

# Rise of Isolationism in The Usa Foreign Policy and Implications for NATO

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## Abstract

NATO proved its resilience by adopting transformative policies that enabled it to adapt multiple security challenges arising in aftermath of the dissolution of the communist bloc. In the first two decades of the post-Cold War era, the Alliance was able to maintain its solidarity and cohesion during the crisis in the Balkans and the war on terrorism after the 9/11 attacks. Meanwhile, the USA declared ‘pivot to Asia’ strategy in response to China’s rise against the USA’s supremacy in the World leadership; and Russia was reemerging more assertively first in Crimea, and later in Syria. Amid changes taking place in the international environment, the foreign policy shift set forth by the Trump administration in favor of isolationism rather than internationalism recommenced the discussions regarding the relevance of NATO. In this sense, the study investigates how the new foreign policy approach of the USA administration could affect the future of NATO. In the first part, isolationist aspects of the USA policy is analyzed within the historical and contemporary contexts. In the second part, the study explores the implications of the new isolationist policy of the USA for the future of NATO. In the conclusion part, the findings of the study have been presented. The study has identified that the USA’s recent isolationist policy degrades sentiment of solidarity in NATO, strengthens proponents of developing autonomous Europe defense capability, encourages illiberal-authoritarian trend among transatlantic countries, paves the way for the emergence of power contestation with implications of an arms race and nuclear proliferation, opens space for new alignments.

**Keywords:** Isolationism, NATO’s transformation, the USA’s foreign policy, Trump-era USA foreign policy.

# ABD Dış Politikasında Yalnızcılığın Yükselişi ve NATO'ya Etkileri

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## Özet

NATO, komünist bloğun ortadan kalkmasından sonra ortaya çıkan çeşitli güvenlik problemlerine karşı geliştirdiği dönüşüm politikalarıyla dayanıklılığını kanıtlamıştır. Soğuk Savaş sonrasında ilk yirmi yılında meydana gelen Balkan Krizi ve 11 Eylül sonrası teröre karşı ilan edilen savaş sırasında da NATO İttifakı dayanışma ve beraberliğini gösterebilmiştir. Takip eden yıllarda, Çin'in ABD'nin dünya liderliğine karşı alternative bir güç olarak yükselişe geçmesi karşısında ABD "Asya eksenli politika"yı benimseyen yeni bir strateji ilan etti; Rusya önce Kırım ardından Suriye'de askeri gücünü kullanarak daha iddialı bir dış politika izlemeye başladı. Uluslararası ortamda meydana gelen bu önemli değişimler karşısında Trump yönetiminin ABD dış politikasında uluslararasılıktan çok yalnızcılığı öngören bir politika tercihini ortaya koyması NATO'nun gerekliliği tartışmalarını yeniden başlattı. Bu kapsamda, bu çalışma ABD'nin yeni dış politika yaklaşımının NATO'nun geleceğini nasıl etkileyecebileceğini araştırmaktadır. Çalışmanın birinci bölümünde, ABD dış politikasının yalnızcı yönleri tarihsel ve güncel çerçevede incelenmektedir. İkinci bölümde ABD'nin yeni-yalnızcı dış politikasının NATO'nun geleceğine olası etkileri araştırılmaktadır. Sonuç bölümünde çalışmanın bulguları sunulmuştur. Çalışmada ABD'nin son dönem yalnızcı politikasının etkileriyle ilgili olarak; NATO'da dayanışma duygusunu azalttığı, Avrupa'nın bağımsız bir savunma kapasitesi geliştirmesine yönelik çabaları güçlendirdiği, atlantik ötesi ülkeler arasındaki liberal karşıtı-otoriter eğilimleri güçlendirdiği, güç mücadelesi ve bu kapsamda ortaya çıkabilecek nükleer silahlanmayı da içeren silahlanma yarışı için uygun ortamı hazırlayabileceği, yeni ortaklıklar için zemin hazırlayabileceği tespitleri yapılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yalnızcılık, NATO'nun dönüşümü, ABD dış politikası, Trump dönemi ABD dış politikası.

## **1. Introduction**

After the demise of communism and breakup of the USSR and Warsaw Pact, NATO searched for a new *raison d'être*. Contrary to the expectation that it wouldn't take too long before the fifty years of alliance dissolved itself, the organization proved its resilience in a new era with multiple challenges. NATO was able to transform itself to adapt to the emerging security environment. Several factors stand out as contributors to NATO's endurance. An integrated civilian and military structure which was developed over the years was one of them. It had attained a certain level of competency that urged NATO countries to take advantage of. Another factor was the evolution of NATO as a defense organization to a security community which was formed of countries who shared similar lifestyles and values. Since members of this community believed that they have been together to preserve their way of life, even though the opponent of NATO collapsed they were able to maintain their unity. Besides these, some political motivations also helped NATO's endurance. In this sense, the desire of European countries not allowing Europe to return to nationalist divisions played an important role. The USA and Europe also had reasonable interests in keeping the transatlantic community together as both would benefit from it, former by preventing Europe to develop a separate power pole and the latter by saving itself from certain military responsibilities as it would be undertaken by the USA.

After Cold War NATO's transformation policy was based on recognizing risks and challenges posed by the new security environment. NATO considered that the risks and challenges of a new era were different from the Cold War period during which there was a conventional threat against the territorial integrity of allied countries. NATO acknowledged that new risks might emanate from adverse consequences of instabilities which might be caused by economic, social, and political problems as well as ethnic and territorial disputes. Another aspect of NATO's transformation policy was the realization of opportunities posed by the independence of old Soviet states. In this sense, the Alliance's transformation evolved around three main policies: "Cooperative Security", "Enlargement Process", "Collective Security / Collective Defence". Cooperative Security was aimed to broaden security culture by developing partnerships in and around Europe and further around the globe. Enlargement policy was pursued in line with Article-10 of the North Atlantic Treaty. It allowed NATO to overcome the division of Europe by incorporating old communist states. The Collective Security approach allowed the North Atlantic alliance to develop certain capabilities to manage the security challenges of the post-Cold War security environment. In 2014, after the annexation of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine by Russia NATO adjusted its stand by shifting its focus towards Collective Defense although keeping up capabilities of crisis management.

After over ten years of adopting its last Strategic Concept NATO is facing internal and external challenges. In this context, changes that have been taking place in the global strategic environment could have ramifications for transatlantic security. The gradual decline of the USA power and its strategic emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region, Russia's growing military presence and influence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, shrinking defense budgets, Brexit, and the rise of nationalism and isolationism are some of several factors already impacting security considerations in the transatlantic community. Among these trends, isolationism bears significant importance for the future of NATO in the sense that its biggest partner the USA gives signals of returning to isolationism in its foreign policy approach. Donald Trump during his election campaign strongly emphasized his "America first" approach which among other things includes disengagement of the USA from global affairs. After assuming power in 2016 he gradually started to execute his campaign promises. He continued to declare his intention of decreasing the USA's involvement in overseas and took some steps in that direction. The USA's further steps on this course are likely to affect its relations with NATO and consequently future of Europe's security. In this regard, the study investigates how the new isolationist policy approach of the USA administration could affect the future of NATO. In the first part, isolationist aspects of the USA policy is analyzed within the historical and contemporary contexts. In the second part, the study explores the implications of the new isolationist policy of the USA for the future of NATO. In the conclusion part, the findings of the study have been presented.

## 2. Isolationism in The USA's Foreign Policy

### 2.1. Historical Background

Isolationism in international relations discipline can be defined as a policy of avoiding meddling other nations' affairs and by doing that maintaining itself away from the World. The roots of isolationist approach in the USA foreign policy history can be traced back to George Washington who advised extending commercial ties while keeping political connection minimal against enduring alliances with any foreign states (Kupchan, 2020). Thomas Jefferson cautioned against "entangling alliances" as well (The Week, 2016). Secretary of State of the USA John Quincy Adams stressed in 1821 that "America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy" (The Week, 2016). The idea of preserving its unique political, economic and social character and liberties at home is long believed to have required remaining away from bad influences of great power rivalry and territories beyond the oceans (Kupchan, 2020). The rationale behind this approach was the USA security would be best served by focusing on expanding commerce and accumulating economic power instead of "getting embroiled in distant lands" (Kupchan, 2003: 214). It can be claimed that two specific factors have allowed the USA to assume an isolationist approach (Kupchan, 2003: 214). First, it is situated on the distant geographic location from the main continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa "with wide oceans to its east and west and nonthreatening countries to its north and south". Second, the USA political and constitutional culture has developed over the years a system of checks and balances which prevents it to take over ambitious external actions (Kupchan, 2003: 214).

Isolationism in the USA history is generally associated with Monroe Doctrine. The USA President James Monroe, at his annual address to Congress on 02 December 1823 declared principles of USA foreign policy, the most striking aspect of which could be summed up as, "separate spheres of influence for the Americas and Europe, non-colonization, and non-intervention" (USA Department of State, 2020). In plain language, USA would not interfere in the affairs of European powers and wouldn't allow European powers' interference in the affairs of USA's neighbors. From another perspective the Monroe Doctrine intended to prevent European powers' exertion of colonization on the New World (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1996:36). Moreover, while the idea of Manifest Destiny was the main drive that led the American expansion in the North America in 19<sup>th</sup> century it was also believed to be served best by remaining detached from the rest of the World (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1996:36).

In 1898, when the USA expelled Spain from its neighborhood she was temporarily leaving decades long traditional policy to embrace brief imperial drive (Kupchan, 2020). Until the First World War the American foreign policy was "marked by series of power assertions and intervention, primarily in Latin America" to protect its economic interest (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1996:36).

The attack by a German submarine on the *Lusitania* in May 1915 sparked a crisis on the issue of neutrals' rights on the high seas (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1996:40). Even though the USA tried to remain neutral she had to declare war against Germany on 06 April 1917. Despite vast distance from the old continent German submarines were able to harm the USA trade interests and prestige by sinking American ships. German's attempt to drag Mexico into war alarmed the USA leaders that the threat would soon be at their doorsteps. Cultural and historical bond with Europe was another reason that pushed the USA to the war. The USA's embroilment in the First World War had signaled that it would not be easy for the USA to stay isolated. This encouraged Woodrow Wilson to put forward "a new collective security system to replace war-prone balance of power" (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1996:40). Despite its idealistic tone, Woodrow Wilson's League of Nation proposal was proof of the fact that some American politicians had realized that the USA couldn't stay unaffected if a fire breaks out even as far as the other side of the Atlantic.

The policy of the USA during 1920s was staying away from "binding international commitments" and instead focusing on "preventing the outbreak of war" (Office of The Historian, 2020). The American public was pleased with rejection of League of Nations (Bagby, 1999:54). She returned to policy of "the passivity of the 19th century" and adopted "secondary role from 1919-1939" (Office of The Historian, 2020). The economic rigors brought about by the 1929 Great Depression had played an important role in pushing the country to return to isolationism despite the emerging danger of fascism and totalitarianism (Office of The Historian, 2020).

After twenty years of remaining out of the World business, the USA had to return to Europe first to stop fascist aggression and then to contain communist expansionism. Experiences of two World wars had

demonstrated that the USA's vital interest was linked to Europe. Following the years of the Second World War, it had supported measures which would prevent Europe from falling back to the power struggle. The emergence of an ideological rival from the East added to factors that provided for the conditions that had USA connected to Europe permanently. The USA realized that the sheer power wouldn't be enough to secure its interests; it would need to be supported by ideological and economic alliances. Therefore, she adopted the policy of creating network of "multilateral institutions, military pacts and installations, and open market" such as the United Nations, NATO, the Bretton Woods monetary institutions (Kupchan, 2020). In that course, the foundation of NATO on 04 April 1949 in Washington, D.C. institutionalized the transatlantic bond between the USA and Europe.

Cold War years were of continued struggle not to lose ground against the communist threat. As such, five years after Second World War, in Korea War (1950-1953) once again the USA had to project its military power far away from mainland. It had faced serious consequences of the leadership of the transatlantic bloc by being entrapped in the Vietnam War. The lessons drawn from the Vietnam War would come out to be not well understood during the 1990s when the USA emerged as the only superpower in the world. First Gulf War in 1991, even though executed by the coalition, was a manifestation of the USA's transition from leader of the Western World to the global hegemon of the World. Uncontested years of hegemony during 1990s and 2000s lured the USA to apply its tremendous military power overseas to achieve national interests. In addition to bases installed all over the world, the USA was involved militarily in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999. The USA demonstrated the level of its military capability occupying first Afghanistan in 2001 and later Iraq in 2003. The USA was now a global interventionist power putting the World affairs into order using its political, economic, and military capacity.

The 2003 Iraq War can be regarded as a turning point for the USA hegemony in the sense that the controversy it brought about into the USA internal politics as well as to the World politics. Despite claims that Saddam Hussein owned nuclear power the USA officials could not document credible proof. UNSC did not pass a resolution to legitimize the USA intervention. In addition to newly emerging old rival Russia, allied countries such as France and Germany stood against any unjustified military intervention. Therefore, although the USA was able to topple Saddam Hussein and change the regime it would be proved that it could not establish a sustainable political regime. That was the collapse of strategy creating democratically governed states to prevent spread of radicalism in the Middle East. Due to this fact it would not last long before the USA started discussing troop withdrawal from first Iraq and later on Afghanistan which would be materialized in 2011 and 2014 respectively. Russia and China's rise was another factor that contributed to the USA's decision on a diminishing footprint in the Middle East. Therefore the USA had to reconsider how to manage its overextended resources in the face of emerging power contestation. Although the policy of retrenchment resurfaced in the face of new geo-economic and geo-politic realities in the second decade of 21st century, discussion over returning to isolationist policy has not been high on the agenda of the USA politics until 2016 the USA Presidential elections.

## **2.2. Isolationist Features in Trump Era USA Foreign Policy**

Securing the USA interests through the leadership of an interconnected global community based on liberal democratic values has been the main characteristic of the USA foreign policy for nearly seventy decades until 2010s. However, the 2016 election campaign brought out opposite discourse blatantly into the middle of the political debate. The presidential candidate of the time Donald J. Trump strictly criticized American internationalism and its components (Brands, 2017: 73). He introduced "America first" as his campaign slogan. In campaign speeches, he spoke against the traditional USA policy of the post-war era by denouncing globalist and multilateralist approaches. He belittled the UN by asking "Where do you ever see the United Nations? Do they ever settle anything?" Trump also questioned the USA's long commitments with South Korea and Japan. In one of the interviews, he opined that he would be open to allowing those countries to acquire their nuclear arsenals rather than relying on US insurance. Any of his foreign policy remarks drew attention as did his ideas about NATO. He labeled the organization as "absolute" and "out of date". According to him, "It was designed for the Soviet Union, which doesn't exist anymore" and "it wasn't designed for terrorism." He also portrayed the organization as a burden for the USA since other countries were not "not paying their fair share". He said, "We are

protecting them, giving them military protection and other things, and they're ripping off the United States"<sup>1</sup>.

Trump's rhetoric during the election campaign was based on disavowing the USA post-Cold War foreign policy. At a campaign speech in which he explained his foreign policy approach, he praised the USA's successes during Second World War against "Nazis and the Japanese Imperialists" and during Cold War against Communists (Trump, 2016). Nonetheless, he did not touch upon the heavy involvement of the USA in both cases. He blamed the USA post-Cold War policy for causing "civil war, religious fanaticism; thousands of American lives, and many trillions of dollars". He attributed the failure to the idea of "trying to make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western democracy" which implies Trump's dislike of enforcing ideology on any other country without their consent. In the same speech he acknowledged five weaknesses which he considered the previous administration's foreign policy was afflicted with: "resources are overextended; allies are not paying their fair share; friends are beginning to think they can't depend on the USA; rivals no longer respect the USA; America no longer has a clear understanding of its foreign policy goals". Trump stressed upon that the USA would get out of "nation-building business", and instead would focus on "creating stability in the world". He proposed three guidelines to cure current foreign policy weaknesses: "creating long-term plan to halt the spread and reach of radical Islam; rebuilding military and economy; developing a foreign policy based on American interests" (Trump, 2016).

At his inaugural speech he once again reiterated his "America First" approach. He said that American industry has been neglected while enriching other countries; the USA military has been weakened while supporting other armies; other countries' border has been defended instead of her borders; the infrastructure of the country has been left to decompose while extravagantly spending money overseas (Trump, 2017). He promised to change the course by declaring "Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families". On foreign policy, he signaled a more restraint attitude by announcing "We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world – but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their interests first". He also stressed that the USA would avoid regime imposition on any country by saying "we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow" (Trump, 2017).

As discussed in previous paragraphs, in many instances during his campaign Trump emphasized the priority of the USA national interests in foreign policy, he denounced internationalism and the USA's military involvement in places far away from the USA mainland. After he assumed power, he set out to execute his campaign promises. Some of his foreign policy decisions have been in line with his campaign rhetoric. For example,

- USA withdrew from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) agreement in January 2017;
- announced its intention to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in May 2017;
- Trump met with the North Korean leader three times in June 2018, February 2019, and June 2019 is the first USA President visiting North Korea. By this he reversed his earlier declaration of his intent to use power to prevent North Korea from acquiring a nuclear weapon;
- recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017 and moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018;
- abandoned the Iran nuclear deal, Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) in May 2018;
- didn't take any action after a drone attack on Saudi facilities in September 2019;
- announced the withdrawal of the USA troops from Syria in October 2019, though later on decided to retain some troops in East and south of the country;
- recognized Golan Heights as part of Israel in March 2019;
- announced to pull out the USA from the Paris climate agreement in November 2019;
- initiated trade war with China by imposing tariffs on Chinese products in July 2018;

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<sup>1</sup> Source for Trump's remarks, (Parker, 2016).

- started building a wall at the Mexico border in December 2019. By taking these steps Trump administrating demonstrated unilateral and unconventional traits of its foreign policy which is different from traditional USA foreign policy which has advocated multilateralism, legitimacy, international institutions, and rule-based international order for decades.

On the other hand, not all his foreign policy decisions were consistent with his campaign discourse. Despite his opposing arguments before the election, Trump pursued the path of traditional USA foreign policy on some main issues. For instance,

- military spending continued to increase during Trump's term despite his promise to limit overseas engagements (Stein and Gregg, 2019).
- Even though he was not so fond of NATO and disapproved USA's contribution to Europe's security he endorsed the USA's commitment to article-5 in Poland in June 2017 after having declined to do it in his previous visit in May 2017 (Pramuk, 2017). The USA still holds around 60000 troops in Europe. Furthermore, The European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) budget rised from 0.8 billion \$ in 2016 to 6.5 billion in 2019. (Latici, 2018: 3). Moreover, the USA announced deployment of 20000 troops to Europe for an exercise in April-May 2020 which would be the largest such kind of deployment to Europe in the last 25 years (Glenn, 2020).
- Trump did not change the previous administration's policy in Afghanistan where she continues to keep around 13000 military personnel.
- Regarding Crimea, the Trump administration reaffirmed its refusal of Russia's invasion in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea which they regard it was "in contravention of international law" (Pompeo, 2018) and continued to implement sanctions policy.
- Although he uttered at several occasions his desire of not being militarily involved in foreign lands he didn't hesitate to fire missiles on Assad regime's chemical weapon facilities in April 2018. He ordered the assassination of Maj.Gen.Qassem Soleimani by a drone strike in January 2020. General Soleimani was a very effective figure in the region and was responsible for the foreign operations unit Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps.

The strategy he adopts in his first National Security Strategy of USA (NSSU) released in December 2017 has traditional and untraditional attributes. He describes its approach as "principled realism" which has two elements: Acknowledgement of the significance of power in international relations and belief in "advancing American principles spreads peace and prosperity around the globe (NSSU, 2017: 55)". NSSU identifies four vital national interests:

- I. Protect the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life,
- II. promote American prosperity,
- III. preserve peace through strength,
- IV. advance American influence" (NSSU: 3-4).

Examination of the vital interests reveals that Trump gives priority to the interests of American society, the prosperity of its people, and homeland security. Nevertheless, the USA does not completely walk away from the US's leadership role and international commitments. It states that "we will advance American influence ... We will compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected" (NSSU: 4). It recognizes dangers that might emanate from shifting regional balances in Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. The Strategy acknowledges that in order "to sustain favorable balance of power" the USA will be required to have "strong commitment and close cooperation with allies and partners" who "will magnify the USA power and extend the USA influence" (NSSU: 45). Contrary to Trump's campaign argument the Strategy accepts the importance of transatlantic bond for the USA's interests and commits itself to European allies and partners. It states that "A strong and free Europe is of vital importance to the United States. We are bound together by our shared commitment to the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law ... the United States is safer when Europe is prosperous and stable and can help defend our shared interests and ideals. The United States remains firmly committed to our European allies and partners. The NATO alliance of

free and sovereign states is one of our great advantages over our competitors, and the United States remains committed to Article V of the Washington Treaty” (NSSU: 47, 48). Nonetheless, as emphasized by Trump on several occasions the Strategy also stresses fair burden-sharing by the allies (NSSU: 48). After four years in the office, against the backdrop of nationalist discourse in the election campaign how Trump foreign policy could be described? Larison (2015) finds Trump’s pre-office approach hard to relate with any traditional understanding because he is not consistent with his arguments and most often his intellectual stance is unsteady. He claims that his rhetoric can be described as a nationalist and foreign policy approach could be defined as “aggressive and unilateralist Larison (2015). Clarke and Rickett (2017: 373) claim that Trump’s foreign policy agenda focused on detaching USA from the post–World War II international order that he thinks “ripped off” the American people. They characterize Trump’s foreign policy as “unilateralist” which promotes “national honor” and “reputation” in line with “America first slogan”. According to Hillison (2018: 32), Trump’s rhetoric is closely associated with the grand strategy of neo-isolationism which is theoretically based on “defensive realism”. Hillison claims that many of the foreign policy decisions Trump has taken during his term is consistent with neo-isolationism (Hillison, 2018: 33). Cha (2016: 89) argues that Trump sees world politics in Hobbesian terms and propose “neo-isolationist and neo-sovereignist countermeasures”. According to Lee (2017: 10), USA’s recent foreign policy best be described as “offshore leadership” instead of “offshore balancing” or isolationism as some other scholars proposed.

Taking into consideration these perspectives and Trump’s four years of foreign policy practices together it can be argued the foreign policy picture given by the Trump administration can hardly be placed into a definite categorization. It can be claimed that it is incoherent and unpredictable in nature; it contains both “unilateralist, non-interventionist and isolationist” elements and “multilateralist, interventionist and internationalist” elements together; nonetheless former has a much weightier place in his rhetoric and practice. Though the unforeseeable character of his foreign policy attitude makes it difficult to predict way for the USA foreign policy, it can be argued that the unilateralist and isolationist approach would continue to have a larger place during his presidency in line with his campaign promises. Inner dynamics of USA politics support this argument as well, due to fact that he came to power by getting reactionary votes of “non-college-educated white working class” who have been badly affected by globalization, immigration, financial crises and longtime foreign entanglements of USA (Cha, 2016: 87). These people were traditional Jacksonian constituency who were angered by urban elites whom they thought exploited them economically and spoiled their traditional values (Cha, 2016: 85). Jacksonian approach is known as generally isolationist, non-internationalist but occasionally militarily aggressive to international conflicts (Cha, 2016: 86). Thus, it would not be unrealistic to expect Trump to remain mostly on the same course.

### **3.Implications of Isolationist Inclinations in USA Foreign Policy for Future of NATO**

The USA is an indispensable partner of the transatlantic alliance. She played the leading role in the establishment of the organization against communist expansion. The North Atlantic Treaty, which is known as Washington Agreement as well, was signed in Washington D.C. Original copy of agreement is deposited in the USA government archives. “The principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law”, which are regarded in the preface of The North Atlantic Treaty as foundation of civilization of North Atlantic countries, have been core values of conventional USA foreign policy discourse for decades. The USA has NATO’s largest, the World’s third largest army with its approximately 1.3 million active-duty troops (Lai and others, 2017). With 685 billion US dollars it has highest defense expenditure in the World which is higher than total of next seven countries (Lai and others, 2017). And with %3.42 it has highest defense expenditure as share of GDP in NATO (NATO Press Release, 2019). Furthermore, after the Cold War, during the operations launched by NATO in the places in and around Europe such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya it had to rely on capabilities provided by the USA military. For that reason, recent discussions regarding the isolationist tendency in USA foreign policy matters for the future of the transatlantic community.

Isolationism has been an enduring feature of American foreign policy which of the roots goes back to the Founding Fathers of the USA who seek to isolate itself from the problems of faraway lands (Kupchan, 2003: 214), though it has gained prominence during 2016 US presidential campaign. After 20 years period following Cold War during which internationalism was the dominant foreign policy

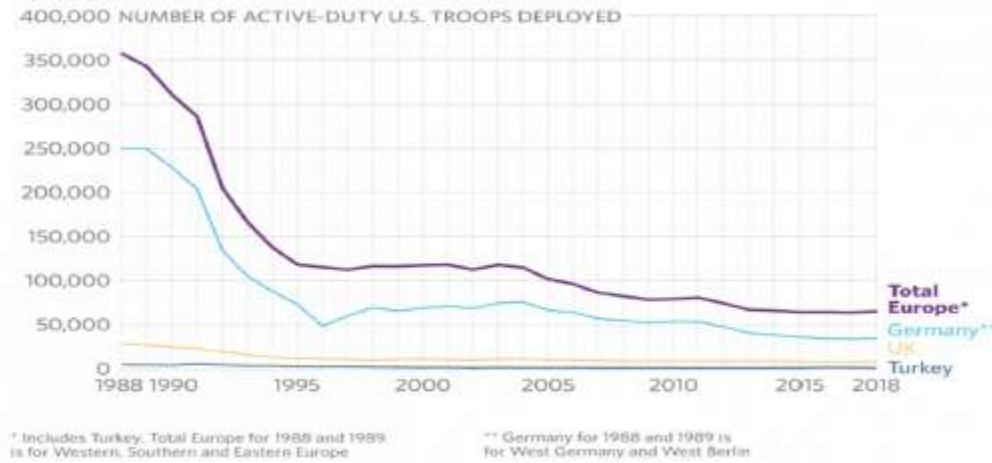


path, in succeeding years of the 2003 Iraq War preliminary sign of restraint had started to appear in the rhetoric of the USA leadership (Kupchan, 2003: 207-208). When authoritarian regimes of the Middle East were set off to be shaken by so-called Arab Spring in 2011 there was a high expectation from the international community that America would be highly involved in the region as it did during color revolutions of the 1990s and 2000s. These hopes were shattered when Obama enunciated America's intention of departing from policy of military intervention in international conflicts in a speech at West Point in May 2014. He said that "Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail" (Obama, 2014). In this sense, a kind of continuation is observed in the USA foreign policy since the mid-2000s through Trump's term. This trend has been articulated by Trump in a more intense tone which caused concern among some countries in Europe over the USA's commitment to Europe.

As noted above, inconsistency in his rhetoric has been one of Trump's main foreign policy traits. This has been confirmed in his approach towards NATO too. Even though he described NATO "obsolete" during his campaign and hesitated to affirm the USA's commitment to Article-5 of North Atlantic Treaty in his early period, he reaffirmed it in June 2017. Moreover, at NATO summit in December 2019 while criticizing French leader Macron's "brain dead" comment on NATO he praised NATO by saying "NATO served a great purpose" (BBC, 2019). This contradictory rhetoric combined with the tendency towards isolationism in the USA foreign policy in recent years would have certain implications for the future of the security of Europe and the future of the Alliance.

First, of all, it creates suspicion among European allies about USA's resolve to extend help in need of time, thereby degrading the sentiment of solidarity. Figure-1 shows that US troops in Europe had constantly decreased since the end of the Cold War. Obama's "pivot to Asia" strategy had further caused concern among Europeans about future of USA's engagement in Europe (Menon, 2013: 9). Reduction of the USA troops halted only after 2014 when the Russian threat emerged at the doorstep of Europe. Despite sanctions against Russia and measures taken by NATO, there are still concerns whether Russia would be deterred from further aggression.

**Figure-1: USA Troops Deployment in Europe**



**Kaynak:** Latici, 2018: 3

Ambiguous stand of USA towards Europe's security strengthens proponents of developing autonomous Europe defense capability. Since Brussel Treaty which was signed in 1948 European countries tried to take care of their defense. NATO's establishment connected the security of Europe to North America. Historically, NATO passed through difficult times when the cohesion of the Alliance was shaken due to different understanding on each side of the Atlantic. In one kind of this occasion, France had withdrawn from NATO's integrated military command structure because of diverging perceptions of security. Germany and France did not consent to the USA's decision to invade Iraq in 2003; Turkey did not accept the USA to use its territory for the same operation. Lately, in an interview given in October 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron expressed his doubt if Article-5 would work when needed (The Economist, 2019). Furthermore, he opined that European countries should not rely on America to defend NATO allies and Europe should start considering itself as geopolitical power to control its

“destiny” (The Economist, 2019). Most surprisingly he also uttered that NATO was going through “brain death” (The Economist, 2019) which even Trump objected. Other than France, another big member of Europe, Germany supports developing an autonomous defense structure as well. German chancellor Angela Merkel, stated in a campaign speech which she delivered right after G 7 summit where she met Trump and other six G 7 leaders that “We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands” (Henley, 2017). In the same speech she also stressed upon that “post war western alliance had been badly damaged by the UK’s Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election as US president” (Henley, 2017).

Concerns regarding the USA’s possible abandonment of Europe had started right after Trump publicized his ideas about NATO during his election campaign. Referendum on Britain’s departure from EU had added to those concerns triggering serious discussions about future of EU. In this regard, EU in its 2016 Global Strategy, which was accepted in June of the same year, had adopted a “new level of ambition” which aims efficient defense expenditure and working “towards a strategically autonomous European defense union” (EDU) (Lazarou, 2018: 1). Trump’s election in 2016 gave new momentum to this kind of quest as illustrated by Macron and Merkel’s remarks.

Since its foundation, NATO has sustained one distinctive feature which has distinguished it from similar organizations. It has not been not only defense organization based on alliance mentality but it has also been a security community formed from like-minded countries that share common values such as democracy, rule of law, free market, human rights, and individual liberty. America has been one of the leading members of this community for more than seven decades. Nevertheless, there is a growing trend among NATO countries, such as Hungary and Poland, towards illiberalism or even authoritarianism (Samp, 2017). This trend coincides with Trump’s authoritarian tendency in the USA’s inner politics (Tharoor, 2020). As a former businessman, he perceives international relations from a value-free, transactional point of view. He has proved his ability to forge very good personal relations with any leader, no matter how much democrat he or she is, as long as it brings financial benefit to the USA. Therefore, Trump’s indifference to the core values of NATO as well as the USA’s distancing from the traditional policy of supporting democratic administrations in the world could encourage already existent illiberal-authoritarian trends among transatlantic countries.

Another implication of the USA’s inclination towards isolationism could be the return of nationalist divisions in Europe. In the last century, the USA had to intervene militarily twice to restore peace in Europe which had been ruined because of competition between nationalist ambitions of European powers. Although the Second World War was the result of Germany’s aggressive behavior it was the second half of power contestation kicked off by the First World War. In this regard, the USA’s retrenchment from the region could strengthen nationalist feelings and xenophobia among the population with the result of bringing far right nationalist parties that have been already gaining ground for some time to the power (Wright, 2020: 14). It could entice regional powers, as such Russia, to assume a more assertive role to fill the vacuum created by the diminished presence of the USA in Europe. As a result, countries could be encouraged to resolve problems themselves instead of seeking international legitimacy. Undoubtedly, the emergence of power contestation would mean the beginning of an arms race including nuclear proliferation.

The USA’s reluctance in being involved in international conflicts opens space for new alignments as well. During the Libya War in 2011, the USA had participated in efforts to prevent Kaddafi’s onslaught over the civilian population which could have been resulted in a massacre. Nevertheless, after the air operation which was led by NATO ended, the ground operation did not take place. Since then, Libya has been undergoing a civil war in which various groups being supported by regional and extra-regional countries including Russia. In Syria, even though the USA announced the usage of chemical weapons as its “red line” it did not take any action when Esad regime used it on several occasions. The USA was able to strike Syria only in April 2018 in response to a chemical attack against civilian by regime forces. The USA’s inaction in Syria paved the way for Russia’s military intervention in September 2015. Moreover, the USA cooperated with Kurdish YPG militias in the fight against ISIS. Despite fierce opposition from Turkey who considers YPG as a terrorist organization affiliated with PKK, the USA provided tons of weapons to YPG under the pretext of fight against radicals. The USA had to back down from its stance partially after she agreed Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 which aimed to clear YGP militias from its south-eastern borders. Meanwhile, Trump announced to pull out troops

from Syria on 06 October 2019, though later decided to retain some of them in the east and southeast of the country to protect oil wells. After the USA evacuated northeastern part of Syria, Russia moved in to sign an agreement with Turkey which ensures the security of Turkey's border by pushing down YPG militias from the border. USA's choice of not being militarily involved in a regional problem might have been in line with its USA's restraint strategy but it created a bizarre situation in which a NATO ally supporting the enemy of another NATO ally and pushing her to cooperate with a longtime rival. Even though Turkey's S-400 deal with Russia with had caused strong criticism from the USA, it should be understood in the context that the strategy the USA adopts might encourage other allies to look for other strategic options.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Reactions to globalism, economic deprivation, and immigration feeds sentiment of populist nationalism and xenophobia in the developed world. The latest isolationism inclination is a reflection of those reactionary trends in the World politics. It is specifically relevant for the USA who has been pursuing global primacy for more than eight decades. The USA President Donald Trump came to power with a strong argument of turning over years of conventional foreign policy under the slogan of "America First". After four years of his inauguration it is hard to describe his foreign policy as pure isolationist since it has had both "unilateralist, non-interventionist and isolationist" elements and "multilateralist, interventionist and internationalist" elements together. Notwithstanding, it would not be unfair to claim that the former have had much more place in his foreign policy decisions.

As the results of 2020 USA presidential elections indicates the end of Trump's tenure it wouldn't be realistic to expect a quick overturn of last four years' policies of retrenchment. As pointed out in the preface, the inclination towards retrenchment had started during Obama term due to geo-politic, geo-economic and domestic factors. In 2016 Trump reaped discontent among the American public which emanated from overextension in the Middle East and Afghanistan, fruitless efforts in spreading democracy, extravagant spending on allies' defense and pursuit of disadvantaged trade deals (Kupchan, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to "economic downturn" similar to 1930s the last time the USA had stayed aloof in spite the rising danger in the old continent (Kupchan, 2020). Furthermore the USA history demonstrates periodic appeal of isolationism due to its unique geographic location and sense of exceptionalism. Therefore it still matters to think about what would be the implications of isolationist tendency in the USA foreign policy in the last decade.

As the biggest and influential partner of the transatlantic alliance has been signaling gradual retrenching from its commitments there would be implications for seventy years old alliance and the security of Europe. The study has identified the following implications resulting from the USA's recent isolationist policies:

- Degrades sentiment of solidarity by creating suspicion among European allies about USA's resolve to extend help in need of time;
- strengthens proponents of developing autonomous Europe defense capability;
- encourages illiberal-authoritarian trend among transatlantic countries;
- paves the way for the emergence of power contestation with implications of an arms race and nuclear proliferation;
- opens space for new alignments.

The future of NATO and European security would be negatively affected by the isolationist policies of the USA if it moves further on the same course. Nonetheless, it would not be an easy task to predict whether NATO would survive or mutate to a European only organization with lesser presence or involvement of the USA in affairs of Europe. In this regard, developments that have been taking place at a global and regional scale during the last two decades might have serious ramifications for the future of NATO.

In addition to China and Russia, other regional countries such as India, Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and some Pacific countries are growing in an unprecedented pace. Britain left the EU but remaining big countries such as France and Germany are looking for more autonomous Europe. The World is moving from unipolarity to multipolarity. Instead of the primacy of a single country, multiple poles have been developing with their own economic, political and security ties. This trend could reduce the relevance

of NATO by inducing NATO members to seek different partners in other parts of the World. USA's "pivot to Asia" policy can be considered an example of such a trend because she decided to shift its focus to the Asia-Pacific region to contain the expanding influence of China and to secure its economic interests. In this context, any possible armed conflict between China and the USA caused by clashing interests could create a situation where the relevance of NATO would be tested.

China's rise in economic, political, and military domains might affect the North Atlantic community, as it was already acknowledged at NATO leaders' last meeting in London in December 2019. In addition to its huge economic growth and military buildup, China is developing alternative institutions and initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and Road and Belt Initiative. Furthermore, China is proposing its model of state-led capitalism and authoritarian political model for other developing countries as well. If the Chinese model proves to be working with its growing web of relations, including Russia, some of the European countries who are already inclined towards illiberalism and authoritarianism might be tempted towards China.

On the other hand, the threat of Russia and its growing assertiveness causes NATO countries to bolster the Alliance rather than weaken it. Russia's aggression first in Georgia in 2008, later in Ukraine in 2014, and its intervention in Syria conflict in 2015 urged North Atlantic Alliance to take some kinetic measures along with some economic sanctions. Moreover, Russia openly declared that it considers NATO's expansion against its interests. Therefore, as long as Russia continues to pose threat on northeast border of Europe it can be claimed that it would contribute to the solidarity of the Alliance and NATO would remain relevant for the security of Europe.

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