

# It's time to abandon neutrality and send pilots, not pillows, to Ukraine

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**D**onald Trump was castigated by Europe's press, politicians and public during his first term as US president for making remarks like this: "We cannot continue to pay for the military protection of Europe while Nato states are not paying their fair share." However, that statement wasn't made by Trump, it was delivered over 60 years ago by President John F Kennedy.

Following decades of European foot-dragging over paying for its own defence, for the Trump administration, the whole issue has become bound up with the war in Ukraine.

Throughout the election campaign, Trump made it very clear he wanted the war in Ukraine to end — and fast. America's European allies and most media commentators simply failed to receive or accept that message.

In trying to understand Trump, the general rule is to take him seriously but not always literally. Otherwise, separating the signal from the noise can become extremely difficult — and there's usually plenty of noise.

In the Oval Office nine days ago, we saw how a failure to make that important distinction can have catastrophic consequences. The fact that Volodymyr Zelensky and his advisers seemed to be oblivious to the seriousness with which the new White House wants to end the war is astonishing. None of which, of course, excuses Trump and JD Vance's ritual humiliation of the Ukrainian president.

It was also a cathartic moment for America's European allies, many of whom reacted with bewilderment. The question now is: will bewilderment translate into European resolve?

For what seems like decades, EU leaders have waxed lyrical about "strategic autonomy" and the need for Europe to become "a superpower". However, none did anything to turn such lofty aspirations into reality. Instead, they continued to indulge

fantasies of so-called "soft power" as their preferred alternative to military re-armament.

The consequences of this flawed strategic thinking have been immense. In Germany, for instance, as defence minister from 2013 to 2019, Ursula von der Leyen oversaw the chronic underfunding of its military. During her time as minister, German soldiers took part in a Nato exercise having to use broomsticks for lack of rifles. Yet even that humiliation did not prompt a military policy course correction.

Many staunch believers in the Atlantic Alliance with the US closed their eyes to the new reality inaugurated by Putin's invasion of Ukraine. After last week, they can no longer ignore the shape of things to come.

**One man who has clearly seen the writing on the wall is the incoming German chancellor, Friedrich Merz.** In a speech last Sunday celebrating his election victory, he said: "My absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that, step by step, we can really achieve independence from the USA ... I never thought I would have to say something like this."

A few days later, he promised fundamental institutional reforms to facilitate the new political direction. "Europe needs to strengthen defence," he said. "The necessary decisions, especially with regard to the federal budget, can no longer be postponed after the recent choices of the American government."

The chancellor-in-waiting is proposing to amend the German constitution to exempt defence spending from fiscal expenditure restrictions, which a leaked document suggests will cost up to €400bn. He also agreed to launch a €500bn infrastructure fund to invest in energy, transportation, and housing.

This injection of almost a €1tn of military and infrastructure expenditure will have transformative Keynes-

ian effects on a previously sluggish economy

Even the EU Commission has had a Damascene conversion regarding defence spending. The same Ursula von der Leyen has announced a "Re-arm Europe Plan" to spend €800bn on air defence, artillery, missiles, and drones. Additionally, the EU will allow its members to spend up to €650bn on defence without triggering the usual budgetary penalties.

Welcome though all this may be, it only resolves Europe's chronic problem of military underspending; it does not remedy Ukraine's acute problem of ammunition shortages. Unfortunately, it is highly unlikely that Europe can compensate for Trump's sudden withdrawal of US military aid to Ukraine; certainly not in the short-term.

Although he professes it is all about "saving lives", the grim reality is that Trump's precipitative actions mean that many more will be lost — Ukrainian lives.

In a matter of weeks, the rules-based international order which held sway for 80 years has been shredded by Trump. What has emerged, or more accurately re-emerged, is a 19th-century great power geopolitical landscape that would be familiar to the likes of UK prime ministers Gladstone, Disraeli, and Salisbury. One in which, as Lord Palmerston put it, states have neither allies nor enemies, just interests.

It looks like Ireland is already accommodating itself to this new reality. The Tánaiste and Defence Minister, Simon Harris, announced a €2.5bn allocation to purchase up to 14 fighter jets — a major step in a new direction. In future, instead of sending the equivalent of pillows to Ukraine — which is what we're doing now — Irish fighter pilots could be patrolling a peacekeeping no-fly zone to protect Ukraine from more Russian aggression.

To do that, however, we might need to finally jettison that shibboleth from a bygone era — neutrality. If that happens, then sooner than we could ever have imagined, an Irish leader might one day stand tall and deliver on Robert Emmet's dream that Ireland should take its full place among the nations of the Earth — meanwhile, we await him or her to step forth.

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