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NATO, R.I.P.: Implications for Asian Security

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The radical overturning of US policy toward Europe is of the same kind as domestic upheavals, and both bear major implications globally.

COMMENTARY

Six Impossibilities

“There’s no use trying”, Alice said to the White Queen: “One can’t believe impossible things”. To which the White Queen responded: “I daresay you haven’t had much practice. When I was your age . . . sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast”. That exchange, from Lewis Carroll’s 1871 novel *Through the Looking-Glass*, is fanciful fiction. But reality can seem even stranger. Case in point: The second Trump Administration has done what many had supposed to be six impossible things before the first month of its tenure ended.

For starters, Donald J. Trump and J.D. Vance managed to win the only two elected offices of the US Executive Branch despite having based their campaign on wild lies about the November 2020 election and what happened at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. After the Inauguration, they turned those lies into loyalty tests to get jobs in the Administration, including on the National Security Council staff and the State Department’s Policy Planning staff.

Second, on his first day in office, the President used his pardoning power to create the core of a loyal para-military force from the 1,600 jailed insurrectionists from January 2021.

Third, the White House nominated and won Senate confirmation of manifestly unsuitable persons to head Executive Branch departments and agencies, several openly hostile to the non-politicised missions of their offices.

Fourth, the Administration fomented a constitutional crisis by illegally impounding funds authorised by Congress, illegally firing civil service employees without due notice or cause and empowering a legally non-existent office – the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) – to carry out the most massive personal information hack of the US Government in history. The White House seeks confrontation with the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) over this because it believes that, based on the July 1, 2024, SCOTUS ruling on presidential immunity, Chief Justice John Roberts will back down. If he does, the core checks-and-balances mechanism of US democracy, the separation of powers, will shatter. This is not impossible; it is likely.

Fifth, the Administration fomented that crisis by using the DOGE to destroy major regulatory capacities of the Federal government, purporting that its activities were devoted to greater government efficiency. Its real purpose is the creation of a corporate oligarchy *within* and protected by the government itself – a form of corporatism common to historical manifestations of fascism and neo-fascism.

And sixth, it not only euthanised the central US alliance of the postwar era, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but joined with Russia to enable it to consolidate a West-facing, open-ended sphere of influence.

In return the Trump Administration seeks rights to invest in Russian energy industries and to partner in the *de facto* colonisation of Ukraine, and an understanding that Russia will respect an expanded US sphere of influence. It expects two strategic benefits from this deal: Assuaging Russian fears of American enmity and power in Europe will reduce Moscow's incentive for aggression toward the West; and Russian ties with China will diminish.

Six Implications

What do these developments, particularly the last one, mean for global security dynamics? A lot.

First, while NATO still exists on paper, a NATO in which the United States refuses an Article V guarantee for its putative allies as they scramble to find a formula for Ukrainian security after a negotiated ceasefire is not NATO as it has existed since 1949. It now resembles a coffee klatch that, in a security emergency, would be relegated to bringing a butter knife to a gunfight. This is a formula for domestic political and perhaps some interstate instability in much of Europe.

Second, by gutting NATO's deterrence and net warfighting capabilities the US Government has eviscerated the regional convening function provided by its relatively disinterested, offshore auspices. The Europeans now need to replace this function among themselves as they strive to develop an integrated defence industry, an effective strategic posture, and an agreed burden-sharing arrangement. This is possible but not easy, and it will not happen quickly.

Third, the US basing footprint in Europe will shrink if not end in its entirety, and it is unclear if the Trump 2.0 Administration will fund more expensive means of maintaining its current global military reach based on the US mainland.

Fourth, the Europeans will lack a strategic rationale for supplying an export market for major new US military platforms as soon as they can manage on their own. This jeopardises the ability of the US government to finance the huge capital costs of such new platforms, even as it seeks new or expanded military export markets in Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

Fifth, European governments now have fewer and weaker incentives to protect the role of the US dollar from being challenged as the international currency of record. Should the international oil market, for example, no longer be denominated in dollars, significant financial implications will abound for many countries, including in Asia.

Sixth, the US policy flip over Ukraine and Russia reveals the Trump Administration's belief that the US-wrought postwar liberal international economic and security orders have become harmful to US interests. It prefers a "might makes right" great power spheres-of-influence world, and assumes that great powers will pursue both deal-making and *realpolitik* advantage over the heads of and often at the expense of smaller and weaker states. The leaders of those states, in Asia and elsewhere, will double-down on means of self-help in a less rule-based order, including, if they can manage it, weapons-of-mass destruction proliferation.

The Asian Angle

In Brussels on February 12, US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth told the Ukraine Defence Contact Group that US strategy would now focus on securing America's borders and deterring "Communist China" as "a peer competitor . . . with the capability and intent to threaten our homeland and core national interests in the Indo-Pacific". The new US Administration is rich with self-avowed China hawks, but they exude cacophony rather than chorus. Hawks in the US military often display irrational and dangerous assumptions about Sino-US relations, even as the President has made clear that defending Taiwanese independence is outside the definition of US vital interests. Many Administration China hawks, moreover, see the China challenge as being mainly economic and technological, not geopolitical. It is, therefore, entirely speculative at this point how the Administration's specific posture toward China, and hence East and Southeast Asia, will develop.

Otherwise, US-friendly Asian elites should not assume that US assets will flow from being downsized in Europe to them in Asia. They should instead consider that a diminished US global military footprint might render the logistics of US security pledges in Asia more difficult and more expensive to manage and hence be, on balance, less credible. Nor should Asian decision-makers assume that Asian countries offering bases and facilities to the United States will rise in importance or esteem; they should instead expect demands for greater offset payments. They should also not assume continuity for regional forums like the Quad and AUKUS. They should assume that all US aid and capacity-building programmes in their countries will end, and soon.

Asian elites are generally more comfortable with transactional ties and cold-blooded

security realism in ways that Europeans, Germans in particular, have since left behind. Hence, the US' self-abnegation from its role of providing global common security goods will have softer and more delayed implications in Asia than in Europe.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that the US downgrading of Europe's geostrategic significance will benefit continuous Asian efforts to balance off US and Chinese power. The Trump Administration's rhetorical elevation of the Asia-Pacific theatre does not change the fact that China is close to and vested in other Asian states; America is far away and deeply distracted by domestic ambitions and uncertainties. Assumptions of basic Asian geopolitical continuity stretched out years into the future are, therefore, likely to prove illusory.

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