extended nuclear deterrent, the Trump administration's goal is for Europeans to assume responsibility

for the conventional defense of the continent. He then praised the German and Polish governments for massively scaling up their military spending, and [addressed](#) Trump's handling of the Ukraine negotiations, threats against Greenland, and other sources of transatlantic tension. "A certain degree of anxiety is salutary," he argued. "If you had a near-death experience ... you change your diet, you don't want to be too reassured ... you want to make sure you take your medicine, exercise."

Whereas Colby spoke with conviction about the need to make Europeans feel uncomfortable, Rubio [wooded](#) his audience with paeans to the unbreakable civilizational links between Europe and the US. In a strange inversion of NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte's [reference](#) to Trump as "daddy," Rubio acknowledged that America "will always be a child of Europe."

He then expanded at length on Europe's contributions to a shared Western heritage, with references to Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World, the frontier spirit exhibited by Scots-Irish settlers in America, the Christian faith, and even German beer. (Not surprisingly for a member of the Trump administration, his account pointedly failed to mention the atrocities committed against Native Americans or any other unsavory elements of European imperialism.)

After this brief historical tour, Rubio promised the audience that America would never give up on Europe. The transatlantic relationship, he explained, reflects "the deepest bonds that nations [can] share." That takeaway met with a standing ovation. Speaking immediately after Rubio, the chairman of the conference, [Wolfgang Ischinger](#), thanked America's top diplomat for his "[reassuring](#)" message. And soon thereafter, European Commission President [Ursula von der Leyen](#) also alluded positively to his speech in her own remarks.

In fact, Rubio's message was more menacing to European governments than Colby's. The Europe he celebrated is not today's European Union – the post-Enlightenment Europe that UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, French President [Emmanuel Macron](#), Chancellor [Friedrich Merz](#), and von der Leyen all invoked. Rather, he had in mind the ethno-nationalist Europe that one hears about from ascendant far-right populist

parties. According to the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, those are the forces that can count on America's backing.

While Colby urged Europeans to accept the end of the post-Cold War order and come to terms with the fact that 340 million Americans will not underwrite the security of 500 million Europeans in perpetuity, he also made it clear that a grown-up, self-sufficient Europe could remain a close US ally. The subtext of Rubio's message was far more sinister. He seems to envision a new civilizational Atlanticism in which US respect for Europe's sovereignty is contingent on European governments' ideological proximity to MAGA and the far right. Like Vance, he is implicitly advocating regime change.

Although the choice of messengers may have surprised long-time MAGA watchers, both Colby and Rubio are faithful servants of Trump. Their contribution is to add a veneer of intellectual heft and coherence to the president's more instinctive approach. That said, both will continue to influence Republican foreign policy long after Trump has left the stage – especially Rubio, who obviously has presidential ambitions. Europeans should listen carefully to both. Rather than being fooled by Rubio's siren song, they should let Colby's shock therapy have its effect.