

The Longest Suicide Note in American History

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Last year, a team of American diplomats from the State Department's Global Engagement Center traveled to two dozen countries and signed a series of memoranda. Along with their counterparts in places as varied as Italy, Australia, and Ivory Coast, they agreed to jointly expose malicious and deceptive online campaigns originating in Russia, China, or Iran.

This past September, the Trump administration terminated these agreements. The center's former head, James Rubin, [called this decision](#) "a unilateral act of disarmament," and no wonder: In effect, the United States was declaring that it would no longer oppose Russian influence campaigns, Chinese manipulation of local politics, or Iranian extremist recruitment drives. Nor would the American government use any resources to help anyone else do so either.

The recent publication of the Trump administration's new National Security Strategy showed that this decision was no accident. Unilateral disarmament is now official policy. Because—despite its name—this National Security Strategy is not really a strategy document. It is a suicide note. If the ideas within it are really used to shape policy, then U.S. influence in the world will rapidly disappear, and America's ability to defend itself and its allies will diminish. The consequences will be economic as well as political, and they will be felt by all Americans.

Before explaining, I should acknowledge the curious features of this document, which seems, like the Bible, to have several different authors. Some of them use boastful, aggressive language—America must remain "the world's strongest, richest, most powerful country for decades to come"—and some of them prefer euphemism and allusion. Sometimes these different authors contradict one another, proposing to work with allies on one page and to undermine allies on the next. The views expressed in the document do not represent those of the entire U.S. government, the entire Republican Party, or even the entire Trump administration. The most noteworthy elements seem to come from a particular ideological faction, one that now dominates foreign-policy thinking in this administration and may well dominate others in the future.

The one genuinely new, truly radical element in this faction's thinking is its absolute refusal to acknowledge the existence of enemies or to name any countries that might wish America ill. This is a major departure from the first Trump administration. The 2017 National Security Strategy spoke of creating an alliance against North Korea; noted that Russia is "using subversive measures to weaken the credibility of America's commitment to Europe, undermine transatlantic unity, and weaken European institutions and governments"; and observed that China is "using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats" to bully others. The 2017 Trump policy team also observed a "geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order."

The second Trump administration can no longer identify any specific countries that might wish harm to the United States, or any specific actions they might be taking to do harm. A decade's worth of Russian cyberwarfare, political intervention, and information war inside the United States goes unmentioned. Russian [acts of sabotage across Europe](#), Russian support for brutal regimes across the [Sahel region of Africa](#), and, of course, Russia's invasion of Ukraine aren't important either. None of these Russian acts of aggression gets a mention except for the war in Ukraine, which is described solely as a concern for Europeans.

[Phillips Payson O'Brien: A wider war has already started in Europe](#)

Even more strangely, China appears not as a geopolitical competitor but largely as a trading rival. It's as if Chinese hacking and cyberwar did not exist, as if China were not seeking to collect data or infiltrate the software that controls U.S. infrastructure. China's propaganda campaigns and business deals in Africa and Latin America, which could squeeze out American rivals, don't seem to matter much either. The new document makes only a vague allusion to a Chinese economic presence in Latin America and to a Chinese threat to Taiwan. When discussing this latter possibility, the authors drop their swaggering language about American power and slip into bureaucratese: "The United States does not support any unilateral change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait."

Other rivals and other potential sources of conflict get no mention at all. North Korea has disappeared. Iran is described as "greatly weakened." Islamist terrorism is no longer worth mentioning. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still "thorny," but thanks to President Donald Trump, "progress toward a more permanent peace has been made." Hamas will soon fade away. The American troops who are still fighting in [Somalia](#) and Syria—and [in some cases dying](#)—are ignored, as if they didn't exist at all.

But if America has no rivals and expects no conflicts, then neither the military nor the State Department nor the CIA nor the counterintelligence division of the FBI needs to make any special preparations to defend Americans from them. The document reflects that assumption and instead directs the U.S. national-security apparatus to think about "control over our borders," "natural disasters," "unfair trading practices," "job destruction and deindustrialization," and other threats to trade. Fentanyl gets a mention. So, rather strangely, do "propaganda, influence operations, and other forms of cultural subversion"—although there is no indication of who might be using propaganda and cultural subversion against us or how it might be countered, especially because the Trump administration has completely dismantled all of the institutions designed to do so.

But what if this document was not written for the people and institutions that think about national security at all? Maybe it was instead written for a highly ideological *domestic* audience, including the audience in the Oval Office. The authors have included ludicrous but now-familiar language about Trump having ended many wars, a set of claims as absurd and fanciful as his *FIFA Peace*

Prize. The authors also go out of their way to dismiss all past American foreign-policy strategies, presumably including those pursued by the first Trump administration, as if only this administration, under this near-octogenarian president, can see the world clearly.

Finally, although they do not name any states that might threaten America, the authors do focus on one enemy ideology. It is not Chinese communism, Russian autocracy, or Islamic extremism but rather European liberal democracy. This is what this radical faction really fears: people who talk about transparency, accountability, civil rights, and the rule of law. Not coincidentally, these are the same people whom the MAGA ideologues hate and dislike at home, the same people who are fighting to prevent MAGA from redefining the United States as a white ethnostate, who oppose the corruption of America's democratic institutions, and who object when Trump's friends, family, and tech allies redirect U.S. foreign policy to benefit their private interests.

European and American liberal democracy is so dangerous to their project, in fact, that the MAGA ideologues seem to be planning to undermine it. They don't want to meddle in anyone's internal politics anywhere else on the planet: "We seek good relations and peaceful commercial relations with the nations of the world without imposing on them democratic or other social change." The glaring exception to this rule is in Europe. Here, it is now American policy to "help Europe correct its current trajectory," language that implies that the U.S. will intervene to do so.

[Eliot A. Cohen: Trump's security strategy is incoherent babble](#)

According to [reporting by Defense One](#), an earlier version of the National Security Strategy said that U.S. foreign policy should even seek to support illiberal forces in at least four countries—Hungary, Poland, Italy, and Austria—to persuade them to leave the European Union. For all four, this would be an economic catastrophe; for the rest of the continent, this would be a security catastrophe, because a damaged EU would struggle to counter Russian hybrid warfare and Chinese economic pressure. If the union breaks up, there would also no longer be a European Commission capable of regulating American tech companies, and perhaps that is the point.

At the same time, the document's authors seem to derive their hatred of Europe from a series of false perceptions—or, perhaps, from a form of projection. The authors fear, for example, that "certain NATO members will become majority non-European" very soon. Because they are presumably not talking about non-European Turkey and Canada, the clear implication is that countries such as France and Germany have so much immigration from outside Europe that they will be majority nonwhite. And yet, it is the United States, not Europe, that is far more likely to become "majority minority" in the coming years.

The security strategy also talks, bizarrely, about Europe being on the verge of "civilizational erasure," which is not language used by many European politicians, even those in far-right parties. Carl Bildt, the former Swedish prime minister and foreign minister, has called this sentiment "to the right of the extreme right." In multiple indices, after all—[health](#), [happiness](#), [standard of living](#)—European countries regularly rank higher than the United States. Compared with Americans, Europeans [live longer](#), are less likely to be [living on the streets](#), and are less likely to die in mass shootings.

The only possible conclusion: The authors of this document don't know much about Europe, or don't care to find out. Living in a fantasy world, they are blind to real dangers. They invent fictional threats. Their information comes from conspiracist websites and random accounts on X, and if they use these fictions to run policy, then all kinds of disasters could await us. Will our military really stop working with allies with whom we have cooperated for decades? Will the FBI stop looking for Russian and Chinese spies? Earlier this month, the Justice Department announced that it was [taking action](#) against two Russian state-sponsored cybercriminal groups that, among other things, targeted American industrial infrastructure. But if our real enemy is "civilizational erasure" in Europe, then surely we should redirect resources away from this kind of secondary problem and focus them on the threat posed by the British Labour Party or the German Christian Democrats.

One is tempted to laugh at these kinds of ideas, to express incredulity or turn away. But similar conspiracist thinking has already done real damage to real institutions. Elon Musk believed distorted or completely false stories about USAID that he read on his own X platform. As a result, he destroyed the entire organization so rapidly and so thoughtlessly that tens or even [hundreds of thousands of people](#) may die as a result. At the State Department, Darren Beattie, the undersecretary for public diplomacy, has repeatedly and falsely stated that the Global Engagement Center was censoring Americans, a [fantasy](#) that he encountered on the internet and that he continues to repeat without proof. As a result, he destroyed that organization and ended its international negotiations. He is now conducting an internal departmental [witch hunt](#), trying to find or perhaps invent post hoc evidence for his conspiracist ideas.

[Charlie Warzel: Everything is the 'Twitter Files' now](#)

Some elements of this story are familiar. Americans have overestimated, underestimated, or misunderstood their rivals before. And when they do, they make terrible mistakes. In 2003, many American analysts sincerely thought that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. During the Cold War, many analysts believed that the Soviet Union was stronger and less fragile than it proved to be. But I am not sure whether there has ever been a moment like this one, when the American government's most prominent foreign-policy theorists have transferred their domestic obsessions to the outside world, projecting their own fears onto others. As a result, they are likely to misunderstand who could challenge, threaten, or even damage the United States in the near future. Their fantasy world endangers us all.