

[Letter from Trump's Washington](#)

Donald Trump Is Breaking Up with Europe

And the war in Iran is helping him do it.



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March 26, 2026



Photograph by Will Oliver / EPA / Bloomberg / Getty

A decade into the Trump era, there are a few rules that should, by now, be common sense for navigating the chaos. One of them, of course, is not to assume that America's most fact-challenged President is telling the truth. The war in Iran "has been won," he said on Tuesday, while at the same time deploying thousands of U.S. troops to the Middle East, presumably to be available in case the war needs winning again. (If only his constant declarations of victory really meant that the conflict was over.) Another is to pay close attention to the things that he is fulminating about late at night or early in the morning. Donald Trump's posts—in all their voluminous, all-caps fervor—represent as close as it gets to the pure id of an American President. Sleepless Trump is the true Trump. He may not always act on

his rants, but they are more than simply a catalogue of what pisses him off. Think of them as a guide to what he would do if he could just do whatever he wanted.

This is why America's friends in Europe—and elsewhere, too, for that matter—ought to take note of what the President said at 6:16 A.M. on Thursday, when he started his day by denouncing not only the ayatollahs of the Islamic Republic but the nations of *NATO* that have so far refused to join the U.S. in its war on Iran. “The U.S.A. NEEDS NOTHING FROM NATO, BUT ‘NEVER FORGET’ THIS VERY IMPORTANT POINT IN TIME!” he wrote on Truth Social. A few hours later, at a Cabinet meeting, he returned to the subject of his faithless allies. “We’re very disappointed with *NATO*, because *NATO* has done absolutely nothing,” he said. “I said twenty-five years ago that *NATO*’s a paper tiger, but more importantly that we’ll come to their rescue, but they’ll never come to ours.” In other words, he was right all along: America never should have trusted those Europeans. Asking for their help [reopening the Strait of Hormuz](#), he added, was a “test.” And they had failed. “I believe that’s going to cost them dearly,” he said. Various thinly veiled threats followed about how “Ukraine’s not our war,” and why, really, the U.S. shouldn’t bother protecting Europe from Russia, given the “big, fat, beautiful ocean” standing between America and [Vladimir Putin](#)’s legions.

I suspect I was not the only person who thought this sounded like the language of a man whose next call might be to his divorce lawyer. It would certainly be bizarre if the breakup finally happened over a war of choice in the Middle East, launched by a President who came into office vowing not to start new wars in the Middle East. (See Rule No. 1.) But, even if no one specifically predicted that a crisis with Iran might lead to the sundering of *NATO*, we can hardly say we weren’t warned: whether Trump follows through or not, he has spent much of the past decade publicly blustering about ending things with *NATO*, looking for pretexts to do so and actively alienating America’s partners in the seventy-six-year-old alliance.

In January, he even [threatened to seize Greenland by force from Denmark](#), a threat so shocking—even if it shouldn’t have been—that many European leaders agreed with the Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney, who used his speech at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, to proclaim the end of the “pleasant fiction” that there was still such a thing as a [U.S.-led liberal international order](#). As for Europe’s top security priority, helping Ukraine beat back Russia’s invasion, Trump has already ended all direct U.S. military assistance to Kyiv; repeatedly blamed the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, rather than Putin, for the failure of U.S.-led peace talks; and, just this week, according to Zelensky, told Ukraine that it should agree to give away territory in the Donbas to Russia, in exchange for vague U.S. security guarantees. On Thursday, even as Trump was railing about *NATO*, the *Washington Post* reported that the Pentagon was considering diverting urgently needed weapons for Ukraine—which have been paid for by Europeans—to the Middle

East. At the same time, Russia, despite supplying Iran with both drones and targeting intelligence in its war against the U.S., has emerged as a major economic beneficiary of the conflict, with the Trump Administration announcing that it would temporarily lift sanctions on some Russian oil to help ease the supply crisis that its attack on Iran has created. (If the war ends by April, a study by the Kyiv School of Economics found, that decision would mean an eighty-four-billion-dollar windfall in export earnings for Moscow.) So Trump's war, in effect, is now also funding Putin's war. How's that as a message to our allies?

During Trump's first term, the establishment types, who coexisted uneasily in a White House with Steve Bannon, [Stephen Miller](#), and other characters from the MAGA-rally stage, used to push back when Trump's frequent bashing of U.S. allies and alliances was pointed out. One of the most enduring images of Trump's tenure was from his first overseas trip, in the spring of 2017, when, at a NATO summit in Brussels, he [shoved the leader](#) of the tiny country of Montenegro aside in an apparent effort to better position himself for the cameras. At that same summit, the President, who had campaigned as a NATO skeptic—"Here's the problem with NATO," he said in 2016, "it's obsolete"—changed his speech, at the last minute, to omit any mention of America's commitment to the Article 5 pledge of mutual defense that is at the heart of the alliance.

Worried about the backlash, two of Trump's more conventionally conservative aides—his national-security adviser, H. R. McMaster, and his chief White House economic adviser, Gary Cohn—teamed up on Air Force One to write an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal* on the way back to Washington. It was headlined "[America First Doesn't Mean America Alone](#)." The article became, in its way, an instant classic: an inversion of truth that proved the point it was meant to dispute. It was a perfect shorthand for the kind of rationales we were hearing every day from the rear-guard remnants of the pre-Trump Republican Party: *He didn't say what he said! He doesn't want to do what he says he wants to do!*

Rereading it now, when the Republican establishment is no more, and Trump's White House is filled with [sycophants](#) who make his first-term officials seem like paragons of principle, the piece comes across not as parody so much as self-fulfilling prophecy: all that effort by Trump's aides to pretend that he was not exactly who we knew him to be has, finally, fallen away. If anything, that long-ago *Wall Street Journal* piece can now be read as a sort of playbook in reverse for Trump 2.0. "Strong alliances bolster American power," Cohn and McMaster wrote, and the President, they claimed, was deeply committed to "fostering cooperation and strengthening relationships with our allies and partners."

In late 2018, another of Trump's first-term appointees, the retired four-star Marine general Jim Mattis, famously quit the Cabinet in a dispute over Trump's

mistreatment of America's partners in Syria, saying in a [resignation letter](#) that the U.S. could not continue to lead in the world "without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies." It is not a coincidence that Mattis has now emerged as one of the most vocal former Trump officials to question his conduct of the war with Iran, the "delusional nonsense" of his demands for regime change, and the negative consequences of it all for America's place in the world. "You can't bring allies on board if they don't trust you," Mattis told PBS's Margaret Hoover this week. Exactly. ♦