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The myth of Trump's revenge campaign

Trump's plan to withdraw US troops from Germany are by no means based on a whim. Europe is simply losing its significance

Read this article in German.

What initially began as just a media report was confirmed by Donald Trump on 15 June: The US government is planning to reduce the maximum number of US troops stationed in Germany from 34,500 at present to 25,000. It remains to be seen whether the announcement will actually result in thousands of US soldiers leaving Germany for good.

By contrast, it seems that a verdict on Trump's motives for the decision has already been reached. German news outlet *Der Spiegel* spoke of a 'plan of revenge' by former US Ambassador Richard Grenell to get even for his departure, which was marked by relief and gloating. The op-ed called the withdrawal of troops 'punishment for Germany' in light of perceived insufficient defence spending and Merkel's decision to decline an invitation to a planned G7 summit in Washington.

Deutsche Welle branded Trump a 'temperamental president' and – with its unfortunate, hackneyed statement that the planned withdrawal was a 'purely political decision' – insinuated that strategic considerations played no role in the decision-making. The chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the German Bundestag, Norbert Röttgen, concluded that Trump's foreign policy was now dictated 'virtually exclusively by the election campaign'. A former German diplomat even ascribed the planned withdrawal of troops to Trump's 'pathological self-centredness'.

A change of strategy

The prevailing opinion that the withdrawal of troops is a reflection of Trumpian impulsiveness or even an act of revenge directed squarely at

Germany is as inaccurate as it is dangerous. It is inaccurate because it testifies to a lack of knowledge about the new strategic direction of American foreign policy, which is already in full swing. And it is dangerous because it falsely suggests that, should Trump fail to win re-election, Germany would 'immediately resume its much better relationship' with the US, as recently predicted by Sigmar Gabriel.

But anyone in Germany who insinuates that the upcoming US presidential election will be determined by how many US troops remain on German soil is also suffering from 'pathological self-centredness'.

Yet even the chronology of events shows that Trump's desire to bring US soldiers back to the US has little to do with the end of Grenell's term as US Ambassador or Merkel's decision not to attend the G7 summit. Even the first media report discussing the troop withdrawal observed that the Trump administration had been giving real thought to reducing troops in Germany since last September. These considerations are not just part of Trump's fundamental criticism of US troops being permanently deployed outside the country's borders (*forward deployment*). Instead, they reflect the dwindling significance of Europe in strategic terms.

Even the hackneyed argument that Trump is hurting only himself with his plans to pull out troops, as the US needs its bases in Germany for military activities in the Middle East, fails to recognise that even this region is no longer at the heart of US foreign policy. It isn't all that long ago that Trump ended military cooperation with Kurdish anti-Assad forces and left the field in Syria's ongoing war to Turkey and Russia.

It started earlier

Certainly, Trump is facing a tough election campaign because of a multitude of challenges – over more than 100,000 Covid-19 fatalities, the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic and blatant discrimination against African Americans. But anyone in Germany who insinuates that the upcoming US presidential election will be determined by how many US troops remain on German soil is also suffering from 'pathological self-centredness'.

Election campaign or no election campaign, Trump's scepticism towards a US military presence in Germany and Europe primarily reflects the strategic conviction that the US is currently caught up in a superpower rivalry with China. The current National Defense Strategy references a 'reemergence of long-term, strategic competition' between superpowers,

labels China and Russia revisionist powers and identifies the Indo-Pacific as a region of vital strategic importance.

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Influential strategist Steve Bannon is not the only person to call the 21st century the 'Pacific century'. The focus of US foreign policy had already begun to shift towards east Asia under Trump's predecessors. In his first year in office, Barack Obama referred to himself as America's first 'Pacific president' and declared a refocussing of US foreign policy towards east Asia in December 2011, a shift that became known as the *pivot to Asia*.

Gone for good?

The Bush administration also saw China as a future rival and began developing strategies to tackle the country's rise. Given that Trump is by no means the sole cause of this foreign policy pivot, which has been in the works for years, it seems unrealistic to hope that electoral victory for Joe Biden would retrain the US focus on Europe and end the debates over the transatlantic relationship that have raged in recent years. Under Biden, the US focus on China and the declining role for Europe that this entails would be no less profound.

Long gone are the days when the US saw itself as capable of waging multiple, costly wars at the same time and affording a network of US military bases across the world. Making more efficient use of military resources includes rethinking existing obligations. In his speech to graduates of the US Military Academy at West Point several days ago, Trump stressed that it is not the duty of the US military to 'rebuild foreign nations' or to be 'the policemen of the world' and that the actual job of the armed forces is to defend the nation.

Trump's foreign policy has made it clear for years that his priorities do not include defending Europe or maintaining military involvement in the Middle East. Getting a realistic picture of Trump's motivations behind plans to withdraw troops from Germany requires viewing his administration's decision in this context. Instead of shrugging off the US's waning interest in Europe as a whim of the current president and hoping that transatlantic relations will improve under his potential successor, foreign policy discussions in Germany need to mature and develop plans for what happens after the US leaves Europe.



Payam Ghalehdar
Göttingen

Payam Ghalehdar is a research assistant at the Chair of International Relations at the Georg-August-University of Göttingen and conducts research on US foreign policy issues. He received his doctorate at the European University Institute. He tweets under @PayamGhalehdar.