

Introduction: American Foreign Policy in an Era of Transition

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The fate of U.S. liberal hegemony has turned into a significant matter of debate especially in the last decade. Tiresome military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and economic problems at home accompanied by the rise of China's global influence have triggered questions on whether Washington would continue to lead the world and if so, whether this would be the same leadership that the world has gotten used to. With the increasing number of alternative power centres, the world is going through an era of transition in which one can talk about "Easternisation" – in other words, a power shift from the West to the East. As a matter of fact, the world we live in is not anymore a unilateral, but a multilateral world. Under these circumstances, neither the former U.S. President Barack H. Obama, nor his successor Donald J. Trump could remove the suspicions that the U.S. might actually be facing a serious retreat from the global stage in the coming period.

In fact, the administrative style as well as the domestic and foreign policy preferences of President Trump have strengthened the claims that Washington is no longer the world's "hegemonic stabilizer" – mainly because the costs of this role have begun to outweigh the benefits. Trump's decisions such as the reconsideration of the U.S. position in NATO, rejection of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), suspension of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) talks and renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) are some of the outcomes of his "America First" approach that prioritizes strong protectionism and isolationism in American foreign policy.

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As a result, it is not easy today to persuade Trump to initiate a foreign intervention, if the issue at point does not directly threaten the U.S. interests. Perceiving international relations often within a simple “us vs. them” dichotomy, Trump claims that the U.S. has done enough for both Europe and the Middle East and it is now the turn of the countries in these two regions to come forward and solve their own problems. It is worth remembering here that today the majority of American voters favour the use of less military force abroad and do not believe that foreign interventions make them safer.

This shows that Trump’s election as president is not a coincidence, but a strong sign of the loss of faith among the American public in the U.S. liberal hegemony, which does not exclude military engagements abroad. Criticizing policies that are directed at securing the other nations’ borders and spending trillions of dollars overseas, Trump signals a significant break from the liberal hegemonic establishment in Washington. For figures such as John. J. Mearsheimer, this is not surprising at all as U.S. liberal hegemony has already failed. In his latest book, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, for instance, he claims that the U.S. should look for a more restrained foreign policy as the world order is becoming multipolar. Of course, this does not mean that Washington will totally quit the idea of leading the world or interfering the domestic affairs of other countries. This is something against the grain of the U.S. foreign policy. However, it certainly needs a new grand strategy that better fits *realpolitik* and the American nation’s current needs and expectations.

The zeitgeist of our times, which is the rise of neo-nationalism and populism worldwide, challenges the practice of an American type of liberal leadership. In fact, the outcomes of decades-long U.S. involvement in external problems and Washington’s efforts to shape the world according to American values and interests are vague. Among the supporters of offshore balancing-like strategies, the U.S. is far from persuading foreign countries to become or remain as a liberal democracy. Latest statistics show that one-third of the world’s population lives in a backsliding democracy. Ironically, this includes the U.S. as well, which claims to be the pioneer of liberal democracy, and the declining trend in this country is worse than the trend in other countries. Consequently, this causes a certain level of suspicion about the future of the world as there has been a perceived relationship between peace and the number of countries governed with democratic principles. Another rising phenomenon also increases

the suspicions about the fate of the world. Experts warn about possible violent upheavals that might follow the rise of ethnic nationalism around the world. Today, national identities are getting much more visible either to resist the impact of globalization in general or the U.S. supremacy in particular. This tension certainly weakens the role that liberal hegemons attribute to democracy to narrow the gap between the countries with different identities, thus with divergent definitions of threat and interest.

This special issue is the outcome of an effort to understand the foreign policy dynamics of the U.S. in this rapidly changing global atmosphere. Through a multi-dimensional academic approach, it aims to examine the impact of various systemic, regional and domestic challenges on the course of recent American foreign policy. The six articles that contribute to this issue assess the foreign policy practices of the U.S. especially during the Obama and Trump eras, but do not exclude the historical background that continues to shape the country's current policies. All articles are based on the fact that we are going through a transitional era in which the traditional power distribution on the global stage is being remade. Here, China as a rising rival, and a "national security threat" as the current U.S. administration defines, is a significant determiner. To what extent the U.S. will tolerate Beijing's rise, or which means the American leaders will practice to slow down/stop this country will be extremely significant in this new era. The U.S. response to China's rise has already begun to influence its relations with other countries as neither the Americans themselves nor Washington could yet decide on a clear-cut strategy against Beijing. The majority of the American public still sees China as an economic competitor rather than an enemy, while the Trump administration has already begun to securitize this country. The lack of a comprehensive U.S. grand strategy to deal with the current realities of the world and the U.S. attempts to politically isolate itself from the affairs of other regions affect Washington's relations with its traditional allies in Europe and the Middle East.

To this end, the first article of this issue, by Helin Sarı Ertem and Radiye Funda Karadeniz, focuses on Turkey and explains how the Turkish-U.S. relations have deteriorated especially since the beginning of the civil war in Syria. Receiving mixed signals from the U.S., Turkey has gradually lost its confidence in its strategic partner. However, as the authors underline, this in fact is an outcome of the "foreign policy crisis" that the U.S. is going through, especially with the systemic changes triggered by Chi-

na's rise and the domestic confusion over the future route of the country. Thus, the article offers a reassessment of the Turkish-American relations in retreat, through a wider scope that elaborates on systemic changes as well as the regional and domestic challenges. The authors' portrait of the current Turkish-American relations clearly presents how the two sides are suffering from setbacks especially on issues related to security due to their diverging definitions of threat and interest.

The second article, written by Andrei Korobkov, aims at explaining the recent state of relations between the U.S. and Russia. Similar to the previous article, it underlines the impact of the global transfer of power from the North Atlantic to the Pacific, and claims that the collapse of the Eurocentric system is the main reason behind the ongoing tension between Washington and Moscow. Korobkov argues that although Trump considers Russia as a counterweight against China and a potential partner in dealing with religious fundamentalism, he could not move to a better ground with his counterpart due to his opponents' strong refusal of the rapprochement with Moscow. For Korobkov, this actually presents the Global North's inability to deal with newly emerging threats and pushes Russia toward China, while strengthening the hawks in Moscow.

The third article, authored by Georg Löfflman, focuses mainly on the Obama era, scrutinizing the discursive and practical reflections of his vision, which prioritized lowering the cost of American primacy through the "leading from behind" strategy. Relying on the examples of the military intervention to Afghanistan and the campaign against DAESH, the article satisfactorily explains how the Obama administration, in pursuit of burden sharing and remote controlling, shifted to covert operations, and the use of Special Forces and drones, to fight terrorism especially in the Middle East. This policy was again an outcome of the U.S. preference to prioritize the Asia-Pacific as a region of vital strategic interest. However, as Löfflman argues, this changing trend in U.S. foreign policy created questions about the U.S. leadership both at home and abroad.

The fourth article is written by Nicolas Alexander Beckmann and takes a closer look at the inter-American relationship in the Trump era. The U.S. has long been in a problematic relationship with its south. Latin American countries have huge concerns about Washington's efforts to continue its predomi-

nance in the Western Hemisphere, which has been viewed by U.S. leaders as a natural extension of American control zone. While the recent U.S. tension with Venezuela has brought the inter-American relations to the top of the regional and global agenda once again, Beckmann's article provides the readers with significant insights on the root causes of the tensions between the U.S. and Latin America, and assesses how the shift from Obama's pragmatism to Trump's aggressiveness brought back the bad memories of the past and revived the lack of trust felt for Washington. Interestingly, as Beckmann argues, it is again China, which might benefit from these tensions, as Trump's heavy pressure on the region pushes the Latin American countries closer to Beijing.

The fifth article, by Fatma Nil Döner, is a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Trump's rise to power and the economic aftershocks of the 2008 financial crisis at the global and domestic levels. By focusing on Trump's public speeches, U.S. National Security Strategy and budgetary documents, the author explores how Trump's "America First" strategy, which simply aims to control the flow of goods and people into the U.S., is being reflected in the political economy and foreign policy of Washington. The idea of constructing a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico is a part of this strategy. Trump has various other protectionist measures in response to the global financial crisis and structural shifts, and this has closer connections with the rise of alternative power centres such as China, Russia and India. However, as Döner argues, the Trump administration itself might speed up the demise of the global system by its isolationist policies that encourage polarization.

The sixth and the last article of this issue belongs to Rana İzci Connelly and focuses on the repercussions of Trump's environmental policies, which receive strong criticism from the opposition groups. The unique contribution of this article is its claim that Trump's highly opposed anti-environmentalist stance today is actually a continuation of the previous anti-environmentalist dynamics in the U.S. since the 1980s. After a brief historical analysis of American environmentalism in the last few decades, it aims to scrutinize the battles on environmental protection and climate change during the Obama and Trump eras. Underlining that only a few Republicans in the U.S. are willing to publicly accept and announce the impacts and anthropogenic causes of climate change, the author claims that sticking to the old geopolitical narratives and polluting industries would only deepen the isolationist trends in U.S. foreign policy. She argues that the "America first" strategy might signal not only glob-

al economic competitiveness and political leadership, but also a lack of U.S. involvement in fixing the environmental damage caused by the humans.

As guest editor, I would like to thank all the authors, referees and the editorial staff for their valuable insight and hope this special issue will be beneficial for those who try to understand the highly contentious and complex character of the current American foreign policy, which is being shaped by systemic as well as regional and local challenges including the rise of China, shifting centre of gravity in world economy, Syrian civil war and quest for a stronger American grand strategy. Certainly, the U.S. will not give up its global leadership role in the short term, but whether it will be able preserve it in the long term will be based on its ability to adjust itself to the changing global circumstances. Thus, this interesting topic will likely continue to initiate further academic discussions.