



## For Europeans, Pompeo's Speech in Brussels Is a Missed Opportunity

*By Ulrich Speck*

In his speech in Brussels, U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo apparently had two audiences in mind. On the one hand his boss, U.S. president Donald Trump, and those around him who push for a tough “America first” agenda, and on the other hand the European allies, who rally around the call for “multilateralism”, in an obvious swing against Trump’s unilateral approach to international affairs.

To the unilateralists at home, Pompeo offered staunch criticism of current international institutions, from the UN to the EU. “Multilateralism has often become an end in itself,” he said, it has become detached from national interest of countries, especially of U.S. interests.

That could happen, according to Pompeo, because America has failed for a long time to provide leadership and direction. This has allowed “bad actors” to advance their interests, especially China, Iran, and Russia.

But the conclusion the U.S. secretary of state draws this is not that the U.S. should abandon multilateralism, instead it should reform it: “We’re supporting institutions that we believe can be improved; institutions that work in American interests – and yours – in service of our shared values.”

The project Pompeo has proposed to Europeans in Brussels is, in his words, “to build a new liberal order that prevents war and achieves greater prosperity for all”, in order “to preserve the free world.” This is “especially urgent in light of the threats we face from powerful countries and actors whose ambition is to reshape the international order in its own illiberal image.”

While this sounds reasonable in principle, Pompeo’s offer is unlikely to win the hearts and minds of the Europeans. There are at least two problems with his approach.

First, while Pompeo’s criticism of international institutions will be perceived as genuinely “Trumpian,” there is much doubt as to whether the U.S. president and some of the hardliners around him, such as his National Security Advisor John Bolton, are really interested in substantial reform of international institutions, guided by the vision of a liberal order. The suspicion is that the Trump administration is determined to go ahead with its priorities anyway and unwilling to compromise with allies in international fora. Unilateralism and “America first” appear as two sides of the same coin.



# Transatlantic Take

Secondly, the agenda. For Europeans, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Iran deal represent important achievements. There is substantial transatlantic disagreement not just about multilateralism as a method, but also about priorities of international cooperation.

In other words, Pompeo's speech with its harsh criticism of institutions such as the International Criminal Court, the UN, and the EU will not be seen as a genuine offer to tango in Paris, Berlin, and Brussels. It will rather be seen as a reaffirmation of the fundamental rift that has opened up between Trump-America and Europe.

Which is a pity, because there should be a joint transatlantic agenda along the general line Pompeo offered: a renewal of the liberal order reasserting values and principles of the "free world." The challenges coming from China and Russia are pressing, as is the chaos and conflict in the Middle East. And only if Europe and America team up, together with friends and allies, worldwide, there is a chance to bring the liberal order to the next level.

But that would require a more open attitude from the U.S. side: genuine interest in a partnership and with it, compromise. And it would require, from the European side, a much more coherent approach toward foreign policy. Both are in short supply at the moment.

Sec. Pompeo's speech can be found here: <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/12/287770.htm>

# Transatlantic Take

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## About the Author

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