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Unilateralism and Strategic Realignment: The Impact of Trump's Military Policy on Global Security and Alliances

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the new U.S. military policy under the Trump administration on international relations. Marked by a shift towards unilateralism and transactional alliances, this policy has disrupted traditional multilateral frameworks, weakening the United States' role as a guarantor of global security. By reducing military commitments and pressuring allies to assume greater responsibility for defense spending, the U.S. has forced a rethinking of security strategies among its partners. The article explores how these changes have affected regional security dynamics, particularly in the Middle East, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region. The withdrawal from multilateral agreements, such as the Iran Nuclear Deal and the reduction in U.S. peacekeeping roles, has created vacuums that other powers, notably Russia and China, have sought to fill. The article further analyzes the responses of U.S. allies, including efforts by Europe to foster greater autonomy in defense and the strengthening of security ties in the Indo-Pacific region. In conclusion, the article argues that the Trump administration's military policy has significantly reshaped global alliances and security dynamics, creating both challenges and opportunities for future international relations.

Keywords: Military Policy, Multilateralism, Bipolarism, International Relations, International Cooperation, International Peace and Security.

Introduction

The transformation of US military policy under President Donald Trump is part of a broader reassessment of American strategic priorities, which began at the end of the Cold War. After several decades marked by a policy of global leadership, multilateral engagement, and a permanent military presence in key regions (Europe, the Middle East, Asia), the United States embarked on a significant shift at the beginning of the 21st century. This reorientation intensified with Trump's arrival in the White House in 2017 (BBC news 2016).

Historically, after the end of the Cold War, the United States took the lead in building an international order based on multilateral institutions and active diplomacy. NATO, the United Nations, and bilateral alliances with key countries in Asia and the Middle East served as pillars of American security policy. The military presence abroad aimed to promote regional stability and deter any challenge to the global order. However, over the years, particularly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the priority shifted to combating global terrorism, with massive military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Under President Barack Obama, the United States began to consider a strategic rebalancing, with a pivot toward the Asia-Pacific, highlighting the rise of China. This strategic pivot was accompanied by a commitment to reduce military presence in the Middle East while seeking to

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resolve conflicts through diplomacy (such as the nuclear deal with Iran). However, this rebalancing has faced challenges, including the ongoing crises in Syria and Iraq, and the rise of the Islamic State, which has left the United States engaged in protracted conflicts despite its desire to disengage.

The arrival of Donald Trump marked a radical shift in this trajectory. Trump's emphasis on "America First" led to a reassessment of international alliances and commitments. Trump questioned the United States' role in multilateral organizations, criticizing entities like NATO and international agreements, such as the Paris Climate Accord. He also sought to reduce the US military presence abroad (Mastro, Skylar 2019).

and an increased focus on US national interests (Eikenberry, Karl 2013). These changes have not only challenged the stability of several strategic regions—including Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific—but have also led to a reconfiguration of alliances and global security governance. This upheaval raises a central question: to what extent does the new US military policy redefine international strategic balances and the role of traditional and emerging powers? This article explores the geopolitical effects of this evolution through the analysis of military commitments, strategic alliances, and regional security dynamics.

Methodology:

The methodology used in writing this article is primarily an analytical and comparative approach to the changes in US military policy under the Trump administration and their impact on international relations. The researcher will use primary data, such as texts and cases. Moreover, secondary data will also be used, where a set of reliable references from academic and professional institutions will be utilized.

A Challenge to Multilateral Commitments

The redefinition of global strategic balances stems largely from the evolution of American military policy, marked by constant adaptation to new threats, the rise of competing powers such as China and Russia, and a strategic repositioning, particularly in the Indo-Pacific (Fayet., Bachelier, Jonnekind, & Renaud 2023).

This transformation, which began at the end of the Cold War, has intensified with the emergence of doctrines such as the “Asian pivot” and the “great power competition” strategy, which directly influence traditional alliances, such as NATO, and prompt adjustments among European and Asian partners. The United States thus seeks to maintain its technological and military superiority through structural reforms and a strategic posture oscillating between assertive unilateralism and selective cooperation (Fayet & Bachelier 2024), complicating international relations and pushing other powers to redefine their own security strategies.

Disengagement and Realignment of Military Alliances

One of the first significant acts of the new US military policy was the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2018 (Cohen, Eliot 2018). This unilateral withdrawal, widely criticized by European allies, weakened nonproliferation efforts and increased tensions in the Middle East. The unilateral nature of the decision exacerbated tensions with European allies (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), who supported the agreement.

These countries sought to keep the agreement in place, and the US decision led to a deterioration in transatlantic relations.

Iran, for its part, announced that it would reduce its commitments to nuclear limitations and intensify its program, thus increasing the possibility of a new nuclear crisis in the Middle East.

China, which had supported the nuclear deal, intensified its economic relations with Iran, particularly in the oil sector, and saw the situation as an opportunity to expand its influence in Asia and the Middle East.

Similarly, the Trump administration has repeatedly expressed its desire to disengage the United States from multilateral organizations such as NATO (Eikenberry, Karl 2013), describing the organization as "obsolete" before partially reversing its position under pressure from military advisers. In May 2018, these reversals sowed doubt among traditional US partners, particularly in Europe, about Washington's reliability as a guarantor of collective security. The trend continued with a reduction in US funding for UN peacekeeping missions, pushing other powers such as China to expand their influence in these mechanisms.

Reduced Commitment to Overseas Operations

By adopting a "going home" strategy, the United States has gradually reduced its military presence in certain conflict zones (Ricks, Thomas 2012). This shift was particularly pronounced under the administrations of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and even Joe Biden, each of whom advocated a form of strategic withdrawal in their own way.

Under the Biden administration, this trend has intensified, with a stated desire to end the "endless wars" in the Middle East, particularly in Afghanistan and Yemen. President Biden justified these decisions by the need to refocus American priorities on domestic issues and major geopolitical rivalries, particularly with China and Russia.

This approach has been described as "realistic" by some analysts, emphasizing a desire to prioritize diplomacy and strategic alliances over direct military intervention. The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 and the end of support for Saudi military operations in Yemen illustrate this shift. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has reengaged the United States in international organizations such as the UN, restoring funding for humanitarian programs (Atlantic council 2024).

The partial withdrawal of troops from Syria in 2019, without prior consultation with NATO allies (Rajan and Ruger 2020), profoundly undermined the coalition against Daesh and strengthened the Russian and Turkish presence in the region. In December 2018, Donald Trump announced an immediate withdrawal of US troops from Syria, marking a break with previous US commitments in the fight against the Islamic State (Daesh). This withdrawal was rushed into effect in December 2019, sending shockwaves through NATO allies and partner countries, such as the Syrian Kurds (Mastro, Skylar 2019).

The withdrawal exacerbated tensions between the United States and its European allies (Keohane, Robert., and. Nye 2012), who viewed the decision as a betrayal by Washington. The EU, notably France and the United Kingdom, expressed its displeasure, stressing that such a decision jeopardized stabilization efforts in the Middle East and the security of local partners.

The Syrian Kurds, key US allies in the fight against Daesh, were left without support in the face of the Turkish offensive, leading to a strategic rapprochement between Russia and Turkey to fill this void.

The withdrawal also allowed Russia to increase its influence in Syria, strengthening its role as

the main military actor in the country and consolidating its position in the region.

Such actions have been interpreted as a gradual disengagement of the United States from its role as "world police," causing a reconfiguration of regional power relations.

U.S. Pressure for Greater Allied Military Contributions

One of the most striking features of US military policy under Trump has been the insistence on "burden sharing" (Keohane, Robert., Nye 2012). At several NATO summits, the US president has demanded that alliance members increase their defense budgets to at least 2 percent of GDP, going so far as to threaten to withdraw American troops stationed in Germany and elsewhere. While this demand fits within a framework already established by NATO commitments, the blunt and politicized manner in which it was presented has caused diplomatic friction, fueling mistrust between the allies (Mearsheimer, John 2018).

Japan and South Korea have also been targeted by this approach: Washington has demanded that they pay more for the presence of American troops on their soil, transforming relations historically based on strategic cooperation into mere contractual negotiations.

European countries have been pushed to reassess their dependence on the United States for collective defense. Some have stepped up efforts to strengthen European strategic autonomy, such as the creation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a common defense program within the EU.

Thus, American pressure has created a sense of fragility among some NATO members, particularly Eastern European countries, which have sought to strengthen their ties with the United States while opening themselves to deeper discussions with non-NATO partners like Russia to diversify their security options.

At the same time, China has increased its investment in bilateral defense initiatives with European countries and sought to influence European defense policy by developing strategic partnerships with countries like Italy and Greece.

Challenges to the Future Global Order: Navigating the Shift to Multipolarity

The future international order seems to be moving towards a multipolar world, marked by the end of American unipolar hegemony and the emergence of new regional powers such as China, India, Brazil and Russia. This geopolitical recomposing leads to a redistribution of power relations and calls into question the rules established after the Second World War.

Declining Trust in American Leadership on the World Stage

According to Ralph I. Williams: Credibility is a central but still poorly defined element of leadership, directly influencing leaders' ability to generate support and maintain authority, whether in business or international relations (Ralph. Williams . Raffo, Clark 2022).

Also in a more geopolitical context, Joseph Nye emphasizes the role of "soft power" (Nye, Joseph 2004) —that is, a country's ability to influence without coercion—as the foundation of American influence on a global scale. However, this influence has been undermined by certain recent policies, notably those of the Trump administration, which have accentuated a tendency toward isolationism and disseminated controversial narratives, thus affecting the global perception of American leadership.

The succession of unilateral decisions, combined with isolationist rhetoric, has led to a

weakening of the United States' credibility on the world stage. Historically close countries, such as France and Germany, have advocated for European strategic autonomy, while other powers such as Russia and China have seized the opportunity to strengthen their influence in areas neglected by the Americans (Lissner 2021).

According to Karl Eikenberry, former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, this approach has contributed to an "incoherent militarization of American diplomacy," where military power becomes a substitute for a coherent global diplomatic strategy (Eikenberry, Karl 2013).

This logic has resulted in a marked preference for bilateral relations, where the United States seeks to maximize its influence through direct negotiations.

This strategic shift has weakened established multilateral structures, notably NATO and regional forums in Asia, and reinforced a dynamic of imbalance in which smaller powers are pressured to comply with American demands or seek alternatives. This approach has had the effect of diminishing strategic coordination among allies, weakening the Western bloc's cohesion in the face of global challenges, including the rise of China, cyber threats, and protracted conflicts such as the one in Ukraine.

New Dynamics of Regional Security:

The concept of regional security has evolved significantly in recent years, driven by shifting geopolitical alliances, emerging threats, and the rise of non-traditional security challenges.

The Middle East in Transition: U.S. Disengagement and the Ascendancy of Regional Powers

The Middle East, traditionally considered a priority area for the United States, has seen a significant readjustment of American policy. The partial withdrawal of American troops from Syria in 2019 demonstrated a desire to reduce direct involvement in conflicts in the region. Although Washington maintains a military presence in Iraq and the Gulf region, the central role of the United States appears increasingly contested. This relative withdrawal has intensified following the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in the face of Washington's desire to refocus on the Indo-Pacific region (Gause 2019). At the same time, this strategic vacuum has favored the emergence of more assertive regional powers, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, which are seeking to expand their influence through diplomatic, military, or economic means. Turkey's intervention in Syria, the proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran in Yemen, and the growing activism of the Emirates in East Africa illustrate this dynamic of regionalization of power relations (Hiltermann 2019).

This shift is reconfiguring the geopolitical balance in the Middle East, in a context where alliances are increasingly fluid and conflicts, often protracted, elude traditional mediation.

This disengagement has allowed other powers, such as Russia and Iran, to fill the void. Russia has intensified its efforts to establish a military and diplomatic presence in Syria, consolidating its influence in the Syrian civil war. Moreover, Iran has strengthened its ties with local actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and militias in Iraq, creating a new regional equilibrium in which the United States, perceived as less reliable, has seen its historical partners seek alternatives for its security.

Thus, the reshaping of the balance of power following the Western withdrawal complicates the situation, favoring a fragmentation of the strategic space in favor of regional and extra-regional

actors with often divergent interests.

Europe: Navigating Security Uncertainty and the Rise of an Independent Defense Strategy

The relative withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East and the pressure exerted by the White House on NATO have prompted Europe to rethink its defense strategies (Hiltermann 2020). In 2018, France, Germany, and other European countries called for the emergence of a "European defense." (Fayet, Bachelier, Jonnekind & Renaud 2023).

In response to Trump's policy, some countries, such as France, have emphasized the importance of Europe's strategic autonomy, not only to defend against threats such as Russia, but also to protect against the risks of a US withdrawal.

Although the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund are still in development, these initiatives illustrate a growing desire for security independence from the United States (Hiltermann 2020). However, this aspiration faces practical challenges, particularly in terms of funding, political unity, and military coordination. The coming years will determine whether Europe succeeds in establishing an autonomous collective defense capable of competing with NATO and aspires to more autonomy in managing its regional and internal crises (Gause 2019).

The Indo-Pacific Shift: China's Growing Influence and Strategies of Regional Containment

In Asia, the partial US withdrawal under Trump has contributed to a counterbalancing dynamic led by China. Beijing has intensified its militarization policy in the South China Sea, and the Asia-Pacific region has become a strategic arena of confrontation between the United States and China (Crouch, Pavel, Clementine, Trotti 2021). This context has prompted several countries in the region, notably Japan, India, and Australia, to strengthen their trilateral cooperation in the form of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) (Friedman 2020).

The United States, while committed to supporting its Asian allies against Chinese ambitions, has also pushed its partners to assume greater responsibility for their defense, particularly through investments in regional defense capabilities. The rise of China has thus strengthened security integration in the region, while testing the stability of bilateral relations between the United States and its allies, particularly regarding policy toward Taiwan and the South China Sea.

US military policy under the Trump administration has significantly redefined global strategic balances, marking a turning point in international relations. By favoring a transactional and unilateral approach, the administration has tested traditional alliances, weakened multilateral mechanisms, and prompted its partners to rethink their security and strategic priorities. The partial withdrawal of US military commitments has left a vacuum that other powers, notably China and Russia, have quickly sought to fill, thus shifting power dynamics in several regions of the world.

China's response, with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to strengthen its economic and military influence in the region, but it has also met with growing resistance, particularly from countries fearing excessive dependence on Beijing (Hiltermann 2020).

At the same time, the United States has exerted unprecedented pressure on its allies to shoulder a greater share of the costs of collective security, transforming cooperative relationships into contractual negotiations. This dynamic has had profound repercussions for NATO cohesion and

the strength of traditional alliances, while paving the way for a diversification of international partnerships. The effects of this policy have also been felt regionally, particularly in the Middle East, where America appears to have diminished its role as "policeman," creating an environment conducive to the emergence of more assertive regional actors. In Europe, the desire for strategic autonomy has strengthened, while in the Asia-Pacific, the rise of China has forced the United States and its allies to rethink their security priorities.

Thus, the transformations in US military policy under Trump have not only redefined bilateral relations and alliances but have also contributed to a broader shift in the global order. In this context, issues of security, international cooperation, and strategic autonomy are becoming major challenges for the future. As the next US election approaches, it remains to be seen to what extent the directions taken under the Trump administration will be maintained or adjusted, and how they will continue to shape international relations in an increasingly multipolar world.

Conclusion

The redefinition of global strategic balances, catalyzed by the new US military policy, is leading to major adjustments in international relations. The United States' refocusing on specific challenges, such as the rivalry with China and Russia, is redefining defense and international cooperation priorities. This is prompting a reconfiguration of traditional alliances and the rise of new dynamics, particularly with regional actors seeking to strengthen their strategic autonomy. As a result, the global landscape is becoming more multipolar and uncertain, with an increase in geopolitical tensions, while also offering opportunities for new forms of cooperation between global and regional powers. This calls for a reconfiguration of international collective security mechanisms.

This threatens the international system and changes the rules of international law based on international cooperation and solidarity in the face of any threat to international peace and security.

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