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Transatlantic relations in the security field

- from *globalization* to *realpolitik*

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The optimism displayed at the end of the Cold War that generated the illusions of "the end of history" and of "democratic peace" was short-lived. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War did not lead to the triumph of liberal democracy as a universal form of government, nor to a world peace based on its principles. In this context, the US status of "democratic and liberal hegemon" has proved neither permanent, nor immutable. No form of global power distribution, no *status quo* has been and most likely will never be permanent, but unipolarity seems the least sustainable international configuration because the dominant power tends to assume too many goals beyond their own borders, which, over time, erodes their power. Even if a dominant state behaves moderately, less powerful states will still be worried about its behavior in the future.¹ The United States sought to maintain its hegemonic status by adopting a strategy of "liberal internationalism" and "humanitarian interventionism," which, however, weighed less as the costs of this "great strategy" began to weigh more than the benefits, and internal problems and pressures began to grow.

In the absence of a credible external competitor and in the absence of a real threat from another state actor, successive White House administrations have begun to nuance their commitments under this "big strategy" and thus to limit actions undertaken as part of their "deep commitment" initially assumed in Europe and concentrate more on the immediate interests of the US. Meanwhile, we are witnessing the emergence of revisionist powers that do not share the liberal values promoted by the United States. Despite the fact that the US remain - in the short and medium term - the largest global power, the international distribution of power has become more diffuse, and the tendency towards the reconfiguration of the international order poses additional challenges for Washington. China's assertiveness on the regional and global arena led the Obama administration to decide the so-called "pivot" toward Asia-Pacific, while Europe began to fall lower and lower on their list of priorities. However, the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation in 2014 and the crisis in Ukraine that followed it, partially revived the US interest in Europe.

Even after the end of the Cold War, Europe continued to rely on the United States to ensure its defense, but Washington began to increasingly urge European states (specifically NATO member states in Europe) to take more responsibility for one's own security and defense, including on the Eastern flank. The security interests of actors on both shores of the Atlantic, convergent at first, have begun to diverge on several issues. Financial issues have been and also

¹ WALTZ, Kenneth N., "Structural realism after the cold war", in *International Security*, Vol.25, No.1 (Summer 2000), pp. 27-28

are important causes of disagreement in the US-Europe relationship; accusations of "free riding" and calls for "burden sharing" have intensified as Europe has ceased to be an immediate priority. The United States has called on European NATO member states to contribute more to the Alliance's budget and to develop their national defense capabilities, and at the 2014 Wales Summit (held shortly after the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the onset of the Ukraine crisis), Allies have pledged to earmark 2% of their GDP (gradually by 2024) for defense expenses, of which 20% are to be directed towards increasing national military capabilities. So far, only a small percentage of these states have achieved this goal, and the United States remains by far the main contributor to NATO's budget.

Even before the election of Donald Trump to the White House in 2016, transatlantic cooperation in the security and defense fields was under scrutiny for a more balanced burden-sharing. The main difference is that under previous administrations, the EU was perceived as a key ally, not as a competitor (or rather primarily as an ally and only secondarily as competitor, but exclusively in the economic and trade spheres), and the commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty² was never questioned until Donald Trump took over the US presidency. Ever since the electoral campaign, Trump has expressed his opinion in regard to the European Union: "the reason the EU came together was to create a consortium so that it could compete with the United States"³ and in regard to NATO, which he described as being "obsolete ", and after his election he refused for a long time to reiterate his support for Article 5, citing the limited contributions of the other allies to the Alliance's budget. With a transactional logic, the adoption of unilateralist policies aimed at maximizing the economic gain for the USA was the next logical step.

After many years in which security and defense have not been high on the list of European priorities, from 2016 until now (or at least until the beginning of 2020) they have

² " The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security." - Article 5, the North Atlantic Treaty, 4 April 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm

³ JOHNSTON, Jules, *Donald Trump says EU exists to compete with US*, Politico, 10 June 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-says-eu-exists-to-compete-with-us-brexiteer-nato-wto-nafta/>

seen unprecedented momentum and progress. The year 2016 marked the EU's decision to make concrete efforts to strengthen its Common Security and Defense Policy/CSDP in order to ensure EU's strategic autonomy, such as envisioned in the Union's new strategy "Common vision, common action: a stronger Europe. The Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy" by the then High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Federica Mogherini. A number of initiatives and projects have been since developed (European Defense Fund) or activated (Permanent Structured Cooperation / PESCO) in order to ensure a deeper integration of European defense, but the EU's efforts in this direction, especially the steps taken to further develop and integrate European defense industry (through the European Defense Industrial Development Program/EDIDP), were viewed with suspicion by the US due to restrictions imposed on third countries participation.

The development of defense capabilities can also be interpreted as an attempt by the Union to better insure itself against a context of low predictability of overseas partners, especially after Donald Trump's election, whose statements and policies have diminished European confidence in "the American guarantee". However, NATO remains the main framework for ensuring collective security, so the great challenge for the member states of both organizations is to settle political differences and avoid duplication of capabilities. The EU and NATO have common values, a set of common interests, as well as a single set of capabilities (considering the fact that the two organizations have 21 common members). At the same time, they have different tools, which, through coordination, can be complementary. Neither organization has all the tools on its own to combat the growing number and diversity of threats, which are decreasingly conventional. In this context, at the moment and in the foreseeable future, cooperation is a necessity. Tactical (in theaters of operations), strategic (potential destabilization of the rapid response capacity of both organizations), but also economic (doubling of capabilities) losses that could result from a potential rivalry would reduce the competitiveness of both partners on the global stage and increase the vulnerability of each individual actor (Member States and allies), including the US.

Research questions and hypotheses

In order to be able to understand - as much as possible - the potential evolution of the transatlantic partnership, as well as its ability to make a significant contribution to maintaining the stability of the system, it is important to determine the extent to which the policies undertaken by the Trump administration have damaged the partnership, and to which extent the partnership was in trouble before that. In other words - how and in what way did Trump contributed to the deepening of existing disagreements in the transatlantic partnership and to what extent its policies and rhetoric caused new ones. Starting from this question, the next that emerges concerns the prospects of transatlantic cooperation in the post-Trump era, if the partnership has already begun to be reshaped and to what extent it is or can be updated to manage the new risks and threats and to preserve the current international liberal order (to that extent it still exists) or, rather, to set the rules in the new world order that is emerging. Based on these research questions, I formulated two hypotheses that I test within the paper.

- The general negative trends in the transatlantic partnership predate Donald Trump's presidency, but his administration has nevertheless changed the image of the United States in the world. The negative trends cannot be reversed, nor can the US alter its preexisting image exclusively as a result of the changes in its leadership, and the problems faced by the transatlantic partnership in the last 5 years will continue to be challenges in the foreseeable future.

- The world order established at the end of the Cold War is challenged and, in order to be redefined so as to further serve the interests of the Western community, the US and the EU need to act as a single "pole" of power on the world stage, which is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Sources, research methods and methodology

The main sources consisted of documents, speeches and statistics relevant to the research topic, while the secondary sources dealing with the transatlantic partnership and other intertwined topics consisted of books, reports and specialized articles published mainly between 2016 and 2021. Considering the fact that this research took place while some of the analyzed events were unfolding, but also considering the general interest on this topic, the literature is relatively divided in terms of medium- and long-term implications of recent developments. Furthermore, a relatively large proportion of the literature is focused mainly on the first level

of analysis - the person of President Trump. I referred to the literature in particular to determine the way in which the academic community positions itself in relation to recent events and to identify the main trends in addressing this issue. In the research I undertook, I tried to focus - in terms of the level of analysis - on the system primarily, and the state secondarily.

The research methods were of a qualitative nature and consisted of document and discourse analysis. The main indicators I followed in this approach were:

- Differences in defining key concepts (example: the concept of “strategic autonomy”) in official EU, US and NATO documents;
- The key to addressing the transatlantic partnership (example: competition or cooperation), both in the rhetoric adopted by US, NATO and EU officials, and in the policies adopted (example: changes in trade policies);
- Each actor's reaction to the other's policy and rhetoric (example: Washington's dissatisfaction with the restrictions imposed on third-party participation in European projects and the EU's decision to relax these conditions);
- Identified risks and the definition of interests in US, EU (and member states) and NATO strategies;
- Differences between assumed and requested responsibilities, both within the Alliance and in the bilateral relationship - expectations met and unfulfilled between partners (example: compliance with the commitments undertaken at the Wales Summit);
- The degree and manner in which the views expressed by US administrations are transposed into NATO documents and echoed in speeches made by Alliance officials.

Regarding the theoretical framework of analysis, in the research undertaken, I have started from the fundamental postulates of neorealist theory: the national interest is defined in terms of security; geopolitics is a determining factor in international relations; the policy of balancing is a central phenomenon in global politics; alliances are primarily formed to balance threats; perceptions formed by and about actors play a crucial role in relations between states. Analyzing developments in transatlantic relations starting from these postulates contributed to an objective study aimed at clarifying certain confusing events, developments and processes, in order to produce research with explanatory value.

Conceptual clarifications

Realpolitik is defined as a pragmatic policy adopted by a state and based on real factors and circumstances and not on ideological or moral considerations (without any pejorative connotations), whose ultimate test is success or failure.⁴ While *realpolitik* refers to political practice, the concept of *realism* in international relations refers to a theoretical framework developed from the pragmatism of *realpolitik*, whose purpose is to provide a series of tools for analyzing and evaluating events on the international stage. In this research, the main theoretical framework is neorealism, which preserves the essential principles of *realpolitik* and realism, with the main distinction that means and ends are defined in other terms⁵. In neorealism, power - in the sense of the distribution of capabilities - is a means and not an end in itself, the goal being to ensure national security and, in the case of the great powers, to maintain the privileged status in the system.

Globalization, from the viewpoint of Keohane&Nye and in the sense in which it is approached in this research, refers to the (recent) rise of globalism, understood as a series of spatially extended networks of interdependence inherent to the information revolution, with the US playing a central role⁶. Globalization cannot be defined in strictly economic terms and can be distinguished on several dimensions depending on the types of flows and connections that take place in these networks (example: economic, military, ecological, social, cultural, etc.). Almost all of these forms of globalization have political implications, while the very existence of international bodies and institutions are responses to those forms of globalization (example: the World Trade Organization/WTO is a response to economic globalization)⁷. Globalization is not a new phenomenon, but contemporary globalization is closely linked to the information revolution and is strongly influenced by the US - it is often even put on an equal footing with *Americanization*. The United States has a central position in the existing global networks, which creates additional "soft power": the ability to make others want what Americans want without resorting to force.⁸ As the US's dominant position in the international system erodes (including as a result of discrepancies and inequalities caused at least in part by globalization, but much more evident due to it), their monopoly over formed global networks diminishes. In addition, in the context of high-powered politics (which has begun and foreshadows the dominance of

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/realpolitik>

⁵ WALTZ, Kenneth N, „The origins of war in neorealist theory”, in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol.18, Issue 4 (Spring, 1988), p. 616

⁶ KEOHANE, Rober O., NYE, Joseph S., *Putere și Interdependență*, Polirom, 2009, pp.290-291

⁷ Ibidem, p.294

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 295-296

increased geopolitical competition, especially in the context of the emergence of revisionist powers), the relevance of "soft politics" itself will also be diminished. These developments are not surprising for the neorealist school, because in their theoretical model the very structure of the international system creates the premises for the decline of the globalization process. Global politics has not monopolized national politics, the twentieth century has been the century of the nation-state, and the twenty-first century will not disprove this truth.

CHAPTER I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - NEOREALISM, COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

"Empirical knowledge is always problematic, potentially infinite in scope, and in the absence of a proper "guidelines" we can neither know what information to gather nor how to combine it, so we need theory to make it comprehensible."⁹ Neorealist theory is the most appropriate framework - in terms of its explanatory power - to analyze the evolution of the transatlantic relationship in recent years, especially from 2016 to 2021. Starting from the postulates of neorealist theory and ignoring the irrational contingent elements on the scene of international politics (personality and IQ of leaders, existing prejudices, subjective preferences, etc.), this paper aims to "order" empirical knowledge in a rational way so that it becomes comprehensible and - at least partially - predictable. Complex interdependence is presented as a desirable ideal-type - a framework in which cooperation is the rule and rivalry the exception - in which the transatlantic partnership could be framed, a research exercise on a "what if" model that is further developed in next chapters.

CHAPTER II. THE LIBERAL GLOBAL ORDER. THE POSITION OF THE UNITED STATES AND OF THE EUROPEAN UNION ON THE NEW CHESSBOARD. IMPLICATIONS FOR ROMANIA.

In this chapter I analyzed the changes produced on the global scene, their systemic effects, as well as the effects on the US, the EU and its Member States, including and especially Romania. Such an analysis was vital in testing my research hypotheses from two perspectives:

⁹ WALTZ, Kenneth N, *Teoria Politicii Internațională*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 32

to separate the effects of policies and positions adopted by individual actors from the effects of changes in the global balance of power; to assess the relative position of the main actors in the new multipolar system that is beginning to take shape. As main research methods I used document analysis and discourse analysis.

CHAPTER III. THE TRANSATLANTIC BARGAIN AND EU-NATO INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION

To understand recent and current developments in the transatlantic partnership, it is necessary to understand how NATO has evolved and adapted over time, but especially to understand the main coordinates of the US-Europe relationship, both from within the Alliance and outside of it. Assuming that the international system is moving towards multipolarity and that the US position, although still dominant, is threatened by revisionist powers, while the US remains the de facto decision-maker of NATO, I used the power balance theory (Walt and Mearsheimer) and the theory perceptions (Jervis) to analyze the impact of developments in the last 5 years (2016-2021) on the transatlantic partnership and on security on the European continent. As main research methods in this chapter I used the analysis of statistics, speeches and documents.

CHAPTER IV. EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND THE PROBLEM OF EU-NATO COMPLEMENTARITY

Through EU's Global Strategy and its following security and defense policies and programs, the Union has set new goals and launched the process of making the CSDP fully operational, on the coordinates and within the limits of the Treaty of Lisbon. The publication of the Global Strategy took place in the context of new security challenges, regional and global, and aimed to transform the EU into a more relevant global player by expanding its strategic autonomy. While the EU has made attempts in its history to expand its security and defense competences, the steps taken since the publication of the strategy are unprecedented. While several European leaders have drawn a causal relationship between the unprecedented acceleration of EU efforts towards the development of the CSDP and the takeover of the US

presidency by Donald Trump¹⁰, in this chapter I aimed to analyze the developments in the CSDP and the measure and manner in which they impacted the transatlantic partnership and the EU-NATO cooperation. I used as main methods speech and document analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

The transatlantic partnership is not only vital to ensuring the security of allies on both sides of the Atlantic, but also to maintaining the liberal world order. The international liberal order, established at the end of the Cold War, was a direct consequence of US involvement in shaping it. In this process, the European partners have made a decisive contribution, by supporting the policies adopted by Washington and by recognizing the legitimacy and status of the US as legislator and "gendarme" of the new system of rules. Divergences between partners in this situation, coupled with the manifestation of revisionist tendencies from China and Russia and with the emergence of new threats, represent an increased risk to the stability of the world order that has supported the position of the West for the last 30 years. While the interests of partners are divergent on several issues, and perceptions of threats also differ, the common interest is to maintain the order that ensures their privileged status on the international political scene.

As I analyzed in this research, the disagreements between the Western partners preceded Donald Trump's presidency, and those related to burden sharing date back to the beginning of the Cold War. In the Trump era, however, through the policies, but especially through the public positions adopted, fundamental changes were generated at the perception level. Moreover, there has been a fundamental change in the US reference image - from the engaged partner to the unstable partner. This change has not only generated an increased degree of anxiety on the part of European partners, but has also created a vacuum in the "global governance" (with the necessary quotation marks, being a euphemism for describing the US strategy of the first two decades after the Cold War) by previous administrations, which created the circumstances for the rise of other powers, with fundamentally different interests and values.

The disengagement of the US also coincided with the EU's adoption of multiple security and defence related policies and projects. Through the Global Strategy adopted by

¹⁰ Some European leaders have even explicitly justified EU defense cooperation as a way to reduce dependence on Trump (examples: Junker, Angela Merkel).

HR/VP Federica Mogherini in 2016, the EU has outlined a new level of ambition: taking on a more important role on the global stage by developing its own strategic autonomy. All policies and projects that were subsequently adopted and implemented were in line with this objective. At both EU and Member State leadership level, multiple correlations have been made between the unprecedented acceleration of these efforts and the apparent weakening of the US guarantee on the European continent. On the other hand, the Trump administration, looking at the EU first as a competitor and only secondly as a partner, has launched multiple allegations concerning the spending of allied resources for European projects, as well as manifested dissatisfaction on several occasions concerning the restriction of US participation in these projects. Trump's preference for unilateralism has led him to look at the EU many times with skepticism, and unlike his White House predecessors, he has not resorted to traditional diplomacy to reconcile disagreements in the partnership, and all his grievances have come - in a way unfiltered – into the public space. From a certain perspective and with the necessary quotation marks, Trump-era transatlantic relations can be perceived as an "arms race", but without weapons, only with hostile and political statements meant to strengthen the position of each partner on the global arena.

No individual partner nor organization has all the tools to manage the new and rising security risks and threats. The international liberal order cannot be reformed or updated, or rather a new global order favorable to the Western community cannot be established, without a strengthened cooperation between the transatlantic partners. While it is unrealistic to assume that we will soon (or ever) see a perfect harmonization of interests and perceptions of threats between all partners, a more equal transatlantic partnership could be the building block of a common Western pole of power. A more equal partnership would mean a fair sharing of responsibilities, but also of decision-making power. Although this goal does not seem achievable in the short and medium term, it could be the only solution to tip the balance of power towards the US and the EU. The rise of China and the assertiveness of the Russian Federation require a common position and vision of the Western community, as well as in-depth cooperation and well-coordinated policies on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

The democrat Joe Biden took over the US presidency and created at least a "*respiro*" moment in the transatlantic partnership. There was a similar moment after the democrat Barack Obama won the US presidency in 2009 after two consecutive terms of the republican George Bush, and then that easing of tensions did not last for more than 6 months. President Biden's speeches to the foreign audience contain messages such as "America is back" and "The Alliance

is back," but at the policy level, his greatest successes are his return to the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization. Clearly, Biden has a clear preference for multilateralism and considers the EU first an ally and only secondly a competitor, which can lay the foundations for a deeper revitalization of the transatlantic partnership. On the other hand, in the interim security strategy published by his administration, one of the objectives is for the US to resume its leadership in the multilateral organizations it holds membership, which limits the prospects of a more equal partnership. In addition, its exact standing on EU policies and initiatives in the field of CSDP is not yet known, even if he refers to them (for now, and seldom) in positive terms as being a solid contribution to Allied security. Furthermore, some members of its administration view these policies with skepticism. The key question, however, is not what Biden has done or not done so far, but whether there is a real political will to revitalize the partnership or whether his actions and statements so far have a diplomatic weight rather than a deep strategic one. But, unfortunately, it is far too early to have a definite answer.

What is certain is that Joe Biden - or any other American or European president - cannot resolve all the disagreements in the transatlantic partnership in only 6 months, and profound differences have existed since the Alliance's inception (both in terms of the general framework for cooperation and the equitable sharing of responsibilities and expenses, as well as in more specific matters). However, NATO has functioned as the main defense organization of the West for over 60 years through two different types of world order. NATO survived the end of the Cold War precisely because the US became the predominant power in the system and acted to adapt and recalibrate the Alliance's mission in the new geostrategic context, which allowed it to continue to function effectively despite differences in the transatlantic partnership. NATO's adaptability has been the subject of many in-depth studies, but a clear distinction must be made between adaptability and the acquisition of a permanent character, with the latter not being ensured (at least not yet). Stanley Sloan believes that there are two overriding conditions for NATO to survive and become a permanent alliance: the US must be convinced that deep political and economic cooperation with European allies makes a clear contribution to US interests, while Europeans must be convinced that their own contributions to common efforts to ensure international security with the United States will influence Washington's decisions regarding security on the European continent.¹¹ My research supports this view by adding that now, compared to any other time in the last 60 years, the interdependence between the US and Europe is more obvious. While NATO's credibility on the European continent continues to

¹¹ SLOAN, Stanley, *Defence of the West*, Manchester University Press, 2016, p.339

depend on the US military presence, US' legitimacy on the global arena now depends more than ever on the stability of the transatlantic partnership and the ability of partners to form - in the context, limits and coordinates mentioned in the paper - a single „power pole”. One of the challenges is, as I analyzed in the thesis, to ensure the complementarity of the roles assumed, which, however, is not limited only to cooperation with and within NATO. In the absence of complementarity and in terms of the roles assumed and the tools used for power projection on the world stage, the EU and the US cannot coagulate into a so-called single ”power pole” because they cannot break out of the competitive logic.

If and as much as the "Trump effect" fades, I have identified another risk to the transatlantic partnership in the context of Biden's takeover of the presidency. Transatlantic relations after the Cold War were similarly marked by the "law of opposite effects": when relations are on an upward trend, European defense cooperation stagnates, but when disagreements are at the forefront, Europeans show more internal unity in promoting their own security and defense interests. The ”let down” of European partners (mentioned above) after the election of Joe Biden risks compromising, at least in part, the momentum of the CSDP.¹² This risk is even more pronounced in the current pandemic context, which has led to a redistribution of funds at EU level and has led to a significant reduction - compared to what was initially estimated - of the allocated security and defense budget. However, the endurance of the "law of opposite effects" this time would have deeper implications: by removing security and defense from the list of priorities, the EU could compromise its ambition to develop its strategic autonomy, which would reduce even the premises of a more equal transatlantic partnership in a geopolitical context in which it is essential for maintaining the stability of the system. Not only does the EU need a bigger global role, but the US also needs an equal partner now. The main "winners" in this situation would be the revisionist powers in the system.

¹² ROMANYSHYN, Iulian, *Breaking the Law of Opposite Effects: Europe's Strategic Autonomy and the Revived Transatlantic Partnership*, Egmont Institute, EPC Security Policy Brief, No.140, March 2021, p. 1