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THE ROOTS OF TRUMP’S FOREIGN POLICY: OFFENSIVE REALISM OR EYE WASHING TWILIGHT?

Abstract:

Beyond his low popularity and lack of experience in governance, Donald Trump is already one of the most “out of type” presidents of the American history. Despite the fact that he just spent almost one and a half year on the presidency, his domestic and foreign policy approaches dominate the agenda of international public opinion. In particular, his discourses on American foreign policy’s approach towards the international system offer great aggression. In other words, on the basis of discursive, Trump’s foreign policy approach accords with the classic approach of American foreign policy which is mostly based on offensive realism. On the other hand, in the practice, Trump faces various internal and external difficulties to realize his foreign policy approach. Besides these difficulties, Trump’s practical foreign policy implementations dramatically decrease the prestigious of the States and harm the historical “American Exceptionalism” image. This paper aims to produce a comparative approach to Trump’s foreign policy between theory and in practice. According to the findings of this study, Trump considers the American foreign policy as an instrument to consolidate his domestic power and popularity. On the other hand, use of the American foreign policy as a “political card” does not appear as a rational option to maximize the power capacity of the United States.

Keywords:

Donald John Trump, American Foreign Policy, Offensive Realism

Introduction

Despite the fact that many people consider politics as a rational interaction between the political elites and citizens, sometimes politics do not meet the rational expectations of the national and international public opinions. In other

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words, in some cases “expect the unexpected” motto of Murphy Laws may be valid for political elections all around the world. In this context, unexpected results from political elections entail a quite basic but very critical question: *What will happen now?*

In 2016, the presidential election in the USA, which has named Donald John Trump the 45th President of USA perfectly matches with the aforementioned case. In spite of Hillary Clinton's high popularity and previous positions in governance, the majority of the American voters has elected Trump who could be considered as a “closed book” both for American and international politics. Despite the fact that the reasons behind the Trump's victory worth to be examined carefully; this paper prefers to focus the Trump's foreign policy approach. Needless to say that likewise the other country's citizens, Americans also consider Trump's domestic policy implementations as their (non)satisfactions' primary indicator; on the other hand, definitely Trump's foreign policy indicators will be the most decisive constituent of the international system and power politics.

Exactly at this point, another very important question emerges: *How Trump and the international political system counterpoised their each other?* According to this study, the short answer to this question is sceptical. Inasmuch, according to the point of view of an international system, Trump was a “businessman”, on the other hand, due to his financial capacity, Trump was considering himself as the “boss” of the international system. Quite a long time, this mutual obscurity dominated a very sensitive triangle: Trump himself, the traditions of US foreign policy and the international system. In the context of this equation, in fact, the international system and US foreign policy were used to themselves. Since the end of the I World War, US foreign policy can be considered as the great combination of idealism and realism. All the American presidents consider themselves as the global advocate of democratic and liberal values which constructs the soul of idealism. On the other hand, rationality and power maximization in the frame of offensive realism rise to the occasion of American foreign policy in its every single implementation. In the meantime, the international system is mostly shaped by the position of US foreign policy. In other words, relations between the US foreign policy and the international system are based on a relative prediction. On the other hand, Trump's discourses² distressed both the traditions of US foreign policy and international system based on this question: *Are we experiencing an epoch-making figure in the sense of obscurity?* The following chapter of this paper shall focus on the main arguments of offensive realism and its samples on US foreign policy. Afterward, Trump's foreign policy will be tested on this theory and finally, an explanatory overall evolution will be produced.

² In this study, the author prefers to make a clear distinction between Trump's discourses and his implementations.

The Footprints of Offensive Realism on US Foreign Policy

John J. Mearsheimer's reinterpretation of classic realism constructs the main arguments of offensive realism in his famous book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. In this context, Mearsheimer asks a basic question for his theory: *Why states have considerable reason to think and sometimes act aggressively?*³ According to his answers, the following responses emerge respectively:

- Despite the fact that the nature of the international system is chaotic this situation should not be confused with a pure conflict. This chaos stems from the lack of international governance over national governances;
- Militarization should be counted as a primary object which creates the security dilemma and risks for states to be hurt;
- States are sceptical about their each other and can't estimate their behaviours;
- Survival is the primary objective of states and in this context, states have a tendency to maximize their movement area;
- States are rational actors and they are aware of the international dynamics. Finally, states think strategic⁴.

By a spell backward of Mearsheimer's assumptions, it can be argued that if states don't think strategic and rational, they miss the international conjuncture, they might use their military potential wrongly, they minimize their movement area and finally, they can't survive. In the final analyses, for states, Mearsheimer's theory's ultimate goal is the power maximization. On the other hand, naturally, there are many strong criticisms of Mearsheimer's theory. For instance, Peter Toft argues that Mearsheimer is blind to other decisive instruments of foreign policy such as economic warfare⁵, identity, soft power, population, type of the government or in short, other non-military means. In fact, the majority of criticisms against Mearsheimer focus on the fact that Mearsheimer locates his theory into a pure militarized and security-obsessed perspective. On the other hand, this approach shouldn't be considered surprising because Mearsheimer is a "Cold War-oriented academician". In the second place, it is possible to give meaning to International Relations (IR) by using the non-military means but it is impossible to describe the nature of IR without using the militarism. In the same time, it shouldn't be expected from Mearsheimer to contradict with the major arguments of classic realism, because Mearsheimer only adds the *why* question to the main arguments of classic realism. Consequently, despite the fact that solutions to Mearsheimer's quintet findings might seem like the major arguments of idealism; in fact, according to

³ J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001, pp. 29.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 29-31.

⁵ P. Toft, *John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist Between Geopolitics and Power*, "Journal of International Relations and Development" 2005, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 384.

many scholars, the accuracy and popularity of classic realism constructs the existence reason of other IR theories⁶. In other words, when classic/offensive realism is taken from the IR literature, the rest of the IR theories fail to claim their arguments. As it is argued in the very beginning of this paper, US foreign policy should be considered as the combination of idealism and classic/offensive realism, in the following part of this study, Mearsheimer's standpoints will be analyzed on different turning points of US foreign policy in a quick look.

During the preparation period of the Great War, according to many scholars, "the lack of governance over the governances" was one of the most important decisive factors of the war. In this context, shortly after the I World War, the IR academy was largely in the favour of idealism⁷. On the other hand, not only the IR scholars but also the US foreign policymakers were in the favour of this trend. In this context, Woodrow Wilson who is considered as one of the most important prime movers of idealism laid the foundation stone of the League of Nations in 1918. In the same way, after the II World War, despite the strong tendency to realism, in 1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt was trying the same attempt due to the failure of the League of Nations by becoming the initiator of the United Nations. Needless to mention that the "international governance" issue was not the "magical solution recipe" of the states' aggressive nature. According to Mearsheimer, security dilemma due to intense militarization tendency of states should be considered as another major factor.

According to Todor Mirkovic, during the Cold War era due to the technological race between the polar leaders, the international system entered into a very sophisticated militarization⁸. In fact, militarization was not an unfamiliar development for the international system; but the profile of the weapons was quite threatening for the states. In this context, it might be argued that during the Cold War era, the rationality of the states was suppressed by a security paranoia. On the other hand, despite this intense nuclear militarization, polar leaders didn't leave the rationality completely. In this respect, SALT 1-2 Treaties (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) were signed between Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev in 1972 and finally, SALT 2 is signed between Jimmy Carter and Leonid Brezhnev in 1979. Certainly, these two treaties were the glory of rationality and major steps in favour of mutual understanding between the polar leaders for establishing a more nuclear weapon free world⁹. On the other hand, despite these rare positive developments regarding the limitation of

⁶ E. Özlük, *Gelenekselcilik-Davranışsalılık Tartışmasını Bağlamında Anlamak*, "Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi" 2009, Vol. 64, No. 3, pp. 199.

⁷ A. Bennett, G. J. Ikenberry, *The Review's Evolving Relevance for U.S. Foreign Policy 1906-2006*, "American Political Science Review" 2006, Vol. 100, No. 4, pp. 654.

⁸ T. Mirkovic, *The World's Globalization, and Global Militarization*, "Vojno Delo" 2015, Vol. 6, pp. 7.

⁹ S. Kavuncu, *Nükleer Silahsızlanma Yolunda Start Süreci*, "Bilge Strateji" 2013, Vol. 5, No. 8, pp. 120.

strategic arms still, states' strong tendency to scepticism is one of the most important chronic problems of IR. Without any doubt, even today there is no solution recipe is "invented" for this problem, but it is possible to argue that an advanced dialogue platform between the states might decrease the paranoiac attitude of states to their each other.

In this context, October 1962 was not only the most critical year of the Cold War era but also it was a turning point for the recent world history. A careless "Russian roulette" between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev was almost transforming the Cold War into a very "hot war". Needless to mention that Cuban Missile Crisis is very much worthing to be analyzed in the sense of decision-making process in IR or for practicing the game theories, but one of the most important consequents of Cuban Missile Crisis is the establishment of "hotline" which allowed the direct communication between the US and Soviet leaders¹⁰. Tough, Cuban Missile Crisis is mostly analyzed in the frame of Soviets' defeat after a "chicken game"; in fact, the crises should also be considered as a *win-win policy* as a result of rationality's glory especially when the potential result of a global nuclear war is counted. Since the finalization of Cuban Missile Crisis is considered as the start of *detente period* in IR, synchronously it can be argued that scepticism between the polar leaders had started to gradually decrease.

Hitherto all these mentioned developments on US foreign policy refer to particular cases which are dominated by the rationalism. On the other hand, there are extremely few cases in American history which forced the USA to deal with survival concerns. In the first place, the American Civil War (1861-1865) might be considered as a matter of life and death for the USA. In the recent times, definitely, 9/11 attacks took a similar effect for the American nation. Despite of the fact that as an independent case, the effects of 9/11 attacks might relatively differ from nation to nation; but without any doubt for the USA it was a totally unexpected development especially when it is taken into account that besides the American Civil War, 9/11 was the only case that the USA exposed to physical attacks within his own territory. In this context, the effects of these unexpected attacks immediately showed themselves on US foreign policy under the name of *Bush Doctrine* or *Preemptive War Doctrine*. George W. Bush's "the best defence is the offense" motto was anticipating military aggression not only to target states but also to non-state actors¹¹ even for reasonable doubt. Thus, after the Cold War era for the first time, USA has embarked on such a wide range of military attempts starting from Iraq and Afghanistan. By the Iraq and Afghanistan operations, US foreign policy was proving that despite involving to the principles of so-called idealism, when needed, US foreign policy never avoids from using the hard power.

¹⁰ J. Swift, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, "History Review" 2007, Vol. 57, pp. 10.

¹¹ S. Clavier, *Contrasting Perspectives and Preemptive Strike: The United States, France The War on Terror*, "Maine Law Review" 2006, Vol. 58, No. 2, pp. 572.

To sum up, in the light of this information the following conclusions might be counted regarding the traditional roots of US foreign policy:

- Rationality constructs the primary principle of US foreign policy;
- Time to time, in spite of transforming into an idealist perspective, always US foreign policy deals with the main arguments of offensive realism;
- Bluffing is not a primary tool for US foreign policy;
- One of the most visible mottoes of US foreign policy is “action speaks louder than words”;
- Finally, consistency is one of the most important features of US foreign policy.

A Consistent Foreign Policy on Inconsistency

Make American great again – the campaign slogan that was popularized by Trump. It is a general belief that similar to painting, music or chess, the usage of diplomacy is an art. The only matter is, in practice the use of diplomacy might offer a profile in parallel with “fine arts” or it might turn into “martial arts”. Certainly, populism and valour should be considered as the major enemies of well-functioning diplomacies. According to Walter Russel Mead, exclusively in the USA, suburban libertarians, rural fundamentalists, ambitious pundits, unconstructed racists, and finally conservative housewives should be considered as the main target group of populist and heroic discourses¹². Needless to mention that these classes were the key groups which provided Trump's election victory. On the other hand, in spite of not spending many decades on the presidency, the foreign policy approach of Trump gave important signals to the international system. The following table describes the major foreign policy strategies of Trump and these strategies will be tested in different fields of US foreign policy.

Tab. 1. Donald Trump policy strategy.

| Aim | Strategy | Outcome |
|---------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Tour De Force | Threatening | Resistance |
| Rallying | Retreat | Power Dissipation |
| Re-Gaining Strength | Reconciliation | Confusion |

Source: own work.

After Trump coming to power, USA's relations with North Korea, Russia, and Iran; his approach to European allies and NATO; finally the nature of US

¹² W. R. Mead, *The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy: What Populism Means for Globalism*, “Foreign Affairs” 2011, Vol. 90, No. 2, pp. 29.

foreign policy towards the Syrian Crisis were the most anticipated questions in the sense of US foreign policy. In this context, the North Korea question has become one of the most important political engagements of Trump.

Despite the fact that in the first sight North Korea issue might seem as a non-privileged issue for the USA due to the country was a “half closed book” for the USA for more than a half century; however, Trump decided to practice his *tour de force* on North Korea. In this point, it should be mentioned that Pyongyang’s “huge interest” to nuclear weapons was not a new attempt both for the USA and the international system. After the escalation of tension between two parties, on 3rd January 2018, Trump’s threatening post on Twitter to Kim Jong-Un: “...*My nuclear button is much bigger and more powerful...*” called the Cuban Missile Crisis to international public opinion’s mind. The only difference was on the aforementioned date the international system was not experiencing a Cold War. In other words, the recent development between the USA and North Korea was not a natural growing crisis but it was a Trump oriented artificial crises. In order to support the artificiality of that case, two supportive developments shall be given. On 11th April 2018, Trump threatened Russia on Twitter by the following post: “*Russia vows the shoot down any and all missiles fired at Syria. Get ready Russia because they will be coming nice and new and “smart”*”. Kremlin’s reply to this post was: “*We do not participate in Twitter diplomacy and we support serious approaches*” which was quite harmful to the great image of American diplomacy. Consequently, on 12th June 2018 Trump had become the first American President meeting with a North Korean leader. In spite of this development is counted as a plus for Trump’s foreign policy still the international public opinion couldn’t find the proper answer this question: *What’s changed between the USA and North Korea in six months?* Inasmuch as, North Korea’s nuclear program is developing and North Korean citizens are still indoctrinating by anti-Americanism¹³.

Besides his provocative nuclear Twitter diplomacy, the Jerusalem declaration revolutionized the USA’s relations with different international actors. In the first week of December 2017, Trump recognized the Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. On the other hand, due to the rising protests in various countries and organizations, UN General Assembly refused the proposal of the USA. Surprisingly, many EU countries also opposed the Trump’s Jerusalem declaration. Because of this reason, EU has become the target of the USA. According to Antonio Missiroli, NATO is very necessary for European security, due to still EU couldn’t undertake its own army¹⁴. By knowing this fact during the G-7 Summit in Quebec, Trump called NATO “as bad as NAFTA.” In spite of his threats about quitting from NATO, the mutual

¹³ D. A. Pinkston, *North Korea’s Foreign Policy Towards the United States*, “Strategic Insights” 2006, Vol. 5, No. 7, pp. 4.

¹⁴ A. Missiroli, *EU-NATO Cooperation in Crisis Management: No Turkish Delight for ESDP*, “Security Dialogue” 2002, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 9.

interests of both parties make Trump's discourses utopian. Likewise EU, Iran also has become the target of the USA due to his certain attitude towards the Jerusalem declaration. In the first week of May 2018, Trump cancelled the nuclear deal with Iran by leaving the "door open" which was signed by intense efforts. In the light of this information the great paradox is the following questions: "Can USA achieve his goals in Syria by himself? If not, how Trump's America will be a trustworthy actor in the eyes of these other great powers?"

Conclusion

State and power are two inseparable twins. Through the development of the IR discipline, all the theoretic approaches try to produce the relation between these two vital notions. Idealists claim the preventability of conflicts and wars while classic realists disagree to the death. Exactly in this point, the offensive realists emerge. Instead of maintaining the vicious cycle between these two theories, offensive realists achieve to give the meaning of IR by asking the why and how questions. Needles to mention, that Mearsheimer's theory turns into practice on US foreign policy in different cases of different US presidents. Inasmuch as the great power of the USA comes from the clearance of the state policy and government policy distinction which most of the failed states suffer from. Yet, during the first years of his presidency, Trump seems decisive to change the "rules" of US foreign policy by using his *sui generis* methods. In this respect, recently US foreign policy has been the "target board" of Trump's too much confidence and the traditions of US foreign policy. The negative matter is the fact that the most critical issues of the international system attract the long-lasting bluffs of Trump. The dominance and the determination of US foreign policy will determine the result of USA's "Russian roulette" with the man who treats everyone.

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