The Strategic Culture of Trump's America NATO Policy: A Neoclassical Realist Approach

Abstract

Systemic imperatives are considered the major shaping factor of domestic intervening variables in neoclassical realism. The present article aims to study how the first shapes which variant of American strategic culture and its subcultures tends to manifest under certain structural conditions, having as object of research the Trump's Administration NATO policy from 2017 to 2019. It was found that systemic conditions in the strategic environment, as interpreted by Trump's foreign policy executive, favored the expression of a hardline unilateralist subculture of American strategic culture, heir of the Jacksonian tradition. However, the foreign policy executive as a whole is diverse and tends to vary between hardline unilateralists who aim to make NATO more conditional in terms of burden-sharing and conservative nationalists who reassure allies of US commitments to Europe's collective defense.

Introduction

The Trump presidency has caused a substantive impact on top decision-makers among NATO allies and researchers around the world due to its resolute position regarding burden-sharing within the alliance. There could be multiple standpoints to study and decipher Trump's position on NATO, some of which includes perspectives on the degree of personal adherence to international liberalism by the president, or merely structural incentives.

The goal of the present article is to merge two approaches to study this phenomenon: neoclassical realism and strategic culture. The first approach will allow for a systematization of how the independent variable (systemic imperatives) interacts with the domestic intervening variable (strategic culture) to shape US-NATO policy under the Trump Administration.

The present article will be guided by the following research question: how can a neoclassical realist approach explain the interaction of systemic imperatives with strategic cultural aspects that shaped Trump's foreign policy executive (FPE) NATO policy from 2017 to 2019?

Point 2 of the article explains the methodological procedures to reach the goal expressed by the research question;

Point 3 provides an overview of neoclassical realism;

Point 4 introduces the concepts of strategic culture, the debates within the literature regarding such concepts, and dissects the sources of strategic culture;

Point 5 proposes an approach, based on the existing literature, to intersect neoclassical realism and strategic culture;

Point 6 provides the general guidelines of American strategic culture and its main subcultures;

Point 7 briefly studies how the American strategic subcultures penetrated the Republican Party, and how that partially explains Trump's perspectives of international affairs;

Point 8 analyzes US-NATO policy through the combination of approaches proposed by the present article;

Point 9 offers some synthetic remarks about the main results of this study and prospective fields to explore in neoclassical realism.

Methodology

The present article constitutes a qualitative research based on bibliographical review, exploring previous approaches proposed by primary authors on the subject, such as Colin Dueck and Colin Gray. Scientific articles and specialized books compose the informational input of the present research, although a governmental document is also used.

This research opts for a deductive method, starting with the general theoretical structure and narrowing it to explain a particular case. Thus, this article adopts the following steps:

1. Systematization of the theoretical and conceptual approaches;
2. Specification of how neoclassical realism and strategic culture intersect as analytical devices;
3. Describe American strategic culture and its subcultures and how they operate through decision-makers and their respective visions and analyses of America's place in the world;
4. Analyze Trump's FPE NATO policy using the approaches proposed.

Neoclassical Realism: Model and Framework

Considered one of the main founding fathers of neoclassical realism, Gideon Rose (1998) systematized this theoretical model by distinguishing theories of international politics, whose analytical purpose is to explain patterns of outcomes in the interactions among states in the international system; from theories of foreign policy, which aim to elucidate State behavior through the analysis of its foreign policy and decision-making processes. Neoclassical realism intends to bridge this divide by incorporating internal and external variables under a single framework. According to Rose, systemic pressures are paramount, thus, relative power, material capabilities, and place in the international system are the starting point for neoclassical realists. However, systemic imperatives must be translated by domestic intervening variables, and often, incomplete information emanating from the international system and ambiguous evidence make it problematic for leaders and decision-makers to interpret the distribution of capabilities and read the messages of anarchy.

Given this general picture, it is important to describe the main starting point of neoclassical realism: systemic imperatives, in accordance with the conceptual delineation of structural realism. One of the core ordering principles of the international system is anarchy

(Waltz, 1977), which is the absence of formal structures of command and subordination. According to Waltz, in an anarchical structural organization: "Authority quickly reduces to a particular expression of capability. In the absence of agents with system-wide authority, formal relations of super- and subordination fail to develop." (p. 88). Hence, distribution of capabilities becomes the major distinguishing factor of the units that compose the system, and since units coexist in an anarchical environment, they can use force at any time, and must be prepared to do so in order to avoid living at the mercy of their most powerful homologous. In such self-help dynamics where States seek to assure their own preservation, balances of power tend to form in two categories:

1. Internal balancing: States make internal efforts to strengthen their economic and military capabilities, and also enhance better strategies;
2. External balancing: engaging in alliances and strengthening them while weakening the opponents.

Waltz's structural realism object of study was international outcomes, not unit attributes, and processes. Therefore, structural constraints explain why a set of patterns of reactions are expected amongst formally undifferentiated units, in this case, the States. The process of structural socialization leads States to adopt, emulate, and adapt the best practices of their peers that have proven to be successful. Waltz uses market analogies to analyze how impersonal conditions govern the behavior of units and reward successful competitors, and this process builds models and patterns of expected behaviors from the actors. Nonetheless, even if Waltz wrote that States who emulated the best practices and strategies in the process of international socialization tended to maximize their chances of survival, he did not explain what factors led States to adopt a certain strategy over another. Waltz himself recognizes this theoretical shortfall: "The clear perception of constraints provides many clues to the expected reactions of states, but by itself, the theory cannot explain those reactions. They depend not only on international constraints but also on the characteristics of states. How will a particular state react? To answer that question, we need not only a theory of the market, so to speak, but also a theory about the firms that compose it" (p. 122).

Consequently, structural constraints do not seem sufficient to explain why States choose a strategic decision that will allow it to be successful or to fail in the international arena. It is essentially this shortfall that neoclassical realists have been seeking to address by assimilating domestic intervening variables to analyze how States respond to systemic pressures.

Randall Schweller (2004), for example, sought to explain why states under balance, failing to recognize a clear and imminent threat or/and react to it, which is a behavior that contrasts neorealists predictions. Schweller outlines four domestic intervening variables that help to explain what leads States to under balance: 1. Elite consensus; 2. Regime's vulnerability; 3. Social cohesion; 4. Elite cohesion. In the same logic, Nicholas Kitchen (2010) proposes studying a State's grand strategy and the institutions and individuals who hold the driving ideas of a country's foreign policy to assess how domestic intervening variables influence decision-making in response to the systemic imperatives that shape them. Kitchen argued that one of the biggest challenges for neoclassical realism is to emphasize structural factors while allowing their mediation through domestic variables. However, it needs to be clear that, for neoclassical realists, domestic political processes are analytically subordinate to systemic factors, and the threats and opportunity they provide states with.

Seeking to address this challenge, Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell (2016) suggested that when international systemic imperatives provide a considerable level of clarity and minimize informational uncertainty about the threat or the opportunity, they limit the range of potential policy options. When there's less clarity and more uncertainty, there's a greater margin for domestic variables to intervene in the policy process.

Aiming to advance the methodological and theoretical configuration of neoclassical realism, the three mentioned authors proposed a framework of independent and intervening variables. The independent variables are the systemic factors, the starting point that shapes and conditions the domestic intervening variables. According to Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, the independent variables are:

1. System structure;
2. Structural modifiers: variables that influence elementary structural factors in the interaction among units. Military technology and geography are structural modifiers because they alter the distribution of capabilities, the degree of threat faced by a certain unit, or the effects of anarchy.
3. The relative distribution of power and polarity: conditioned by the structural modifiers, relative material capabilities and the number of great powers in the system are substantial variables for neoclassical realism.

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4. Clarity: represents the degree to which threats and opportunities are evident, whether the system offers information on their time horizon and whether it is possible to elaborate and distinguish optimal policy responses.

5. Permissive or restrictive strategic environment: "the more imminent the threat or opportunity and the more dangerous the threat (or the more enticing the opportunity) the more restrictive the state's strategic environment is" (p. 52). In reverse, the more remote and the less acute the threat or opportunity, the more restrictive a State's strategic environment is.

On the other hand, the intervening variables are:

1. Leader images: the cognitive constraints of the foreign policy executive (FPE) charged with the conduction of foreign and defense policies. Values, beliefs, and images guide the FPE's interaction with the world and frame its information-processing in crisis situations and their perceptions.

2. Strategic culture: norms, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that, through socialization and institutionalization, shape the strategic understanding of leaders, elites, and society, and help define what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable strategic decisions.

3. State-society relations: the interaction and the degree of competition and collaboration between the central State institutions and societal groups. If the foreign policy executive is insulated from other political institutions, its policy-making process is less susceptible to conforming domestic demands and more likely to be in congruence with the international environment.

4. Domestic institutions: "Formal institutions, organizational routines and processes, and bureaucratic oversight, often established by constitutional provisions with clearly specified rules and regulations set the broad parameters within which domestic competition over policy occurs" (Ripsman et. Al, 2016, p. 75). Institutional architecture can enhance or constrain the FPE through the division of power, checks and balances, and public support. Furthermore, the quality of government and the ability of state institutions to extract society's potential and turn it into national relative advantage are recognized as a substantial subset of this intervening variable.

The Concepts of Strategic Culture

One of the major aspects in the study of strategic culture is the prevalence of varied definitions, perspectives, and approaches. Therefore, there are different concepts of strategic culture.

Jack Snyder (1977) was one of the first major considerable proponents of employing strategic cultural-based analysis to address the insufficiencies of the rational actor and game theoretical models in studying Soviet strategic nuclear thought and behavior. For Snyder, Soviet decision-makers were not culture-free game-theoretical agents, because they had been socialized into a certain institutional configuration under a unique historical and cultural framework that promoted a set of regular strategic behaviors that Americans could identify. According to Snyder, strategic culture is "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation" (p. 8).

In a similar rationale, the British author Colin Gray (1981), based on the American example, defined strategic culture as: "modes of thought and action with respect to force, derives from the perception of the national historical experience, aspiration for self-characterization (e.g., as an American, what am I?, how should I feel, think, and behave?), and from all of the many distinctively American experiences (of geography, political philosophy, of civic culture, and 'way of life') that characterize an American citizen." (p. 22).

Johnston (1995) criticized what he named the "first generation" approach to strategic culture produced by authors such as Snyder and Gray. Unlike the first generation of authors who had suggested, the behavior is not constitutive of strategic culture, and the first should be treated as a dependent variable and the latter as the independent one. Johnston defined strategic culture as a "system of symbols" (p. 46) comprised of two dimensions:

1. Basic assumptions about the role of war in human affairs, the nature of the adversary and the threat it poses, and the efficacy of using force.
2. Operational level of strategic culture consisting of assumptions about which strategic options are the most effective for dealing with the threat environment.

The two dimensions would not always correspond, as Johnston showed in his broad study of Chinese strategic culture. Therefore, for Johnston, there was a difference between

documental strategy and operational strategy, and he accused the first generation of "determinism", arguing that for them, strategic culture determined behavior.

Colin Gray (1999) responded to Johnston's critique in an article he wrote for International Security by saying that strategic culture is an expression of ideas and behavior. For Gray, actors hold cultural ideas and behave culturally, and social actors are shaped by and actively shape those ideas. Strategic culture cannot be considered an outside force, according to Gray, the flux between ideas and behavior is continuous. Furthermore, according to Gray (1999): "Strategic culture need not dictate a particular course of action, indeed domestic and external constraints frequently will prohibit such behavior." (p. 68). The British author observed that strategic culture will be stamped in behaviors of all kinds and can slowly change and be reinterpreted and readapted.

For the purpose of this article, we can point to Johnston's approach as restrictive, since it reduces strategic culture to declaratory and documental dimensions, and minimizes its interactions with material variables (geography, technology, historical experience and, even structural constraints) that first-generation authors consider as inputs or sources of strategic culture.

Sources of Strategic Culture

Adopting the first generation's framework, it is necessary to clarify the factors that act as inputs to strategic culture, its sources. David Jones (1990, p. 37) systematized three set of sources of strategic culture:

1. The geography of the State, the ethnic culture of its founding people, and the latter's subsequent history;
2. Social-economic and administrative system, and the technological base, which is significantly important for the development of critical spheres of the State, the military included;
3. Networks of military-administrative institutions and patterns of political-military cooperation.

William Kincade (1990, p. 10) argues that "A nation's strategy usually reflects its geostrategic situation, resources, history and military experience, and political beliefs." He then suggests that these factors work as an influential force in shaping how a country perceives,

protects and promotes its interests and values abroad, shaping its strategic culture, noting that the latter is not always highly consistent or homogenous, even if, as Jones (1990) wrote, it is conditioned by permanent operating variables, being geography and geophysical constraints an example.

Similarly, Jack Snyder (1977) listed an interconnected group of elements that helped constitute strategic soviet culture and behavior and can be generalized: balance of power and strategic situation; geographical position; historical legacy; a profile of the decision-making elite; civil-military relations; institutional arrangements; economic power; and technology.

Darryl Howlett (2005, p. 4) sums up what he considers to be the main sources of strategic culture pointed by the literature: geography, climate and resources; history and experience; political structure; the nature of the organizations involved in defense; myths and symbols; key texts that inform decision-makers of the appropriate strategic action; and transnational norms, generational change, and the role of technology.

A Neoclassical Realist Approach to Strategic Culture

The intersection of neoclassical realism and strategic culture has been deliberated by the vast literature comprising the subject, and some authors suggested practical methodologies to effectively attain the integration of both objects.

John Glenn (2009) suggested attributing strategic culture an epiphenomenal aspect, allowing it to explain deviations from behaviors expected by the neorealist theory. This approach attempts to diagnose patterns of State behavior and develop generalizable knowledge by identifying causal and intervening variables. Epiphenomenal strategic culture supplements neorealism, because "ideational factors would still be regarded as epiphenomenal, whereas structural constraints should be deemed the primary cause of state behavior." (Glenn, 2009, p. 541).

Offering a different methodology from that of Glenn, Colin Dueck (2005) applied process-tracing to analyze the strategic options chosen by US decision-makers during two continuous historical periods, 1918-1921 (post-World War I) and 1945-1948 (post-World War II, proceeded by the Cold War). According to Dueck (2005): "neoclassical realists would argue that international conditions ultimately drive the process of both strategic adjustment and cultural change. That is to say, when political-military cultures come under intense international pressure, they adjust and adapt in the end" (p. 204). Hence, strategic culture is shaped and driven

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by systemic imperatives, and Dueck explained how American decision-makers opted for strategic choices that were in conformity with the classical liberal thought that the US was founded on. Liberal influence allowed for justifications of both non-entanglement after World War I and – covert and overt – interventions during the Cold War, projecting the US society model as an example. Nevertheless, systemic factors conditioned the strategic decision-making process and the cultural elements that influenced and justified policy choices.

Colin Gray (1999) argued that strategic culture often interacts with internal and external variables that shape the strategic behavior of security communities. Hence, for this article, we shall consider strategic culture not as an epiphenomenon of deviant strategic behavior expected by structural realists, but as an intervening variable that interacts with systemic factors and is shaped by them. Therefore, we shall base our approach on Dueck's findings: strategic culture is driven by systemic imperatives, but does not necessarily contradict them.

American Strategic Culture

One of the main analytic observations that can summarize American strategic culture is the absence of a single and homogenous approach. The vast literature tends to point to competing approaches and subcultures within the American strategic culture. According to Oliver Lee (2008): "the resulting geostrategic policies periodically alternate between isolationism and interventionism not because of an internal contradiction in America's strategic culture but because there are different coalitions of subcultures that alternate in their control of foreign policy" (p. 281).

Walter Mead (as cited by Sondhaus, 2006) categorized four major subcultures of American strategic culture and their respective analysis of America's place in the world and the appropriate foreign policy to achieve the corresponding goals:

The Hamiltonians a strong foreign policy must be founded on close cooperation between the Federal Government and businesses, and American interests are better served when integrated in the global system on favorable terms. One example is Franklin Roosevelt's administration, which helped orchestrate international institutions that supported the post-Cold War American-led order, such as the World Bank, the UN, and NATO.

The Jeffersonians reject foreign policy adventurism and tend to favor safeguarding domestic security. They tend to view strong standing armies and adventuristic foreign policy as threats to republican liberty.

The Jacksonians do not advocate aggressive and militaristic foreign policy but favor forceful response when America is attacked. Tend to adopt a Hobbesian realist view of international relations and be skeptical towards international organizations. Favored America's intervention in World War I not out of solidarity with European allies, but because Germany attacked Americans through submarine warfare.

The Wilsonians consider it the duty and strategic interest of the United States to advance American democratic values in the interests of peace and justice worldwide, using force if necessary but prioritizing peaceful means. Strongly influenced by classical liberal assumptions about international relations.

In addition, the literature tended to describe general guidelines that comprised the "American way of war" which transcended subcultures. Theo Farrell (2005) described 3 biases that inform American strategic culture and military practices:

1. Technological fanaticism: historically, there have been varied enthusiasm for technology in the US military. In the 70s, with the introduction of electronics into weapons platforms and the rise of new battlefield systems based on network technology, all four services embraced the mentioned enthusiasm.

2. Casualty aversion: rooted in the Vietnam War, it makes political and military leaders skeptical of deploying ground troops for risky missions.

3. A pragmatic approach to international law: flexibly adjusts the interpretation of legal rules to the realities of US power.

Farrell's second bias is compatible with Thomas Mahnken's (2008) description of American strategic culture: "No nation in recent history has placed greater emphasis upon the role of technology in planning and waging war than the United States" (p. 5). Mahnken also notes how since the Civil War, the American leaders have tended to favor strategies of total victory over their adversaries and wage wars with unlimited political objectives.

Carnes Lord (1985) mentions that an important aspect of American strategic culture is the civilian control over the military. The decisive moment for the steady erosion of military control over strategic planning and decisions proceeded after World War II was McNamara's terms at the Pentagon, with the creation of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the system analysis staffed primarily by civilians that provided the Secretary a view of military requirements independent of service bias. The creation of separate defense agencies also

contributed to centralize the management of military programs and activities common to the services.

Sources of American Strategic Culture

We can trace two intertwined leading variables that framed American strategic culture and shaped its sources: geography and historical experiences.

The United States was initially populated by puritans and dissenters from the Anglican church who deconstructed their past connections to the Old World and built new social, moral, religious, and political foundations in the colonies (Lee, 2008).

George Friedman (2020) divided American geography into two lines: 1. South of Pennsylvania, where the Appalachians were two hundred miles from the Atlantic coast, and the flat abundant land made the territory propensity to large plantations; 2. North of Pennsylvania, where the distance from the mountains to the Atlantic was much less, and the soil wasn't as favorable as southwards. "There was room only for family farms, craftsmen, merchants, and bankers" (p. 38). This division, according to Friedman, is the origin of the subsequent economic and cultural divisions that would threaten the existence of the United States until 1865. For example, South of Pennsylvania, the physical geographical conditions made slavery a productive necessity, while northwards, it was uneconomic.

In the post-Civil War context, between 1890 and 1920, massive industrialization transformed the United States into a metropolitan manufacturing power in search of overseas markets (Kincade, 1990). This process underlined the disagreement between the ones who cherished the notions of the United States as a self-sufficient internally absorbed agrarian society, echoing George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, and those who believed that the protection of American economic security and values required global economic and military projection.

This geo-historical source of American strategic culture penetrated the Republican Party, and still influences Trump's position in certain matters of international affairs, including alliance burden-sharing.

The Republican Party and American Strategic Culture

In his book, called Age of Iron, Colin Dueck (2020) points out three categories in the Republican Party and delineates their respective analysis and visions of what the US role in the world should be:

Conservatives nationalists believe in an active US role overseas (economically, militarily, and diplomatically). In the 21st century, they favor free trade, alliances, foreign aid, and high defense spending. However, they differ from their liberal Wilsonian counterparts by placing less significance on multilateral institutions, approaching them from a pragmatic approach based on US national interests. They have been the dominant tendency within the party since World War II, being represented by leaders such as President Eisenhower and President George W. Bush.

Noninterventionists oppose American military intervention and bases abroad and tend to be skeptical toward alliances. This segment dominated the Republican Party between the 1920s and 1930s. They defend limited government at home and believe that over-militarized foreign policy is a threat to civil liberties. During the Cold War, this segment was marginalized by Republicans as anti-communist policies prevailed. This category is associated with figures such as President Hebert Hoover, Senator Robert Taft, and Senator Rand Paul.

Conservative Hawkish/Hardline Unilateralists tend to be favorable to high levels of defense spending and strong responses against terrorism. They are not pacifists, but at the same time, they are usually skeptical of nation-building efforts, democracy promotion, foreign aid programs, humanitarian interventions, and multilateral institutions that promote global governance. For this segment, the maintenance of American sovereignty is fundamental, and diplomatic engagements and appeasement with US adversaries are usually unwelcome, while their basic objective is to build and maintain strong defenses and punish any threat to American citizens. This variant can be represented by Pat Buchanan, President Donald Trump, and Senator Tom Cotton.

Applying Walter Mead's categories to Dueck's systematization would lead us to describe the conservative nationalists as Hamiltonians, noninterventionists as Jeffersonians, and hardline unilateralists as Jacksonians.

As Franz-Stefan Gady (2020) noted, during the 1952 Republican presidential primary between Senator Robert Taft and then-candidate Dwight Eisenhower, two segments of the

Republican Party clashed: noninterventionists, represented by Senator Taft, who proposed offshore balancing, and thus, avoiding ground troops commitment to Europe; and conservative nationalists, led by General Eisenhower, who wanted to continue with containment strategy and reinforce ground troops commitment to Europe collective defense and NATO.

Eisenhower's victory in the 1952 primaries can be traced as the defining moment of marginalization of the noninterventionists in the Republican Party, in benefit of containment strategy supporters and conservative nationalists.

According to John Mearsheimer (2001), there was a major systemic imperative that led US leaders to keep American ground forces in Europe instead of choosing offshore balancing: Soviet power. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union controlled the eastern two-thirds of the continent. Therefore, no local great power could check the Soviet Union without US commitment to NATO.

This provides reasonable evidence of how systemic and structural imperatives shape which variant of American strategic culture is more expressive in a certain context to influence and justify foreign policy decisions.

President Donald Trump: A Brief Analysis of a Hardline Unilateralist

As an embodiment of the Jacksonian strategic subculture, President Trump's foreign policy proposals were not driven by moral or internationalist imperatives but animated by the necessity to protect US soil and interests from direct threats. His assertive speeches stating the intention to use force to extinguish ISIS are predicated on the hardline unilateralist category of the Republican Party, a descendant of the Jacksonian tradition, whose one of the most basic aims is to confront and punish threats against American citizens (Clarke & Ricketts, 2017). His approach towards NATO can also be considered compatible with the Jacksonian tradition of the hardline unilateralists, who tend to adopt a Hobbesian perspective of international relations and frame alliances and institutions so long as they go hand in hand with national interests. Hence, "America first" is essentially a unilateralist Jacksonian narrative.

President Trump's appeal as a candidate went over with a critical percentage of small-town, non-college-educated white voters in key swing states such as Pennsylvania, and in the Midwest to Iowa and Wisconsin (Dueck, 2020, pp. 125-126). Weinschken (2018) shows that Trump's performance with white, male, and religious voters triumphed over Clinton's.

Even though domestic issues such as economics, Supreme Court appointments, individual liberties, criminal policing and party loyalties played the leading role in Trump's victory in the 2016 election, the group of voters (southern, midwestern, evangelical, agrarian, rural, and white) who chose him over Clinton tend to be associated with the non-interventionist subculture of American strategic culture (Lee, 2008), thus, skeptical of liberal internationalism and non-critical military interventions abroad.

US-NATO Policy in the Trump Administration: Systemic Factors and Strategic Cultural Aspects

US presidents have successively emphasized the need for greater burden-sharing among NATO allies. What distinguishes Donald Trump from past presidents is the willingness to take bigger risks in order to make allies increase their defense spending (Benitez, 2019). In this sense, according to Benitez, Trump's observations towards NATO has shown that conditionality is a policy parameter for the president. Donald Trump has stated that the United States might back down on its defense commitments in case allies do not meet their financial commitments.

However, the concrete NATO policy might also have been shaped by a diverse FPE that carries different views on the subject, with some officials tending to prefer conditional relations with NATO allies, and others reassuring them of the unchanging US commitments.

Table 1 - Trump's Foreign Policy Executive - Current and Former Officials: Position Towards NATO (made by the author of this article)

Trump's Foreign Policy Executive - Current and Former Officials: Position Towards NATO	
Official	**Position Towards NATO**
Former Defense Secretary James Mattis	**Reassurance**
Former National Security Adviser (NSA) McMaster	**Reassurance**
Former NSA John Bolton	**Ambiguous**
NSA Robert O'Brien	**Conditional**
Secretary of State Mike Pompeo	**Conditional**
Secretary of Defense Mark Esper	**Reassurance**
President Donald Trump	**Conditional**
Vice-President Mike Pence	**Ambiguous**

As the table above indicates, the Trump administration as a whole does not hold a homogenous position on NATO policy. This may contribute to non-clarity when it comes to actual decision-making. Taking that into account, it is possible to note that the harsh speech about burden-sharing has coexisted with an increase of rotational troops in Poland (BBC, 2019). Therefore, the lack of a homogeneous position has meant that the policy towards NATO does not follow a linear logic. Most of the changes regarding NATO policy under Trump's presidency have been ideational, and one of the main goals was to make security guarantees more conditional, but the alliance remains intact (Ashbee & Hurst, 2020).

To capture the underlying imperatives of the Trump administration's NATO policy under a neoclassical realist framework, it is pertinent to analyze how systemic factors interacted with strategic cultural aspects in shaping the administration's decisions.

Systemic Factors

Analyzing objective systemic factors through a neoclassical realist lens allows us to use the National Security Strategy – NSS – (2017) to examine the Trump administration's interpretation of the structural imperatives that might guide its foreign policy. Hence, this document allows the author to evaluate the general guidelines of how the mentioned administration depicts systemic inputs, and how that influences its NATO policy.

The NSS describes the strategic environment and points to emerging threats to America's power: China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and transnational terrorist groups. The document states that these actors challenge US dominance in the post-Cold War unipolarity. The NSS emphasizes the challenges posed by China's economic and military modernization, while extensively acknowledging Russia's acquisition of military capabilities as a threat.

Thus, the recognition of the Chinese threat (which predates the Trump Administration) may have contributed to the rhetoric in regard to NATO, underlying the necessity of relocating troops to the Asian military theater (Ashbee & Hurst, 2020). Meanwhile, the continuous Russian threat can be identified as a leading factor in the boosting of troops to Poland.

Strategic Cultural Aspects

We can interpret that China's rise allowed the hardline unilateralist tradition, descendant of the Jacksonian strategic subculture, to be manifested by the US demand of greater burden-sharing in NATO, given the need to relocate troops to Asia. However, the continuity of the

Russian threat is still a strategic imperative that keeps NATO intact, and Trump's FPE varied between hardline unilateralists who want to make the security guarantees in the alliance more conditional and conservative nationalists who seek to reassure allies of the unchanging US commitment.

Conclusion

In this article, we analyzed Trump's Administration NATO policy, combining neoclassical realism and strategic culture.

The intersection of these two approaches positioned systemic imperatives as the independent variable and strategic culture as the intervening variable, and it was possible to identify that the rise of the Chinese threat seemed to justify the President's harsh rhetoric regarding NATO, given the necessity to shift troops from Europe and other theaters to Asia. Simultaneously, the continuous Russian threat seemed to be a leading strategic imperative for an increase of US troops in Poland.

The harsh speeches towards NATO also result from a hardline unilateralist branch of the Republican Party that originates from the Jacksonian subculture within American strategic culture, which has competing approaches.

The task of exploring and simplifying the fundamental intervening variables remains unfinished. Yet, studying the interaction of systemic pressures with domestic factors has helped researchers capture the complexity of international phenomena and foreign policy, and how both converge.

Besides strategic culture, electoral processes, institutional architecture, organizational processes, and leader's psychology can be explored to examine how a certain country designs a certain aspect of its foreign policy. This may contribute to the scientific refining of neoclassical realism.

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