

The motives and consequences of the reducing and repositioning of the US forces in Europe

On July 29th, 2020 the US Secretary of Defense published the list of recommendations concerning the reduction and repositioning of the US forces in Europe¹, following Donald Trump's decision in early June to pull out thousands of American troops from Germany. Two months later, the Department of Defense presented a concept that seems to be a compromise between

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Trump's political expectations and the Pentagon's strategic interests related to the emergence of great power competition with China and Russia. The recent actions of the United States seem to have two major goals; the first goal is purely political, president Trump is eager to rebuke Germany and Chancellor A. Merkel for not being compliant with the US policies to prove himself and show his assertiveness. The second goal is strategic; the US administration continues implementing the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy by withdrawing the troops from the Euro-Atlantic area and moving the forces to the Asia-Pacific to counter China's influence in the region. It seems that the US administration also wants to send a clear message to Russia that the United States will increase its presence along the south-eastern borders of the North Atlantic Alliance (the Black Sea), given the uncertainty over the Turkish stance and the negative impact of Ankara's policies on NATO.

As far as the first goal is concerned, Donald Trump has been using a business-like approach to foreign affairs and security policy since the first day of his presidency. Trump expects that Washington's allies will pay for the US security guarantees and therefore the US administration has launched a campaign to force the European members of NATO to increase their military spending. First, it is worth noting that some part of the European defence budget could be a funding source for the US troops deployed in the old continent. Second, Europe's military spending could also support the US defence industry given that US companies are major suppliers of the most advanced military technologies in NATO.

The efforts of the US administration resulted in only partial success, for instance, a large portion of Poland's defence budget goes to American defence contractors; on the other hand, not all US allies are keen to increase their military spending or their defence budgets expand at a far slower pace than expected².

Germany is especially reluctant to follow the US stance on defence spending; the Trump's approach on this issue was one of the reasons why the bilateral relations between the United States and Germany have deteriorated, including Trump's relationship with Chancellor Merkel. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, even the modest plans concerning an increase in military spending in NATO member states will have to be verified. Given these circumstances it is clear that Trump's pressure on European allies—Germany in particular—to meet the NATO requirement of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence will not be successful. The coronavirus crisis thus puts an end to the US dream of doing a 'military business' in Europe. It is quite likely that the aforementioned conditions pushed Donald Trump to reduce the US presence in Europe and withdraw from Germany³.

The upcoming 2020 US presidential elections can be another factor shaping the US stance on Europe's defence given that Donald Trump is determined to show that his foreign policy has up-to-date been successful. The implementation of the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy could be portrayed as an achievement of the US administration since the US political elites generally agree that the strategic rivalry between the United States and China ought to be perceived as a priority. Trump may use an argument that the US withdrawal from Europe has become possible thanks to his successful efforts to convince the European allies that a rise in military spending is indispensable. The deal to deploy additional forces to Poland can help Trump secure the Polish-American vote; therefore, the aforementioned conditions provide the incumbent president with a number of potential political gains during the campaign.

The second goal is related to the greatest strategic challenge facing the United States, i.e. the rising conflict with China and the competition for global hegemony⁴. China's growing assertive stance towards the West⁵ as well as dark predictions concerning an outcome of a possible US-China military conflict in the Western Pacific are a thorn in the side of the US authorities⁶. Consequently, the US government seeks to strengthen its strategic capabilities in the Asia-Pacific by repositioning the forces deployed in other regions. The modification of the US strategy is inevitable, given the changes in the global balance of power. China's rise as a major contender for world supremacy is the reason why the incumbent president has no other option but to implement Obama's "Pivot to Asia" strategy⁷. The United States does not have unlimited resources and therefore the reduction of the US presence in Europe and other regions is absolutely crucial in addressing the challenges faced by Washington in Asia.

The third goal of the US administration is to exert pressure on the Russian government and make them aware that the withdrawal of the US troops from Europe will not reduce NATO's capabilities in the region. Recently, Washington announced the establishment of the Forward Command of the 5th US Army Corps in Poland⁸. The Command will be responsible for monitoring the situation along NATO's eastern flank; analysing operational conditions; conducting operational planning; and enhancing capabilities of relevant operational and tactical commands as far as NATO and US defence plans are concerned. The establishment of the Forward Command as an important step to improve NATO's credibility and capabilities in terms of countering Russia's strategic efforts in the region. The second decision of the US administration concerns the transfer of F-16 multirole fighters from Germany to Italy; the main motive behind this move is to strengthen NATO's capabilities in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, as well as Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. This is due to the fact that Russia has also increased its operations in the region over the past few years. Another important factor is the uncertainty surrounding Turkey's stance on NATO, despite the fact that Ankara used to be one of the keystones of security in the region⁹.

Leaving aside the motives behind Donald Trump's decision to pull out the US troops from Europe, the situation raises questions about the impact of the US policy on Europe's and NATO's security environment. The US withdrawal poses a serious political and strategic challenge. The political risks are related to the way the US administration communicated its decision too. The reaction of NATO member states suggests that the United States did not discuss this issue with its allies. Trump's decision is therefore a severe blow to Europe-US relations, which undermines the transatlantic foundations of the Alliance's strength and unity. It is worth noting that the United States made similar decisions in the past; for instance, on September 17, 2009—the 70th anniversary of the Soviet Union's invasion of Poland—Barack Obama announced that the US had abandoned the plans to develop a missile defence system in Poland. However, the recent policy change of the US administration cannot be perceived as an unfortunate accident, given that Trump is no longer credible as a partner in Europe's eyes.

The withdrawal of roughly 6,000 US troops from Europe seems to be the most significant strategic consequence of Trump's decision. Undoubtedly, the NATO's strength is highly dependent on the American presence in the old continent; however, the US administration has not offered any options that could compensate for the reallocation of the US forces, for example, by strengthening nuclear or missile defence capabilities of the Alliance. Therefore, Trump's decision can be harmful to the US national interests¹⁰, due to the significance of the US presence to counter the Russian influence in Europe and the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is possible that the US administration will withdraw from Trump's decision, provided that Joe Biden wins the next presidential election.

The US withdrawal will also affect the European Union and the bilateral relations between the EU and the United States. Despite the fact that Warsaw is a key NATO member on the alliance's eastern flank, Trump's decision may undermine the position of the Polish government, which is facing a backlash from the EU institutions over the rule of law. On the other hand, the decline of Europeans' trust in the United States may strengthen the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), considering Russia's attempts to exert greater pressure on Europe. Therefore, Russia can become the largest beneficiary of Trump's decision, which seems to aggravate the alliance's unity by reducing NATO operational capabilities in Europe. Furthermore, Russia is not willing to make any concessions in Ukraine or Syria and is about to strengthen its forces in the Western Military District, by deploying an additional armoured division there¹¹.

In conclusion, Donald Trump's decision concerning the withdrawal and repositioning of the US troops in Europe will put the Euro-Atlantic area at risk but at the same time will also allow the United States to counter China's rise in Asia. Beijing may perceive this decision as a signal that Washington will increase its involvement in the Asia-Pacific. On the other hand, the decline of the Euro-Atlantic alliance may reduce Europe's support for the US foreign policy and provide China with additional political gains. Trump's decision seems to create new opportunities for Beijing given that China is eager to boost its expansion in Europe.

Possible scenarios

The withdrawal and relocation of the US forces ought to be analysed in two dimensions. First, it is important to underline the impact of Trump's decision on US military capabilities in Europe. Second, the United States acted unilaterally without regard to Europe's perspective. Consequently, the US withdrawal seems to undermine trust in the significance of transatlantic relations and escalates tensions among NATO member states. From the US perspective, the transatlantic relations are of great importance given rising global competition between the United States, China, and Russia. The question is how the United States can face the dilemma of maintaining large forces in the old continent or countering China's influence in the Asia-Pacific. In my opinion, there are two possible scenarios: unilateral and multilateral.

According to the unilateral scenario, the United States will continue to act unilaterally to address the security challenges in Europe and Asia. It is likely that the US administration will tend to follow the principles of the 'Pivot to Asia' policy by making strategic decisions without any form of consultation with its allies. Such an approach to foreign policy will certainly affect NATO's unity and exacerbate negative trends in US-Europe relations. The US unilateral approach can allow Moscow to exert greater influence on Europe, which could potentially lead to deterioration of Europe's security

environment, especially in Central and Eastern Europe which remains in the sphere of Russia's political interests.

In this scenario, the United States and European countries do not coordinate their foreign policy toward China, which means that Washington will be forced to deal with China alone. Consequently, Europe may tend to accelerate cooperation within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy; however, it is worth noting that the EU can potentially be affected by internal divisions between the member states. Uncoordinated efforts of the EU and the United States can potentially strengthen the position of China and Russia in the new-cold war era; on the other hand, it might be a good opportunity for the European Union to reconsider a new approach in the field of defence and security.

In the second—multilateral—scenario, the United States will attempt to counter China's global influence in cooperation with the Western world. In this scenario, NATO would play a key role in coordinating military efforts of the United States and the European members of the alliance, to balance China's military strength. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed similar thoughts in his speech on June 8, 2020, which launched the 'NATO 2030' initiative. According to Stoltenberg, the Alliance should aspire to become a global player that could face challenges posed by China¹².

As far as the multilateral scenario is concerned, the problems such as the US withdrawal from Europe could not occur. The US 'Pivot to Asia' strategy would not be necessary since the European countries could support the US efforts independently or within the framework of NATO's decision-making process without damaging the unity of the Alliance. This scenario would therefore support the integration process in the Western world and NATO and thus strengthen the position of the Euro-Atlantic region in hegemonic competition with China and Russia.

At the moment both scenarios are equally likely despite the fact that neither the United States nor Europe can perceive the unilateral scenario as favourable for their interests. The success of the second scenario, however, depends on a shift to more multilateral approach in the United States as well as Europe's perception of Stoltenberg's concept of turning NATO into a global actor. In conclusion, the US presidential election can determine whether the United States will choose one of the aforementioned scenarios given that Trump seems to favour uncoordinated foreign policy; on the other hand, the success of Joe Biden could potentially lead to a shift of the US policy toward deeper cooperation of the United States with the European allies.

Conclusions

1. The scale of the withdrawal and repositioning of the US troops in Europe is the consequence of the compromise between Donald Trump's political expectations and the strategic interests of the Pentagon in the context of great power competition involving the United States, China, and Russia. The first goal of the US administration is political; Washington wants to rebuke Germany and demonstrate Trump's perseverance as far as the foreign policy is concerned. The second goal is strategic; the US administration is implementing the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy by moving its forces from the Euro-Atlantic area to counter China's influence across Asia-Pacific.
2. The US administration seems to send a signal to Moscow that the United States will be more involved on the south-eastern flank of NATO (the Black Sea) in order to enhance the alliance's capabilities in the region, which were undermined by Turkey's foreign policy.
3. Donald Trump's decision may put the Euro-Atlantic security at risk. The US withdrawal has seriously damaged Europe-US relations as well as Washington's credibility within the Alliance. Possibly, the EU member states of NATO will be eager to use this situation as an opportunity to strengthen the EU-led defence cooperation.
4. There are two possible scenarios concerning the US dilemma of maintaining large forces in the old continent or countering China's influence in the Asia-Pacific: unilateral and multilateral. As far as the unilateral scenario is concerned, the United States approach undermines trust in the significance of transatlantic relations and escalates tensions among NATO member states. In the second—multilateral—scenario, the consolidation of the Western world turns the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation into a global player that could balance China's and Russia's military strength. The US presidential election can determine whether the United States will choose one of the aforementioned scenarios given that Trump seems to favour uncoordinated foreign policy; on the other hand, the success of Joe Biden could potentially lead to a shift of the US policy toward deeper cooperation of the United States with the European allies.

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⁷ K. G. Lieberthal, *The American Pivot to Asia*, Brookings, December 21, 2011; <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>

⁸ *W Polsce powstanie Dowództwo V Korpusu Sił Zbrojnych USA*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/w-polsce-powstanie-dowodztwo-v-korpusu-sil-zbrojnych-usa>

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