

Pivot to Asia

Europe's Declining Significance from a Geo-Strategic Perspective

Ludolf von Löwenstern

No sooner had Donald Trump and his Secretary of Defence Mark Esper announced the withdrawal of some 12,000 US soldiers than commentators in Germany were largely in agreement: the step, according to public opinion, was a "campaign of revenge" against the renegade NATO member Germany.

In fact, there has been a lot of pent-up friction in American-German relations recently: from the conflict over North Stream 2 to defaulting NATO payments to high EU duties on German cars, to name just a few examples. Nevertheless, the step now announced does not mark a fundamental change of strategy in American foreign and security policy. Quite the contrary: with this plan, the US President is continuing the re-orientation of the world power towards Asia that his predecessors had already initiated. One of the concomitant effects: Germany and Europe are losing their significance.

Some US strategists refer to the 21st century as the "Pacific century". This orientation of US foreign policy towards East Asia - known as the "Pivot to Asia" - began as early as 2011 under President Barack Obama (2009 to 2017). His predecessor George W. Bush (2001 to 2009) also saw China as a future adversary and had corresponding strategies developed with the aim of curbing the country's rise. But China is not the only country that needs to be warned. Trump is also aiming at Germany with his America first rhetoric,

Photo: U.S. DoD



As part of its Pivot to Asia, the US has been rotating substantial amounts of military equipment into the region. Depicted are US Marine Corps amphibious assault vehicles moving into position during the amphibious assault phase of Exercise Bold Alligator 2012.

ric, Trump has also declared war on Germany. The fact that the US President openly questions the international involvement of the United States in NATO, for example, raises serious concerns that Western power arithmetic could change fundamentally.

The Geostrategic Rationale of the US

Trump's foreign and security policy clearly shows that neither the defence of Europe nor the continuation of military engagement in the Middle East are among his priority objectives. In a recent speech to graduates of the US military academy West Point, he said that it was not the military's job to "build foreign nations" and act as "world police". The announced "withdrawal of troops" from Germany should also be seen in this context. The US military bases (over 800 worldwide) in Germany are still of outstanding strategic importance. Therefore, there are no plans for a "withdrawal", but rather a reduction and relocation of troops.

According to recent announcements, some 6,400 soldiers are to be recalled to the USA, and a further 5,600 are to be transferred to other countries such as Belgium and Italy. By the way, Belgium and Italy are even less likely than Germany to keep their NATO promises. There is an agreement with Poland to increase the number of US troops there from the current 4,500 by 1,000 soldiers to shore up NATO's eastern flank. As a reminder: NATO had promised Russia in 1997 to refrain from permanently stationing troops in Eastern Europe. The military headquarters for Europe (EUCOM) is moved from Stuttgart to Mombach / Belgium. This would reduce the total number of US soldiers in Germany from 36,000 today to about 24,000 - this would be an economic disaster for the affected areas. This is not a "criminal act" against Germany. Even if the next US president should be Joe Biden, nothing will change in these plans. This is because they follow a geopolitical and geostrategic calculation that is comprehensible to everyone.

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US Military Bases Around the World

The US maintains about 800 military bases (Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps) in more than 170 countries worldwide. Japan is home to the largest US military force with approx. 55,000 troops, the second largest in Germany with approx. 36,000, followed by South Korea with approx. 26,000, Italy with approx. 12,000 and Great Britain with approx. 9,000. Germany is not home to warring US armies or divisions but "only" two combat brigades. From a geostrategic point of view, Ramstein was, is and remains the most important US base because it is a logistics base and bridgehead for worldwide operations, especially in the strategically important East Asia (Pivot to Asia). Five of the six main operational bases of the US bases are located in Germany.

- Ramstein is the largest US Air Force military airport outside the USA and has important functions for supplies and troop transport for the intervention wars.
- Landstuhl (LCMR Landstuhl Regional Medical Center) is the largest military hospital outside the USA with over 3,300 employees on 49 hectares. It is also one of the most important hospitals for organ donations in the EU.
- Büchel is a US Air Force base. This is where the USA's nuclear bombs are stored and where Air Force Squadron 33 (Tornados) is stationed.
- Vilseck / Grafenwöhr is a military training area and training centre of the army for approx. 15,000 soldiers (including relatives). It is the largest US Army base in Europe (approx. 284 square kilometres). This is where shooting exercises for tanks and artillery are conducted and combat troops are trained.
- Ansbach Katterbach is a US Army helicopter training center.
- The 52nd Fighter Wing is stationed in Spangdahlem in the Eifel: It consists of an F-16 fighter squadron with about 20 aircraft. About 4,000 US soldiers are stationed at the air base. It is considered a strategically important air base for the American armed forces in Europe and has supported missions of the US Air Force and NATO worldwide, from Iraq to Bosnia and Afghanistan.
- In addition, there is the Wiesbaden location and the EUCOM and AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart.

Let's remember: President Trump is a friend of deals, and Germany wants to buy F-18 fighter planes in the US to replace the old TORNADOs as carrier planes for US nuclear weapons. There are also urgently needed



Photo: US Navy

Sailors aboard the aircraft carrier USS GEORGE WASHINGTON in Hong Kong, November 2011. In May 2015, the then US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said that the US rebalance to Asia-Pacific is a continuation of its pivotal role over the past 70 years.

heavy transport helicopters from a US manufacturer on Germany's wish list. The German government would be well advised to seize the opportunity and make a deal: keeping more troops in Germany vs. procurement of F18s and transport helicopters.

The Eurasian Chessboard

Among the explanatory approaches that make the US foreign and security policy "DNA" easier to understand are the concept of geopolitics on the one hand and the US National Security and Military Strategy on the other. The concept of geopolitics opens up interesting perspectives on the different world views of Europeans, Americans, Russians or Asians and thus on world events as a whole. Geopolitics interprets political connections in the light of geographical circumstances and analyses the connection between the two. It thus opens up perspectives on political events that we would otherwise sometimes find difficult to assess.

The German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, who published a book entitled Political Geography in 1897, is considered the spiritual father. The Swede Rudolf Kjellén then coined the term geopolitics. Besides Sir Halford Mackinder, well-known names such as Henry Kissinger, Samuel P. Huntington, Karl Haushofer, George Hamilton, Rear Admiral and naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan are among its most important pioneers. The geographical foundations of geopolitics can be traced back to the geostrategic work of the British Sir Halford Mackinder (1861 to 1947). In 1904, he formulated the Heartland Theory as part of geopolitics in The Geographical Pivot of History. This theory states that the domination of the Euro-Asian heartland is the key to world domina-

tion and that Great Britain, as the leading maritime power, must expect the emergence of a dangerous expansionist power on the continent, especially Russia. When Britain's position as a world power came to an end - after all, it was based primarily on control of the world's oceans - Mackinder formulated a geostrategic theory of the importance of the Eurasian landmass at the beginning of the 20th century, which later became known as the "Heartland Strategy". If a state succeeded in gaining control of the Heartland, i.e. Central and Eastern Europe as well as Siberia, Mackinder's thesis was that this state would dominate world politics. In the US, geopolitical considerations have always played an important role when formulating key foreign policy positions. Mackinder's Heartland Theory, for example, was the basis of the "containment strategy" with which the USA sought to contain the territorial expansion of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. The domino theory, which promoted US intervention in Vietnam and Central America, is also a manifestation of geopolitical thought. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the East-West divide, the concept of geopolitics and the associated discussion of spatial aspects of world order witnessed a renaissance.

Zbigniew Brzezinski is considered the spiritus rector of modern US geopolitics. The politician, who died in 2017, served for decades as National Security Advisor to various US presidents. His two books "The Grand Chessboard" / "The Only World Power. America's Strategy of Domination" (1997), and "Last Change" (2007) clearly describe how Eurasia - the Eurasian continent - is, from a geopolitical point of view, the "chessboard on which the struggle for global dominance



Photo: Friedens- und Zukunftswerkstatt e.V.

US military bases in Germany

will continue to be fought in the future. This huge, strangely shaped Eurasian chessboard, which stretches from Lisbon to Vladivostok, is the scene of global play". Commenting on Russia's new geopolitical framework, Brzezinski said: "The geopolitical confusion caused by the loss of the Caucasus bordering Turkey, the secession of Central Asia and its natural resources, and especially the independence of Ukraine challenged the very essence of Russia's claim to be the banner bearer of a common Pan-Slavic identity chosen by God."

The US National Security Strategy

Another important building block for understanding US foreign and security policy is the US National Security Strategy, NSS for short. Contrary to widespread assumptions, the US administration has never made a secret of what geopolitical and geostrategic concepts it is pursuing. Rather, defining and articulating the most important geopolitical linchpins transparently is a defining constant of American foreign and security policy. Some National Security Strategies have become more or less famous, such as the National Security Strategy of September 2002, also known as the "Bush Doctrine", the first after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, but if one compares the National Security Strategy of 2017 (Donald Trump), with that of 2010 (Obama), 2006 (George W. Bush), 2002 (George Bush) or 1996 (Clinton), one can see that the National Security Strategy of 2017 is the most important one: The central guide-

lines have always remained the same. Again and again it is about Protecting the American people/homeland, promoting prosperity, peace through strength and advancing interests/values, albeit supplemented by "current" events and accentuations. Donald J. Trump added the point "America First" to his NSS.

The situation is quite similar with the National Defense Strategy. This, too, has been characterised by a high degree of continuity for decades. The current version of the National Defence Strategy was published in July 2019. Media coverage in Germany was relatively small, but everyone agreed that the USA, as the headlines read, feared a war with Russia or China. Above all, competition with China is shaping the current view of the American military on the international order. In this context, it is also appropriate to consider the Emerging Security Challenges (ESC), i.e. the new challenges for a modern and effective security policy. The term ESC seems to be gaining ground in order to distinguish security policy challenges in the narrower sense from general political risks.

In brief: In recent years, American foreign and security policy has remained essentially unchanged, but has merely adapted to the new circumstances.

INF and START Treaty

The USA has also recently put up for discussion the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia, which expires in February 2021. It provides for the reduction of the nuclear arsenals of Russia and the USA to 800 delivery systems and 1,550 operational nuclear warheads each. It should be noted that the USA and Russia together hold more than 90% of the world's nuclear warheads in their military stockpiles, with about 6,500 and 6,800 warheads respectively, while China has about 280 nuclear warheads.

What many people don't know: When it comes to medium-range missiles, there has been a lot of progress in recent years, especially among the Chinese. That is why the Americans have terminated the contract with Russia. But the real goal of the USA is to integrate China into a new New Start treaty. Pointing to the disparity in nuclear arsenals, China has repeatedly stated that it has no intention of participating in tripartite arms control talks with the US and Russia. China is also demanding that the US and Russia first make further cuts in their own arsenals, thereby creating the conditions for other countries to join the disarmament

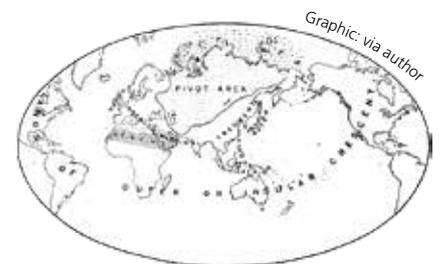
efforts. Moreover, Beijing is open to arms controls. For example, it is a member of the NPT, party to the Iranian nuclear agreement of 2015, a negotiator in the revival of the P5 process, a special forum for the five recognised nuclear weapon states under the NPT, or has coordinated work on a common nuclear glossary. One figure is interesting here: China spends around €260Bn on its military. That is not even one third of the US budget (approx. €730Bn).

A Wakeup Call for Europe

Despite numerous "warning shots" from Washington, the EU states have so far failed to establish their own foreign and security policy worthy of the name and to form a defence union, nor have they succeeded in developing a defence and security concept in coordination with NATO. Yet Germany and its European partners - after 75 years under U.S. auspices - should long since be in a position to guarantee their own security. And everyone knows that in an emergency, the USA would be there as an ally anyway, in accordance with Article 5 of the NATO Treaty.

The strategic goal of the US is not to dissolve NATO. Rather, it is about expanding its own sphere of influence in the direction of Asia. But the NATO partnership should become more global and reliable. For this reason, they will continue to insist on the two percent of the national gross domestic product agreed in Wales as NATO contribution - especially from Germany. Pacta sunt servanda.

Europe needs the USA. The USA needs the EU. Above all, in order to survive in the global race with China, which is also about defending our values. The fact that the world community is in a global



According to Mackinder, the pivot area is decisive for global dominance.

recession, which has gained catastrophic momentum as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, might make the USA, Russia and China more willing to curb the costly arms race in future. We will see how the great power chess game will continue. ■