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## **Merz should seize the opportunity to push back against Trump**

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Spare a thought for Germany's Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who this week braved the gilded wrestling ring that is the Trumpian Oval Office to talk sense about trade and Ukraine and faced a "peace president" flush with triumph for having unleashed Armageddon on the Iranian mullahs.

Get berated and thrown out; sink into the upholstery and think of home; imitate the host's cabinet with oleaginous flattery: most of the options available to foreign leaders for surviving a global live broadcast with the boss in the White House are unappealing. And the chancellor had recently drawn some brightred lines. He joined European neighbours in standing up to Trump over his predatory claims on Greenland. At the Munich Security Conference last month, he had warned that US claims to leadership might be "forfeited" and that "the Maga movement's culture war is not one we share". But it appears Trump sees a kindred spirit in Merz, despite a nine-year age gap and, er, differences in temperament. Both formed their world views in the 1970s and 80s. The German, too, has had an extended career in business. Most importantly for the president, perhaps, both have vanquished a mortal political foe through a seemingly unlikely electoral resurrection.

The chancellor made a point of affirming that he was on the "same page" with the US and Israel about the strikes on Tehran; US planes use bases in Germany. The president referred to Merz as "a very, very successful man . . . a friend . . . an excellent leader". He even slapped his visitor's knee jovially. Twice.

A certain level-headedness stands Merz in good stead in these moments. It also helps not to be the former chancellor against whom Trump still nurses an epic grudge. As he put it: "I had my differences with Angela [Merkel] . . . we have a man sitting on my right that is, I think, pretty much the opposite". Merz, who largely owes a 20-year hiatus from politics to Merkel, briefly permitted himself a tiny smile.

But beyond pleasantries, Merz didn't achieve much. On Ukraine, where Berlin would like to see greater pressure on Moscow and more support for Kyiv, Trump persists in blaming both sides.

Merz also got no traction on tariffs, where Europeans are desperate for stability. The chancellor's discreet query about a "day after" perspective for Iran was later answered by Trump when a journalist asked about Iran's future leadership: "Most of the people we had in mind are dead." So much for that.

The chancellor's main mis-step was to push back against the president's ire over Spain's refusal to let the US use its military bases, and to listen impassively to a similar tirade ("not Winston Churchill") about British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer. A rather subdued Merz was at pains afterwards to assure reporters that he had stood up for his Nato allies in private; criticism went viral in Europe nonetheless.

In truth, the German leader who, as opposition head, generally gave the impression that governing couldn't be that hard, has been discovering that it actually is. Perhaps even more so than for any of his predecessors.

He faces flagging personal polls, a struggling economy, a surging hard right, the burden of being the main pillar of Ukrainian support against a relentless Russian foe, a China attempting to pull Germany into its camp while at the same time flattening its industrial mainstays, an utterly disruptive American ally and now the prospect of a conflagration in the Middle East whose flames are already licking at the periphery of Europe. It's a lot.

Much now depends on whether Merz resigns himself to falling in line with that perennial tradition of German chancellors — defining the government's remit as one shaped primarily by constraints. Alternatively, he could grasp that this era of great power revisionism is a historic opportunity to reshape the European security order. It would be a heroic undertaking — more economic and energy integration, public-private lender funding to put to work the huge sums sleeping in European banks — but it's possible.

Meanwhile, he has at least one small source of comfort. Markus Frohnmaier, one of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) bridge-builders to Maga, is visiting Washington this week for a nationalist conference. Alas, the "civilizational allies" celebrated by JD Vance and more recently Marco Rubio might not get so much love in wartime Washington — the AfD's leaders are against the strikes. That rather limits the risk of a high-level welcome by the Trump administration.