

## Trump and the Future of NATO

by Tarık OĞUZLU

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO, the linchpin of transatlantic security structure, has been in a continuous process of transformation and adaptation. Despite the pessimists, most of whom are neo-realists in the lexicon of International Relations, NATO has succeeded in adapting itself to the emerging security dynamics of the last twenty-five years. Enlarging to the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, performing out-of-area military operations in Europe and its beyond and defining transnational terrorism, lack of good governance in Europe's peripheries, cyber warfare and organized crime as the existential threats confronting its members, NATO has proved its resilience over the turbulent years of the past-quarter century.

Yet, the glue binding NATO members to each other has always been the undisputed American commitment to the security needs of its European allies. This has continued during the US-led unipolar era. Even though there is no agreement among analysts as to which years this US-led unipolar era exactly cover, the commonly held assumption is that this era lasted until the global financial crisis erupted in 2008. Since then, the weakening of the US-led liberal world order has been quite evident. During the unipolar era, NATO allies seem to have shared the common



view that the European continent still attracted the lion share of the United States' strategic attention, despite the sporadic crises in the Middle East and East Asia.

Another consensus-point among NATO allies was that the continuation of NATO as the linchpin of European security structure would not only produce a conducive environment for the deepening of the EU integration process but also help allay those European allies that might potentially feel irked by the specter of Germany becoming an hegemonic power in the middle of the continent. NATO allies also assumed that with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation would no longer be in a position to threaten the well-established security order in Europe, for its diminishing capabilities would not allow this to happen. Russia's western oriented foreign and domestic policy outlook in the 1990s also gave hope that the more Russia wanted to become a part of Europe, the more receptive an attitude she would develop vis-à-

vis the alliance. For a particular time period, the US-led unipolarity continued to provide the most suitable geopolitical environment in which NATO continued to exist as a credible security actor and the US commitment to the security needs of its allies remained undisputed.

However, the major permissive factor behind the persistence of NATO has been the continuation of the US-led liberal world order in which western powers could succeed in shaping the tone of global politics profoundly. To put it another way, the apparent 'end of history' with the victory of liberalism against its ideological rivals constituted the background against which liberal powers of the western international community cooperated within NATO to achieve their security needs. The liberal character of the global order facilitated the persistence of the alliance. Otherwise, it would have been extremely difficult for NATO members to maintain their commitment to their security within NATO in the face of growing strategic differences absent the unifying Soviet threat.

Despite the common ideological glue binding NATO allies to each other, allies found it extremely difficult to coalesce around common threat perceptions and strategic priorities during much of the post-Cold War era. For example, while the United States perceived the alliance mainly as a force multiplier and considered its multilateral mechanisms as a constraint on its decision making autonomy, European allies tried to make sure that NATO provide them with institutional capabilities to help shape American priorities and policies. From Washington's perspective for NATO to remain as a relevant and credible security organization it needed to move

out of area, whereas European allies continued to invest in NATO's European character.

While the United States argued for NATO adopting expeditionary war-making capabilities, European allies paid a significant importance to NATO remaining a Europe-oriented collective defense organization. While the United States saw NATO's enlargement toward Central and Eastern European countries as strengthening its primacy in the post-Cold War European security order, NATO's European allies paid much closer attention to how Russian leaders might respond to NATO's coming closer to Russia's borders. From the perspective of European allies NATO's post-Cold war era transformation should not put Europe's relations with Russia into jeopardy, for the need on the part of European allies to be on good terms with Russia was more evident than the need on the part of the United States to take Russian concerns into account while formulating its foreign and security policy priorities.

For European allies NATO should not act as a legitimizing platform for unilateral American military involvement across the globe as well as put them in unwanted contingencies driven by American-only security priorities.

With Trump now in power, NATO will likely face more challenges than ever in its post-Cold War era history. First, Trump does not seem to believe that there is a western international community built on common identity, morality and values. Such a skeptical attitude towards the existence of a western community of nations would likely erode NATO's ideational roots and legitimacy. We knew that Obama had claimed to be the first American president of the post-Amer-

ican world. Yet, Trump's commitment to the transatlantic community seems to be much lower than that of Obama. Trump's "America First" approach runs the risk of hollowing out NATO's identity as the league of liberal democratic states. Trump's support to far-right and populist movements across the continent as well as his strong criticisms of mainstream political parties in leading European countries, such as Germany and France, seem to have already caused a crisis of confidence and credibility in transatlantic relations. For example German Prime Minister Merkel warned Trump against the negative consequences of endangering the liberal democratic values of the transatlantic community and asked Trump to respect the founding rationale of the European Union's integration process. The head of the European Council, Donald Tusk, openly referred to the United States of President Trump as a potential threat leveled against the existing European security and political order.

Second, Trump made it clear that he would no longer tolerate the free-riding of European allies on the United States. Adopting a transactional and businessman-like approach towards its international interlocutors, Trump is predisposed to ask how much the United States would gain or lose from an international engagement. This suggests that he prioritizes the numerics of US military expenditures within NATO over how the alliance contributes to the materialization of US security interests across the globe. He seems to be extremely preoccupied with the burden sharing issue within NATO. He seems to ignore the structural benefits of NATO's persistence for the United States. Re-emergence of balance of power politics in Europe in the absence of American commitment to European security

through NATO might incur far greater costs in future than the amount of money that the US spends within NATO now. Besides, NATO, together with the European Union, binds Germany to the transatlantic community. Absent such institutional structures in Europe, Germany's growing power capabilities will likely cause further security anxieties on the part of many European countries, least of which are France and the countries lying on Germany's borders. NATO also offers the most credible security deterrent against Russia, whose geopolitical assertiveness has spectacularly increased in recent years.

Third, Trump applauded the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union and pointed out to this as an example to be emulated by other European nations, which have grown extremely uneasy about the post-modern EU integration process as well as the multilateral approaches in global governance issues in recent years. As a 'nationalist' and 'nativist' rather than 'internationalist' or 'globalist', Trump lends his support to similar political groups in other countries, notably European allies. Trump sees the European Union as an example of multilateral integration exercise in the field of economics and NATO in the field of security. He seems to be of the view that tackling economic and security issues within bilateral mechanisms would yield far greater benefits to the United States than relying on multilateral mechanisms. This approach would likely erode NATO and push each and every European ally to face the United States bilaterally.

In a similar vein Trump seems to trumpet a more 'isolationist' than 'internationalist' strategic orientation. Acting in the footsteps of 19th

century American President Andrew Jackson, Trump adopts a skeptical approach towards outside engagements if they particularly foresee substantial American military and economic investments. In his view, American leaders should somehow scale down their global engagements and put the territorial integrity and economic well-being of their country at the center of United States' foreign policies. Such a view suggests that NATO's European allies should invest much more than they do now in their security.

Fourth, Trump seems to have developed a highly positive view of Putin's Russia. During his presidential campaign, Trump criticized the sanctions put on Russia in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and hybrid warfare in eastern Ukraine. Putin's support to Trump's prospective presidency was also well known. Trump strongly believes that the United States could/should cooperate with Russia against the so-called Islamic extremism evident in Iraq and Syria as well as other security challenges in the wider Middle Eastern region. Trump would also like to capitalize on cooperation with Russia against the so-called China threat. Just as the United States made a strategic opening to China with a view to dealing with the existential Soviet threat during the Cold War era, Trump believes Washington should now come closer to Russia against China, for the latter proves to be a more vital threat to American primacy than the former. Such a pro-Putin stance on the part of Trump seems to have caused strong consternation on the part of NATO's European allies, particularly those bordering Russia. Many European members of NATO continue to view Russia as a growing threat to be reckoned with and support the continuation of the sanctions by the

time they produce a positive change in Russia's behaviors. However, in Trump's view the strategic attention of the United States should strongly switch to East Asia, for dealing with China will prove to be more decisive for American interests as well as the future of the global order.

Trump's skeptical approach towards NATO will likely accelerate the erosion of the alliance in the years to come. There will remain only two choices before NATO's European allies: They will either increase their investment in their own security in line with Trump's wishes or toe the Russian line in the face of diminishing American credibility in their eyes.

### ***About BILGESAM***

Established in 2008, the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM) is one of the leading think tanks in Turkey. As a non-profit, non-partisan organization BILGESAM operates under the guidance of a group of well-respected academics from different disciplines, retired military generals and diplomats; and aims to contribute regional and global peace and prosperity. Closely following the domestic and international developments, BILGESAM conducts research on Turkey's domestic problems, foreign policy and security strategies, and the developments in the neighbouring regions to provide the Turkish decision-makers with practical policy recommendations and policy options.

### ***About Author***

Prof. Dr. Tarık Oğuzlu is currently the Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences and the Director of the Center for Social, Economic and Political Research (SEPAM, [www.sepam.antalya.edu.tr](http://www.sepam.antalya.edu.tr)) at Antalya International University. He holds a Ph.D. degree in International Relations taken from Bilkent University in 2003. He holds a Master of Science degree in International Relations taken from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2000 as well as a Master of Arts degree in International Relations taken from Bilkent University in 1998. He was granted the Jean Monnet Scholarship of the European Commission in 1999. He works on the following subjects: international relations theories, Europeanization of foreign policy, European Union foreign and security policy, transatlantic relations, Turkish foreign policy, Turkey's relations with EU and NATO/US, Turkey-Greece relations, Cyprus dispute, Turkey and the Middle East. He is one of the co-editors of the book "Turkey's Rise as an Emerging Power". He has academic articles published in such journals as Political Science Quarterly, Washington Quarterly, Middle East Policy, International Journal, Security Dialogue, Middle Eastern Studies, Turkish Studies, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, European Security, International Spectator, Contemporary Security Policy, Mediterranean Politics, Australian Journal of International Affairs, Journal of Balkans and Near Eastern Studies, Insight Turkey and Uluslararası İlişkiler, etc. He writes policy briefs on international politics and security issues for SEPAM and BILGESAM ([www.bilgesam.org/en](http://www.bilgesam.org/en))