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An iron fist in a velvet glove: Rubio's message on US-Europe ties

Despite the softer tone of his Munich speech, the harsh reality for Europe is that it has become a tiresome burden for the US and has very limited strategic options.

Joseph Chinyong Liow

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at a press conference in Slovakia on Feb 15. While relief and rounds of applause may have swept the hall after Mr Rubio's speech at the Munich Security Conference, it is telling that after his departure from Germany, his next destinations were Hungary and Slovakia – both headed by populist leaders more aligned with Moscow than their fellow European Union leaders. PHOTO: REUTERS

Henry Kissinger, the late US secretary of state, once reportedly remarked that "to be an enemy of America would be dangerous, to be a friend would be fatal".

That observation, while made in the context of America's allies in the Vietnam War, has gained fresh resonance at the recently concluded Munich Security Conference, where current Secretary of State Marco Rubio artfully delivered a message that was, to all intents and purposes, an iron fist in a velvet glove.

The year 2025 had been an especially difficult one for Europe's relationship with the US. Trade tensions escalated amid a slew of tariffs and counter-tariffs. At the Munich conference that year, US Vice-President J.D. Vance warned Europe it was essentially on the path to civilisational self-destruction – a view that turned up again in the latest edition of the US National Security Strategy.

Against the backdrop of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine, the Trump administration added to the anxiety of its European allies with its questioning of NATO commitments. As the continent struggled to cope with its profound sense of abandonment, President Donald Trump did what was hitherto thought unimaginable – he laid claim to territory of a NATO ally, and threatened to use force if necessary to secure Greenland.

While Mr Trump subsequently walked back his provocative remarks, the damage was already done. As the Malay idiom cautions: "kerana mulut, badan binasa" (because of the mouth, the body perishes).

It is against this series of shocks and setbacks to the transatlantic alliance that Mr Rubio's speech at Munich must be understood and processed.

THE IMMIGRATION IMBROGLIO

At first glance, Mr Rubio's words appeared carefully curated to reassure rattled allies rather than cause further distress. He spoke affectionately about how the US and Europe "belong together", are "connected spiritually", and are "part of one civilisation – Western civilisation".

Moreover, to the extent that President Trump "demands seriousness and reciprocity from our friends in Europe", it is only because "we care deeply. We care deeply about your future and ours".

Yet for all the emollient proclamations about shared bonds of Western civilisation, Mr Rubio's message was clear: it was in essence about power, and a reminder of who holds all the cards. The secretary was there not to repair a relationship so much as to reinforce a point. Principles that once bound the US and Europe – the so-called rules-based order and expansion of global trade – no longer hold any currency in the eyes of this administration.

Instead, the agenda is to make America great again, and insofar as ties to Europe are concerned, it is about making the West great again.

Indeed, while the US may be, in Mr Rubio's words, a "child of Europe", it is the child that is now dictating the terms of the relationship to the "parent". The bone of contention here is immigration, and it is through this lens that the Trump administration is projecting its domestic preoccupations onto foreign policy.

In the eyes of the MAGA crowd that propelled Mr Trump twice to the White House, it is unbridled immigration that has eroded the foundations of American cultural identity and weakened US power. This view catalysed a hardline stance towards immigration which President Trump pursued in his second term.

Mass deportations became policy priority, backed by institutional levers such as the Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Department of Homeland Security. Concomitantly, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents have raided businesses, religious buildings, university campuses and even private homes in their search for illegals.

The MAGA world view may grate on progressive minds, but the inconvenient truth is that it speaks to a long tradition of nativism that has always been an undercurrent in American history, from racism against Chinese workers who built the American railway system in the 1870s to the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 restricting immigrants by nationality, and concern over unauthorised Mexican immigration after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the 1990s.

It is on this score that the Trump administration views with disdain the immigration policies pursued by its "cherished allies and oldest friends" in Europe and makes common cause with its raft of xenophobic right-wing parties for whom this world view resonates. The growing popularity of these parties across Europe, particularly in France, Germany and the UK, suggests further that this sentiment will not dissipate any time soon.

THE REALITY OF POWER POLITICS

Yet, as important as the cultural and civilisational underpinnings are to the transatlantic relationship, it would be a mistake to think these to be the chief drivers of President Trump's foreign policy towards its European allies.

Ultimately then, what Secretary of State Rubio's Munich speech did was to cast in sharper relief the existential dilemma confronting Europe: one rooted not so much in civilisational angst but its severely limited strategic options. As the old order fades before its eyes, Europe cannot but find itself at a crossroads. Decades of de-emphasising defence have placed its security at serious risk as new geopolitical winds sweep across the continent. The illusion that the relationship with the US was somehow an equal one has been all but shattered.

The harsh reality is that this relationship has become ruthlessly transactional, unhindered by ideological, cultural, historical – or indeed, civilisational – baggage. Moreover, Mr Trump is not just leveraging American power at will, he is doing so with little interest in dialogue and discussions with his European allies.

Consequently, Europe finds itself left on the sidelines in negotiations to end the Russia-Ukraine war, and blindsided by Mr Trump's bid to commandeer Greenland.

Further baked into Secretary of State Rubio's remarks was a thinly veiled critique of Europe's approach to the handling of its own security: "We increasingly outsourced our sovereignty to international institutions while many nations invested in massive welfare states at the cost of maintaining the ability to defend themselves. This, even as other countries have invested in the most rapid military build-up in all of human history and have not hesitated to use hard power to pursue their own interests."

This view cast harsh light on what has been a rude awakening for Europeans – by subcontracting their security to the US, they have rendered themselves acutely vulnerable now, in the face of Russian assertiveness and American re-evaluation of the terms of its transatlantic commitments.

THE DIFFICULT ROAD AHEAD

This is not to say that the US will abandon NATO. This would be a step too far even for President Trump. At any rate, there are still transatlanticists in his inner circle, and they will be able to persuade him from taking things to the extreme.

But the nature of the alliance relationship is poised for a fundamental change. The Trump administration views European security less as a rewarding partnership and more of a tiresome burden. Pressure is piled on European allies to do much more in order to look after their own backyard, all the more so in the face of Russian aggression at their doorstep.

Relief and rounds of applause may have swept the hall after Mr Rubio's speech at the Munich Security Conference, but it is telling that after his departure from Germany, his next destinations were Hungary and Slovakia – both headed by populist leaders more aligned with Moscow than their fellow European Union leaders. At his meeting with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Mr Rubio hailed a "golden age" of US relations with Hungary.

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Looking ahead, managing its US allies is going to be a far more complex proposition as American appetite to underwrite European security continues to diminish. This state of affairs should hasten European efforts to build credible capabilities for deterrence.

But this will take time and a monumental shift of mindsets, not to mention a degree of political cohesion that is currently elusive.

In the meantime, America's European allies really have little choice other than to maintain the orientation towards Washington with all its uncertainties. As Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen observed in Munich, it is doubtful that Mr Trump had given up his aggressive pursuit of Greenland.

"Unfortunately, I think the desire is the same," she said.

Having to adjust to these new, disconcerting realities is a bitter pill for Europe to swallow but swallow it, it must.

• Joseph Chinyong Liow is dean and Wang Gungwu professor in East Asian Affairs, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

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