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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRAGMATIZATION OF THE TRANSATLANTIC PARTNERSHIP: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE	3
<i>Maksym Khylyko</i>	
WHAT DONALD TRUMP’S “PRINCIPLED REALISM” WOULD MEAN FOR TRANSATLANTIC UNITY.....	11
<i>Mykola Kapitonenko</i>	
US POLICY TOWARDS NATO UNDER DONALD J. TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: CAUSES, EUROPEAN RESPONSES, CONSEQUENCES	18
<i>Mykola Bielieskov</i>	
RUSSIA’S CHALLENGES TO THE TRANSATLANTIC UNITY	26
<i>Ihor Todorov</i>	
CHANGE OF THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN THE TRANSATLANTIC REGION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE EVOLUTION OF FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY OF UKRAINE	34
<i>Valeriy Kravchenko</i>	
THE NATO-UKRAINE RELATIONS AFTER THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA	42
<i>Agnieszka Legucka</i>	
GAME CHANGERS: THE FACTOR OF NATO AND UKRAINE’S NATIONAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION	50
<i>Olga Vasylychenko</i>	

WHAT DONALD TRUMP'S "PRINCIPLED REALISM" WOULD MEAN FOR TRANSATLANTIC UNITY

Dr. Mykola Kapitonenko
UA: Ukraine Analytica

Donald Trump's first foreign visit can be considered as a moment to finally provide some conceptual insight into his external policy. It has been wrapped as "principled realism". So far, it seems to generate additional uncertainty, rather than make things more clear, especially in what concerns the future of the transatlantic strategic partnership. Undermining mutual long-term commitments is always easier, while an alternative agenda would require additional efforts. It looks like the American-European relations are heading into a crisis, marked by a lack of trust and growing strategic differences over issues that for decades used to be on a joint agenda. This article provides an assessment of how American foreign policy based on "principled realism" can affect transatlantic ties.

Introduction

Since Donald Trump was elected president, everybody has kept guessing about how his foreign policy would be different from Barack Obama's. Lack of vision accompanied his first months in the office.

In his speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit in Saudi Arabia on 21 May, Donald Trump referred to "principled realism" as a new approach for American foreign policy.¹ Another thing mentioned in the same

speech was a \$110 billion defence contract with the Saudis, which referred to realism in a more quantifiable way. Trump's later speech at NATO Headquarters focused on the GDP percentage spent by the countries for collective defence, while falling short of sending a clear signal to NATO member-states as to whether the US should consider Article 5 of the Washington Treaty binding.² Earlier and later the rhetoric by the American president on the US relations with Europe makes one wonder how "principled realism" would affect transatlantic partnership,

¹ President Trump's Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit, White House, 21 May 2017, [<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/21/president-trumps-speech-arab-islamic-american-summit>].

² Remarks by President Trump at NATO Unveiling of the Article 5 and Berlin Wall Memorials, White House, 25 May 2017, [<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/25/remarks-president-trump-nato-unveiling-article-5-and-berlin-wall>]

arguably the most important partnership for both the US and Europe.

What “Principled Realism” Is About

A combination of values and interests under the notion of “principled realism” is challenging, at least from the international relations theory perspective. The phrase clearly points at a pragmatic foreign policy, which takes values, norms, and principles into account. But it is exactly the way it does so, as well as the exchange ratio for values and pragmatic interests, which is at the centre of debate. How easy is it to combine pragmatism and principles?

Fundamentally, realism is about states pursuing their interests, defined in terms of power.³ There are several distinguishing things a realist observes in world politics.

First, there is anarchy. No supranational institutions or world government can prevent states from doing what they want or make them do what they do not want. Rules of the game are defined by the balance of power, and are as unstable and flexible as the latter. Lack of institutions and norms leads to lack of trust, mutual fear, and preventive actions. In words of K. Waltz, anarchy is a permissive cause of war⁴, and neorealists heavily rely on this assumption. A realist foreign policy takes anarchy for granted and has no illusions about the efficiency of multilateral regimes or international norms. In an anarchical environment, states can rely only on themselves.

Secondly, international politics is state-centric. There are thousands of non-state actors in the world, from international corporations to lobby groups, but only

relations among states matter. States shape agendas, define priorities, and monopolise diplomacy and warfare. Consequently, bodies, which are installed by states, e.g. international organisations, are either instruments or facilitators of states’ goals, desires, and intentions. For a realist, international regimes matter very little, while international norms are relative and weak. Breaking them is easy if it brings about relative gains.

Relative gains, in turn, are better than absolute ones, according to the realist perspective. It means that a realist carefully examines not so much what he or she can get from a partnership, but how a mutual gain would be shared. What really matters is the relative size of a gain, comparing to others. Gaining a smaller part is a bad option, since it will make one weaker compared to someone getting a bigger one. From this point, it is better to abstain from any cooperation at all.⁵ Not surprisingly, realists are sceptical about long-term cooperation, just as they are about international regimes and institutions, which may arise from it.

Thirdly, in shaping the agenda of international relations, states prioritise security concerns. Among a variety of spheres, they pick political and military as the key ones. This hierarchy of issues dominates any agenda.

Finally, negative scenario thinking is a common feature of realism. Since states do not trust each other and there are no supranational institutions to install that trust, the best strategy would be the most cautious one. It is always better to assume the worst intentions among one’s partners and to be ready for a possible backstab.

³ H. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Alfred A. Knopf: NY 1978, pp. 4-15.

⁴ K. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, Columbia University Press: NY 1954.

⁵ R. Powell, *Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory*, “*The American Political Science Review*”, Vol.85, No.4 (Dec. 1991), pp.1303-1320.

The realist line of thinking is quite difficult to merge with principle-guided policy. The latter presumes norms and values as high priorities, be it ideological, religious, or any other. Shared principles help create common identities, at least in what concerns security issues. Partly that is why democracies almost never fight each other, just as Canada and the US are friends, not enemies. Common values and principles make it easier for states to trust each other and make their policies more sustainable and predictable. The security dilemma, so common and destructive within the realist worldview, may be ameliorated by shared norms.


Taking these considerations into account, “principled realism” would hardly be a comprehensive strategy. Realism demands suspicion, while common principles require trust; realism is about relative gains, while principles are about shared values; and – last but not least – shared principles allow free riding, while realism strongly discourages from it.

Theoretically doubtful, this formula nevertheless may become a reflection of the US grand strategy and, in particular, its policy towards the European allies.

Free Riding Effect on Transatlantic Agenda

Applying “principled realism” to the US relations with the European allies may cast doubts over the long-term loyalty and durability of this strategic partnership. This is the most dangerous part. American policy towards NATO, guided by a mix of interests and principles, may actually take different forms. A new approach will surely provide Washington with additional space for manoeuvre. Probably, this is the level of flexibility D. Trump is after; however, the price may go too high.

At the heart of the current disagreement, or at least at what seems to bother the US president regarding NATO, lies the issue of free riding. This is the effect that enables different agents to enjoy the same level of consumption of some common good, even without equal contribution into generating it. This is usually the case with non-divisible resources. In the case of NATO, such common good is security. Since NATO is a collective defence system, it



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maintains the same level of commitment to all its members. No matter how big or small a member of alliance is, joint forces of the rest will protect it. This is a powerful deterrent for any potential adversary. Ability and readiness of the members of the Alliance to stand for each other is a matter of strategic and utmost importance. Credibility of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty is the main reason for NATO’s overwhelming record.

This creates opportunities for free riding. Only five NATO member-states – the United Kingdom, Estonia, Greece, Poland, and the US – spend no less than 2% of their GDP on defence. Spain, Belgium, and Luxemburg spend less than 1% of the GDP, while Iceland almost spends nothing, with less than 0.1%. Per capita annual spending is highest in the US (over \$1,800) and Norway (about \$1,400), with all the rest below the \$1,000 level. In Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, and Romania, per capita spending is less than \$200.⁶ Clearly, there is a huge distance,

⁶ Data from Funding NATO, NATO, [http://www.nato.int/cps/ro/natohq/topics_67655.htm access: 03 June 2017].

and that opens a gap for free riding. There are member-states in NATO that care little about defence, save money, and enjoy the same level of security as the champions of military spending. But does that mean that NATO is a deal that benefits some of the states at the expense of the others?

NATO's overall military budget is about \$1.4 billion; civilian budget is over \$250 million; and the NATO Security Investment Program (NSIP) budget adds another \$700 million to the total. The US covers about 23% of direct contributions to the NATO budget, while second-placed Germany's share is about 15%.⁷ The structure of the Alliance's budget looks much less unbalanced, with major European contributors – Germany, France, and Great Britain – spending no less than the US. Moreover, it was the decision of the NATO Summit in Wales in 2014 to gradually move towards 2% of GDP level of military spending for all member-states.⁸ For some states, this has been unrealistic to achieve immediately.


However, NATO's main deterrent is the military power of the member-states combined and the readiness to employ it, not the Alliance's operational forces and peacekeeping missions. From this perspective, simply having the American security guarantees is a huge advantage for most of the small and medium European states. They may pursue a flexible foreign policy within that framework and also save money by lowering military spending.

From the current American perspective, that should be changed. President Trump is not the first among the US leaders to raise the issue of a fairer burden-sharing within NATO. That has been around for some while, even at the times of the Cold

War. What make Trump's rhetoric different are the speculations about the possible lowering of levels of US commitment to the Alliance. If the American president utilises this as an argument to persuade the allies to spend more, it may not be the best tactics. Side effects will include weakening of trust within NATO and undermining the US strategic interests.

European-American Unity: What is at Stake

Global security, nuclear non-proliferation, and democratic values are the most important outcomes of the transatlantic strategic partnership. Each of them may



Stability may fall the first victim to D. Trump's understanding of realism in foreign policy as making everybody pay for security. Unlike money, security is indivisible.

to a certain extent be endangered if the newly adopted "principled realism" is based much more on realism than on principles. A strategic alliance within NATO gave way to the world's most institutionalised security network, which now encompasses several multilateral organisations and regimes on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. More than 70 years of durable peace in Europe, a continent that previously hosted the most devastating wars in history, is the result.

Stability may fall the first victim to D. Trump's understanding of realism in foreign policy as making everybody pay for security. Unlike money, security is

⁷ *ibidem*.

⁸ Wales Summit Declaration, NATO, 05 September 2014, [http://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm access: 03 June 2017].

indivisible. Free riding will always be there. But the riding may not necessarily be so free. NATO members pay for their security with readiness to take joint risks and to be militarily involved if necessary. A high level of solidarity is the common good created within the Alliance and enjoyed by all its members. This, in turn, generates a high level of trust. The member-states know what to expect from each other and adapt their policies respectively. Trust allowed the Europeans to shift from a traditional Realpolitik of the 19th century to the current neoliberal paradigm, and NATO has played a crucial role in this.

Some global security issues are also at stake and will heavily depend on the future of transatlantic partnership. The most important of them from the US perspective is the non-proliferation regime. One of the utmost strategic interests of the US is to keep the number of states with nuclear weapons as low as possible. For about seven decades, American efforts have been quite effective, and the number of states with nuclear arsenal is strikingly low, given the importance of the technology and the desire of many to possess it. Extended security commitments work perfectly well to discourage states from acquiring nuclear weapons. Arguably, Germany and Japan are still non-nuclear due to American security guarantees. It is critically important for the non-proliferation regime to function properly to keep credible US security commitments in Europe.

Democracy is probably an institution that can stick interests and principles together. Democratic values and procedures do help to frame and channel foreign policy aspirations of states and tools they use to achieve desired outcomes. Shared

democracies on a bilateral level generate mutual trust and help construct positive perceptions. In security terms, mutual democracy helps ameliorate security dilemma in relations between two states. It remains to be seen whether “principled realism” will be principled enough to keep emphasis on democratic values.

Contours of Possible New Transatlantic Security

If a more realistic approach is taken by the US Administration, Europe will have to respond. A drift away from neoliberalism, already visible in Europe, will be reinforced. Strengthening of states, more emphasis on hard power, and less institutionalised security could be a likely outcome.

Consolidating security policy on a state level would further weaken the EU’s common security and defence policy. It is already facing serious problems in dealing with Russia’s revisionism and the refugee crisis.⁹ Both challenges require concerted actions and similar priority setting, while the level of cohesion among the European states remains low. A general framework, within which the European Neighbourhood Policy is being carried out, may collapse. So far, it has been based on the common interest of the European states to have a friendly, democratic, and prosperous environment and application of the EU’s normative power to that end. However, with a weakened CSDP, the member-states’ priorities may split. With a growing pressure from Russia, geopolitical considerations may become more important, at least for some European states. The understanding of security may also change: While for some it will remain broad and transnational, for others it may become more traditional, with emphasis on hard power.

⁹ Refugee Crisis in Europe, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/refugee-crisis_en access: 04 June 2017].

Departure of the United Kingdom from the EU would enhance those trends. First, the UK was a transatlantic bridge without which the Americans and Europeans would find it more difficult to speak the same strategic language. Secondly, without the UK, a balance within the EU will be disturbed, and its restoration may go along the lines of countering the Berlin-Paris tandem. In this case, European politics may over time return to a more traditional balance of power model, which will result in increasing differences over strategic issues.

More realism for European security will result in more emphasis on hard power and growing military spending.¹⁰ Proceeding from worst-case scenarios and entrapped into the security dilemma, the European states will become more inclined to unilateral decision making. The rising value of military advantage will result in further increase of military budgets, which in some cases may lead to local arms races. It should be noted that geography will contribute to divorcing strategic interests: The EU member-states in Eastern Europe and/or the Black Sea region will feel less secure due to neighbouring Russia. If any major crisis appears on the horizon, it will become an uneasy test for the credibility of collective defence systems in Europe.

Tackling the Russian threat and elaborating a long-term strategy towards the current Eastern Partnership states will be another challenge for a more realist European security. Recent events in Ukraine proved that Russia is ready to pay a high price for securing geopolitical control over the post-Soviet space, of which Ukraine is the

most important element. A new stability in Europe will in that case resemble the Cold War type of bilateral balancing, rather than the recent neoliberal models. Risks of local and regional conflicts will continue to rise.

The already existing regional conflicts would be harder to resolve. That will be even more so in the sphere of Russia's perceived interests. Post-Soviet frozen conflicts have never been close to any sort of resolution, but for now, each of them will become a zero-sum game. Geopolitical rivalry, imagined or real, will accompany any regional conflict.

The weakening of the transatlantic ties will reinforce almost every negative trend in European security. American commitments, involvement, and institutional support generated a broader approach to security, helping it overcome hard-power realist limitations. With the weakening of those, Europe may find it much more difficult to manage a balance-of-power system.

Conclusion

A. Merkel's speech in Munich, days after Trump's voyage to Europe, indicated that the American message on "principled realism" has been delivered and properly received. The German chancellor stressed that times have changed and the Europeans have to take care of themselves.¹¹ This surely has a pre-election connotation. Nevertheless, the essence is also here: There is a growing gap between the US and Europe, the world's closest and most durable allies. This may result in a tectonic geopolitical shift with far-reaching consequences, including growing security risks for both.

¹⁰ World Military Spending: Increases in the USA and Europe, Decreases in Oil-Exporting Countries, SIPRI, 24 April 2017, [https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2017/world-military-spending-increases-usa-and-europe].

¹¹ After Summits With Trump, Merkel Says Europe Must Take Fate Into Own Hands, "Reuters World News", 29 May 2017, [http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-politics-merkel-idUSKBN1800JK].

Donald Trump's realism may be too realistic to handle the strategic alliance with the Europeans, in which values used to play a crucial role. On the other hand, "principles" may not be enough to fix the damage done to mutual trust. It is easy to start doubting the intentions and reliability of each other, while it will be much more difficult to get confidence back.

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