

POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM ON NATO

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A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP: DONALD TRUMP and NATO **“Possible Effects of Donald Trump’s Second Term on NATO”**

Donald Trump, the unique 45th President of the United States of America (USA), has taken his place on the ballot once again as the Republican candidate in the presidential elections to be held in November. Thus, millions of American voters will witness a rematch in a presidential election for the first time since 1956. We all know how long and dramatic a process it took to reach the result of the 2020 elections. Considering the events of January 6, Donald Trump’s lawsuit processes, the 2022 midterm elections, and what is happening in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, it is essential to understand the importance of these elections.

It is not often that foreign policy, as a debating arena, emerges as one of the primary focuses of campaigns in American presidential elections. After all, while there are economics, irregular immigration and all sorts of controversial social topics, foreign policy has a limited impact on the voting behavior of the American electorate. However, this situation faces a significant transformation in 2024. The security threat posed to the European continent by the Russia-Ukraine War, which has been two years old, and the Israel-Palestine War, which has been six months old, the heavy financial support allocated by the USA to the war, and the uncertainty of the upcoming period are the main reasons for this transformation. As a result, war has its fair share as one of the areas of increasing inter-party polarization in American politics. Now, both the quality and quantity of aid to be provided for Ukraine, if not for Israel, are seriously discussed in Congress. As the elections approach, Republican Congress members question, criticize, and ultimately block the free nature of the aid. As such, the outcome of the 2024 elections has become the main agenda issue for Europe as well as for the American people.

Donald Trump is undoubtedly a political actor whom we cannot consider independently of this controversial process, with his statements and rhetoric. Not too long ago, Russia’s statement that it would encourage NATO member states that did not pay their defense contributions to “do whatever they want” caused serious outrage, to say the least, in the old continent. These words, which show that the idea of isolationism still finds a strong response in American politics, show that the situation has reached a level that cannot be underestimated for NATO and its member countries. In these days when the election is on the horizon, it has become extremely important to carefully examine the possible effects of a possible second Donald Trump term and the

inflammatory rhetoric he uses as a domestic policy tool for NATO.

Donald Trump and NATO Face to Face: The First Term

While discussing the effects of a possible second presidential term of Donald Trump on NATO, it should be noted that the current agenda is not new. Even before the start of his first term, Trump has shaken the foundations of NATO more than his predecessors. Throughout the election campaign, he complained that the financial burden carried by the United States was “unfair” compared to its European allies. Of course, considering NATO’s long history, it is not possible to say that this discourse is new news. However, describing NATO as “outdated” because it does not do enough

in its fight against terrorism is a completely different situation. Moreover, he argues that the implementation of Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty will depend on whether the ally in question "fulfills its financial obligations towards us", whether it meets the "2 percent of its gross domestic product target" towards NATO, has been a very worrying statement. The fact that an American President chose sentences that so fundamentally attack the protective shield of the old continent must have been discussed in the Oval Office, as Vice President Mike Pence said in his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2017, "The United States strongly supports NATO and this transatlantic alliance." "Our commitment to the alliance will be unwavering," he said. Ultimately, Trump - contrary to his previous dubious comments - stated that NATO "has not become obsolete" (Pothier and Vershbow, 2022:1). Although this sudden "U-turn" may seem like a positive development for the Alliance, what is said is said.

Donald Trump did not refrain from drawing attention to the validity of NATO, its effectiveness in the fight against terrorism, and the injustice of its financial burden on his country, both during his candidacy process and in his first months of office. However, this occurred at a time when Trump was making positive statements about NATO and providing assurances that his administration would fulfill its defense commitments to NATO. However, he did not refrain from continuing to make these defense commitments conditional on whether his allies paid enough during his presidency. Moreover, he has implemented this "tit-for-tat" perspective more clearly than during the candidacy process. Ultimately, Trump reinforced this tit-for-tat view by verbalizing it at the 2018

NATO Summit and did not hesitate to state clearly: "The United States' commitment to NATO is very strong and remains very strong, but first of all... the money they are willing to spend because of the amount." (Benitez, 2019:187). These words, which can be understood as "you reap what you sow", should be seen as a concrete manifestation of Donald Trump's perspective on NATO in his first term - and even today. While the form and emphasis of the discourse seem positive, reflecting his own style of oratory, the meaning he means is a mild-mannered threat that "shows a stick under his belt".

2% Discourse: Is The Addressor Europe or Domestic Politics?

To read the meaning of Donald Trump's comments regarding NATO's budget, it is important to first understand what this 2% contribution issue is. The only way for a large-scale Alliance like NATO to manage its activities effectively is to finance its budget in a healthy way. The Alliance has a defense expenditure financing that its members have shared since its establishment. The main point here is the need to determine this financing issue numerically. Although this need was first put forward in 2006, its officialization took place in 2014. The "2% of countries' gross domestic product" rule, adopted by NATO Defense Ministers in 2006, became a commitment because of the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. Apart from this, it is important not to ignore the impact of the widespread instability experienced in the Middle East during the same period. Considering all these developments, in 2014, NATO Heads of State and Government agreed to allocate 2% of their national gross domestic product to defense expenditures to ensure the continuity of

the Alliance's military readiness (NATO, 2024).

2% contribution, that's the only part of the issue on paper. However, the actual situation is different from this. Ultimately, not all members of the Alliance honor this commitment. When we look at NATO's data (Lu, 2024), as of 2023, only eleven NATO member countries have achieved the target of spending 2% of the gross domestic product of NATO members on defense. Poland, the United States, Greece, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Romania, Hungary, Latvia, the United Kingdom and Slovakia are among the members that have achieved this goal. Luxembourg, Belgium, Spain and Türkiye are among the members furthest from this target. However, no obligation is expected from members to hit the target. As a matter of fact, NATO is not a structure that survives on its members' dues or subscription fees. For this reason, members do not owe money to NATO. The criterion of commitment depends entirely on the wishes of the member. In fact, NATO does not foresee any penal sanctions in its treaty texts for its members who do not meet these contributions (Le Monde, 2024).

While this is the situation on the NATO side of the issue, it is also important to see how these comments are responded to by the US people. After all, Donald Trump is currently in an election race. He can make speeches on various issues to get the masses to vote for him. As in every election atmosphere, these discourses do not have to turn into action. After you win, it is possible that you will soften what you said before or remove it from your agenda. One of the important sources we need to look at to establish post-election opinions on a more solid basis is public polls. Thus, these polls will show us to what extent Donald

Trump's rhetoric regarding NATO resonates with the American people.

According to research conducted by Gallup (2024), it is stated that Americans' views on NATO are similar in interviews collected before and after Trump's comments. In the survey, 47 percent of Americans want the United States to maintain its current commitment to NATO, while 20 percent think that support for the alliance should increase. Meanwhile, 16 percent think that the United States should reduce its NATO commitments, while 12 percent prefer the United States to withdraw from NATO completely. Moreover, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the addition of two new members to the Alliance, the American public's views on the level of US commitment to NATO appear to have remained mostly unchanged. It seems clear that the majority wants existing commitments to be kept consistent or increased. When we consider all these discourses and data together, it is quite possible to infer that Donald Trump's addressee is both European and American voters. While he tells his European allies to "take responsibility", like what he did in his first term, he is also trying to appeal to the voters' perception of "America First". Therefore, his rhetoric about 2% contributions should be seen as a criticism of both Joe Biden's leadership and his administration. As a matter of fact, if we need to support these two-sided discourses with concrete examples, firstly, Donald Trump stated in a statement that his words were a "negotiation tactic" towards his allies (Le Monde, 2024). Trump's campaign spokesman Jason Miller said in his statement that Europe was peaceful during Donald Trump's presidency, but "death and destruction" spread across Europe when Joe Biden was vice president and currently president.

“President Trump got our allies to increase NATO spending by demanding they pay, but Joe Biden has gone back to his decision to let them take advantage of American taxpayers,” Miller said. “When you don’t pay your defense expenses, you can’t be surprised to face more wars,” he said (New York Times, 2024).

Donald Trump and NATO Face to Face: Second Term

The possibility of Donald Trump, who is skeptical about NATO and does not shy away from his critical discourse regarding the general structure of NATO, returning to the White House increases fears in Europe that Washington may break away from the military alliance and the security of Europe. On the one hand, considering that these statements were made during Trump’s first term, it may be thought that they are not as worrying as one might think. On the other hand, in a situation where the security concerns arising from the Russia-Ukraine War and the Israel-Palestine War beyond the old continent are considered, it may well be thought that these discourses are more worrying than expected. So, amid all this equation with many unknowns, what will a change of president that may take place in November 2024 affect a well-established organization like NATO? It seems possible to answer this question through two possibilities, one of which is remote and the other more likely.

What is unlikely and will have a very negative impact on NATO is undoubtedly Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from NATO, which would create an earthquake in international relations, to say the least. Considering that he withdrew from various international conventions or treaties in the first term of his presidency, this frightening possibility should be emphasized, and its

consequences should be considered in detail. First, a NATO without the United States would be an “oxymoron” statement based on international relations. Moreover, when the United States leaves NATO, it will jeopardize its claim to continue its existence in Europe, Africa and, naturally, the Middle East. Considering NATO bases and personnel in various countries, the impact of such a decision on both sides will be unpredictable. In fact, the rapprochement of many NATO countries with Russia or China may be among the natural consequences of this decision. However, although there has been no withdrawal from membership throughout NATO’s history, a partial withdrawal has occurred twice. First, France withdrew from the military wing of NATO in 1966 and returned to the military wing of the organization 43 years later (Washington Post, 2009). Later, Greece withdrew from NATO’s military wing in 1974 as a reaction to Turkey’s Cyprus Peace Operation. However, because of the diplomatic pressure of the United States in 1980, Greece was forced to return to the military wing of the organization - within the scope of the Rogers Plan (Directorate of Intelligence, 1982:6). Since France and Greece continued to be NATO members throughout this process and the negativities mentioned above, it will be understood why it is a remote possibility for the United States to withdraw from membership today. In addition, with a law passed late last year, Congress made it more difficult for the United States to opt out of NATO. With this law, the American President is prohibited from unilaterally withdrawing from NATO, and it is required that two-thirds of the Senate approve it, or Congress takes a decision to end the United States’ participation in the organization (Defense News, 2024).

What seems more likely to happen is that Donald Trump, sitting in the Oval Office, will see NATO from the perspective of “all members are equal, but some are more equal.” Thus, this perspective will cause the defense contributions of NATO members to become increasingly unbalanced within the organizational structure. The distance between countries from the geography where the war is taking place, their economic sufficiency and differences in perception of the threat of war are among the factors that currently widen the gap in contribution margins. Likewise, the “threat perception” discourses and the contribution discussions between Poland and Spain can be shown as a concrete example of this situation (Washington Examiner, 2024). Moreover, it should not go unnoticed that these discussions took place before a Donald Trump presidency took place. It is not insignificant that the “contribution hierarchy” that Trump will establish after taking office will cause trust problems among allies.

After two possibilities in which the election of Donald Trump could “directly” affect NATO, an “indirect” possibility should also be mentioned. This indirect possibility is that the “contribution hierarchy” that Trump will cause will leave NATO quite helpless regarding the future of Ukraine. It is a fact that many NATO members currently contribute significantly to the defense of Ukraine. However, considering the obstacles that Republican lawmakers placed on this aid even before the elections, there is a high probability that the Trump administration will completely cut off resources to Ukraine as soon as it starts work. If such a possibility occurs, it will be difficult for Ukraine to maintain its resistance against Russia with the resources it receives from other NATO members. Ultimately, by positioning

himself as the “leader who ends the war”, Donald Trump will lead Ukraine to peace talks in which he makes concessions.

Whether Donald Trump is elected or not, the lesson to be learned for NATO in the light of these developments is quite clear. This lesson manifests itself in the concepts of “trust” that allies have in each other, and “cooperation” brought about by the organizational structure. Allies must understand each other’s concerns through constructive and effective dialogue and address them through the experience the organization has brought over the years. They must preserve the experience of joint action without allowing a few political discourses to determine the structure and future of a seventy-five-year-old organization. It is extremely essential to allocate the necessary resources to defense and to always be ready against dangers, without using warmongering or distracting from the fact that war is a concrete reality.

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