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Examining the Change in Foreign Policy Paradigm and the Impact of Political Parties in the United States: A Case Study of the Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout Prisoner Exchange

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ABSTRACT

The decision by the United States to exchange Viktor Bout, a notorious arms smuggler and former international fugitive, for Brittney Griner, a prominent female basketball player, has generated considerable controversy and debate. A key point of contention centers on the stark divergence of this policy from the transactional approach adopted during the previous Donald Trump administration. Concurrently, some factions contend that the exchange of Brittney Griner for Viktor Bout reflects a political agenda championed by the Democratic Party, thereby fostering the perception that liberal interests receive preferential treatment within the Joe Biden administration's cabinet. This research aims to examine the change in foreign policy paradigm in the United States and the impact of political parties in the context of the prisoner exchange between Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout. The exchange has garnered public attention as it raises questions about the shift in the United States' foreign policy approach and the influence of political parties in the decision-making process. This study adopts a qualitative approach by analyzing relevant sources such as academic literature, news reports, and official government statements. The findings reveal a paradigm shift in the United States' foreign policy during the Joe Biden administration. The transactional approach adopted by former President Donald Trump has been replaced by a values-based orientation and the nation's obligation to protect its citizens wherever they may be. The prisoner exchange between Griner, an American athlete, and Bout, a Russian detainee, serves as evidence of this change.

Keywords: United States, Brittney Griner, Viktor Bout, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Transactionalism.

ABSTRAK

Keputusan Amerika Serikat untuk menukar Viktor Bout, seorang penyelundup senjata terkenal dan buronan internasional, dengan Brittney Griner, seorang pemain basket wanita terkemuka, telah menimbulkan kontroversi dan perdebatan yang cukup besar. Salah satu poin perdebatan utama terfokus pada perbedaan yang mencolok antara kebijakan ini dengan pendekatan transaksional yang diadopsi selama pemerintahan Donald Trump sebelumnya. Sementara itu, beberapa faksi berpendapat bahwa pertukaran Brittney Griner dengan Viktor Bout mencerminkan agenda politik yang didukung oleh Partai Demokrat, sehingga memunculkan persepsi bahwa kepentingan liberal mendapatkan perlakuan istimewa di dalam kabinet pemerintahan Joe Biden. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji perubahan paradigma kebijakan luar negeri di Amerika Serikat dan dampak partai politik dalam konteks pertukaran tahanan antara Brittney Griner dan Viktor Bout. Pertukaran ini telah menarik perhatian publik karena mengangkat pertanyaan mengenai pergeseran pendekatan kebijakan luar negeri Amerika Serikat dan pengaruh partai politik dalam proses pengambilan keputusan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan menganalisis sumber-sumber yang relevan seperti literatur akademik, laporan berita, dan pernyataan resmi pemerintah. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan adanya perubahan paradigma kebijakan luar negeri Amerika Serikat selama pemerintahan Joe Biden. Pendekatan transaksional yang diadopsi oleh mantan Presiden Donald Trump telah digantikan oleh orientasi berbasis nilai dan kewajiban negara untuk melindungi warganya di mana pun mereka berada. Pertukaran tahanan antara Griner, seorang atlet Amerika Serikat, dan Bout, seorang tahanan Rusia, menjadi bukti dari perubahan tersebut

Kata Kunci : Amerika Serikat, Brittney Griner, Viktor Bout, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Transaksionalisme



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1. Introduction

On December 8, 2022, the United States and Russia conducted a prisoner exchange that sparked controversy and raised questions regarding the backgrounds of the individuals involved in the exchange, namely Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout. Brittney Griner is a professional female basketball player from the United States who was arrested by Russian authorities in February 2022 for being found in possession of cannabis oil during her visit to the country. Subsequently, in August 2022, she was sentenced to 9 years in prison (Maynes, 2022). Meanwhile, Viktor Bout, a former international fugitive, gained prominence as an illicit arms trader, embarking on his career amidst the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Throughout his trajectory, Bout engaged in transactions with diverse actors, spanning from insurgent groups and pro-independence fighters to military regimes of various nations. His operational scope extended extensively, with self-proclaimed involvements in Angola, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, and several regions across North America. On March 6, 2008, Bout was apprehended by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in Thailand, thanks to an elaborate ruse orchestrated by the DEA, wherein they posed as potential clients seeking arms deals with Bout. Subsequently, Bout underwent an arduous legal process in Thailand, lasting two years. The judicial verdict favored Bout's extradition to the United States, where he faced further judicial proceedings. Upon extradition, Viktor Bout faced a comprehensive set of charges, resulting in a conviction that led to a 25-year prison sentence. He was accused of putting American citizens' lives in danger, endangering civilian workers' lives, trafficking illegal weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles, supporting terrorist groups, money laundering, falsifying official documents, and illegally obtaining weapons. (The United States Department of Justice, 2011).

Following the exchange of prisoners, the opposition, particularly Republican congressman Michael McCaul and former President Donald Trump, expressed their disapproval and harsh sentiments. They believed that the prisoner exchange was unfair to the United States and biased. Such responses are not unexpected, especially in light of the transactional nature of foreign policy under Trump's presidency. Donald Trump frequently used a transactional approach to forming foreign policy throughout his presidency. He was unwilling to help other nations unless the United States personally benefited, which was clear from his hesitation. For instance, he harshly opposed the Barack Obama-initiated agreement between the United States and Australia to accept thousands of immigrants, calling it a "dumb" pact. (Chappell, 2017). Trump's claim that the United States suffered losses and received no benefits from stationing thousands of troops on the border between South Korea and North Korea is another illustration of his transactional approach to foreign policy. He thought that South Korea should "pay" for the aid that the United States of America had given (Jacobson, 2016).

This article aims to clarify how the Joe Biden administration is working to alter the direction of foreign policy that was left over from the Donald Trump administration. By analyzing the instance of the 2022 prisoner exchange involving Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout, it also looks at the probable impact of American political parties on the creation of foreign policy. The article's investigation of this case tries to shed light on the reasons for and factors that were taken into account while deciding whether to exchange inmates. It examines if political motivations, particularly those connected to the Democratic Party, were behind the prisoner exchange. Additionally, the article explores the potential implications of such exchanges on the perception of prioritization within the Biden administration's cabinet, particularly with regard to liberal interests.

Furthermore, the analysis seeks to examine the broader implications of the Griner-Bout prisoner exchange for the foreign policy orientation of the United States under the Biden administration. By investigating the departure from the transactional approach of the previous administration, the article endeavors to ascertain whether the Biden administration's foreign policy demonstrates a shift towards a more cooperative and multilateral framework. By examining these aspects, the article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the case of the Griner-Bout prisoner exchange, shedding light on the potential influence of political dynamics and the underlying motives driving foreign policy decisions in the United States under the Biden administration.

2. Method

The discussion regarding the role and influence of political parties in the formulation of foreign policy is not a new phenomenon. Since the end of World War II, many countries have gained independence and established governments based on democratic principles. These countries have also formed their own political parties, which over time have played significant roles in shaping both domestic and foreign policies. One of the early thinkers who addressed the role of political parties in the making of foreign policy was William E. Paterson (1981) in his work titled "Political Parties and the Making of Foreign Policy: The Case of the Federal Republic."

However, it is important to understand that the role and extent of influence exerted by political parties in the modern era are vastly different from the period before the end of the Cold War, particularly in the case of the United States. In reality, the political landscape in America has become highly polarized, especially with the rise of populist politics in recent decades (Friedrichs & Tama, 2022). This has led to a segmented political climate in the United States, broadly divided into two sides: a liberal-leaning society represented by the Democratic Party and a conservative-leaning society represented by the Republican Party. These opposing political parties also hold distinct views on what should be the key priorities in foreign policy (Pew Research

Center, 2018).. The debates between these political parties encompass various issues, ranging from immigration, trade, intervention in foreign conflicts, to the rescue of citizens abroad.

Transaccionalism in international relations is not a new concept, but its discussion gained popularity during Donald Trump's presidency in the United States from 2017 to 2021 due to various foreign policy decisions. In the context of foreign policy, transaccionalism views the world as a zero-sum game, where there is a threshold of benefits that a country can obtain in its interactions with other countries, and these benefits must be maximized as much as possible. Therefore, transaccional foreign policy rarely establishes long-term commitment with other countries, but rather adopts a flexible position that allows for engagement with any country as long as it yields benefits.

In the context of foreign policy, transaccionalism does not prioritize factors such as ideological similarities or a history of good relations when interacting with other countries. Instead, the calculation is based on the magnitude of the benefits to be gained (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020). Furthermore, a foreign policy can be considered transaccional if it prioritizes bilateral cooperation between two countries rather than engaging in multilateral arrangements involving three or more countries. This is because multilateral relations tend to be more complex, involving various state actors with different political agendas, interests, and backgrounds. Additionally, multilateral relationships often require long-term commitments to achieve benefits, which is not ideal for a transaccional state that seeks instant cooperation and quick results to gain the trust of its people, as transaccionalism operates on the principles of populist politics.

Although sharing similarities with realism, these two concepts (transaccionalism and realism) have several distinguishing points. One of the differences is that realism is not afraid to establish commitments with strategically oriented alliances. Secondly, domestic interests do not play a significant role in the formulation of foreign policy in the concept of realism, unlike transaccionalism, which utilizes foreign policy to gain influence in domestic politics. Thirdly, the concepts of sovereignty and non-intervention are important in realist foreign policy, whereas the same does not apply to transaccionalist foreign policy, as its primary objective is to achieve populist/domestic goals, relying on what the domestic population desires. Consequently, intervention in the affairs of other states is not uncommon in transaccionalist foreign policy (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020).

According to Robert B. Zoellick, as cited by Thayer (2018), there are several aspects that differentiate Donald Trump's transaccionalist foreign policy from the foreign policies of other world leaders. Zoellick argues that: (1) Donald Trump views foreign policy as a transaction, giving less consideration to whether his actions align with the traditions and characteristics of U.S. foreign policy in general; (2) Domestic interests dominate the formulation of his foreign policy; (3) His foreign policy tends to be protectionist in nature; (4) Donald Trump adopts an ambivalent stance in forming alliances or cooperation with other countries, believing that the United States has been too "good" in assisting other nations during its approximately 70 years as a superpower. By using these indicators of Donald Trump's transaccionalist foreign policy, the author aims to demonstrate that the exchange of Brittney Griner for Viktor Bout does not align with the pattern of foreign policy during the Trump era and signifies a shift in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy under the Joe Biden administration.

This paper utilizes a descriptive analysis research method through a qualitative approach with secondary data sources such as websites, journal articles, books, and other electronic media. Qualitative research is a type of research that focuses on a process, aiming to generate descriptive information and thorough analysis, but does not employ numerical or measurement scale methods (quantitative) in the research process. Meanwhile, descriptive research is a type of research that seeks to explain a phenomenon by describing various variables related to the research problem (Mulyadi, 2011). The author chose to use this method because the issues discussed in the paper are political in nature, therefore numerical data or statistical analysis are not utilized to explain and elaborate the author's arguments.

This paper discusses and analyzes the case of the exchange of Brittney Griner for Viktor Bout, which occurred in 2022. The paper focuses on indicators of the influence of political parties and the pattern of foreign policy, thus it does not address the perspective of economic, military, or other factors that may have influenced the exchange of Brittney Griner for Viktor Bout.

3. Result and Discussion

Changing the Pattern of Foreign Policy

Russia's desire to regain Bout's custody was evident long before the prisoner exchange with Griner occurred, even during the initial stages of Bout's trial in Thailand in 2010. The Russian government openly expressed its rejection, stating that the prosecution was a mistake, as Bout was merely an innocent businessman and a political prisoner. This demonstrates that despite Viktor Bout being a notorious criminal actively involved in arms trafficking and indirectly contributing to various conflicts in different countries, he remained an asset for Russia.

The decision of the United States to exchange Brittney Griner for Viktor Bout contradicts the transactionalist approach of former President Donald Trump for several reasons. Firstly, the prisoner exchange took place despite the clear advantage it provided to Russia. This viewpoint was expressed by John Bolton,

former National Security Advisor of the United States, who stated that the exchange was a victory for Russia. Bolton further suggested that if he were still in office, a more favorable prisoner exchange, such as swapping Bout for Paul Whelan, an American Marine also detained in Russia, would have taken place. This differs from Trump's policy approach, as he consistently prioritized the benefits that could be obtained by the United States (Keane, Doornbos, Simko-Bednarski, & Golding, 2022).

Secondly, the exchange of Griner for Bout stands in stark contrast to the position of the United States, which has taken a firm stance against Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. Instead of sending troops to support the Ukrainian national army, the United States returned a notorious illegal arms dealer to Russia. This individual has the potential to further facilitate the provision of military logistics required by Russia during the invasion. Additionally, Viktor Bout openly expressed his full support for the military invasion of Ukraine and even suggested that it should have been initiated earlier (Askew, 2022).

Thirdly, the exchange of Brittney Griner for Viktor Bout involved not only the governments of the United States and Russia but also a third-party actor, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This is evident from the statement released by the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which disclosed that the prisoner exchange was facilitated through their mediation. It highlights the close relationship the UAE maintains with both superpowers, the United States and Russia. Furthermore, the physical exchange took place at the Al Bateen Executive Airport located in Abu Dhabi. This signifies the element of multilateralism in the exchange of Brittney Griner for Viktor Bout, which contradicts the transactionalist policy approach of the Trump era.

The decision to adopt a foreign policy that differs from the transactionalist approach of the Trump era is certainly not coincidental. Since 2020, Joe Biden himself has opposed the policies implemented by Donald Trump (Biden, 2020), stating that the credibility and political influence of the United States have been eroded during Trump's presidency. He accuses Trump of abandoning many American allies and sacrificing the well-being of various military personnel, diplomats, and other civil servants in order to pursue a foreign policy that he deemed "beneficial" based on his own perspective. Joe Biden's clear motive to change the course of foreign policy and present a new image of America to the world is one of the factors that renders the exchange of Brittney Griner for Viktor Bout inconsistent with the transactionalist indicators associated with Donald Trump.

Accusations Regarding Democratic Influence

The exchange of prisoners involving Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout has sparked considerable controversy and criticism. Some individuals have raised questions regarding Joe Biden's decision to release Paul Whelan during the negotiation process, accusing the Democratic Party of exerting significant influence over the exchange. One basis for these allegations relates to Brittney Griner's identity, which aligns with the progressive values of the Democratic Party. Specifically, Griner identifies as a lesbian and is part of the LGBT+ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) community.

Griner publicly disclosed her lesbian identity early in her sports career, specifically in 2013 during an interview with *Sports Illustrated* (Feinberg, 2013). She has been open with the media and the public about her sexual orientation. Additionally, she authored a book titled "In My Skin: My Life On and Off the Basketball Court," published a year after she revealed her sexual orientation. The book recounts her childhood and the various challenges she has encountered as a lesbian (Griner & Hovey, 2014).

Secondly, one controversial aspect of Brittney Griner's identity that has faced opposition from conservative society is her refusal to sing the national anthem before competing. Griner stated that she does not want to sing the national anthem as a form of protest supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, prior to her arrest in Russia (Metcalfe, 2020).

This aspect of Brittney Griner's identity has created an impression of "favoritism" within the Joe Biden administration, where Griner's identity as a lesbian who opposes singing the national anthem as a form of protest - or in other words, someone with a progressive identity - is prioritized over citizens with conservative-leaning identities like Paul Whelan, who are considered equally deserving for an exchange with Viktor Bout (Weisman & Bensinger, 2022).

Lastly, one argument used to oppose the exchange between Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout is the fact that Griner was technically arrested for violating Russian laws. Griner knowingly brought in a vape pen containing cannabis oil into a country that prohibits the consumption and distribution of marijuana. Russia did not engage in a political conspiracy or unjustly abduct Griner without cause; rather, Russian law enforcement apprehended a foreign tourist who had violated criminal laws in Russia.

However, the argument regarding the influence of the Democratic Party in the decision to exchange Brittney for Bout contradicts the fact that prior to this prisoner exchange and in the same year, the United States government had already exchanged a former American Marine named Trevor Reed for Konstantin Yaroshenko, a Russian pilot who was arrested and convicted in the same year as Viktor Bout for smuggling cocaine into America (Tucker & Lee, 2022). However, the prisoner exchange between Trevor Reed and Konstantin Yaroshenko did not generate the same level of controversy and criticism as the case of the exchange between Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout. This is noteworthy because, using the same argument, the exchange of Reed for Yaroshenko should also be considered as influenced by the Republican Party, considering Reed's identity as

a white patriot (former Marine), yet this was not the case.

Furthermore, the argument that Brittney Griner was "unworthy" of being exchanged for Viktor Bout because of her refusal to sing the national anthem as a form of protest should also apply to the case of the prisoner exchange between Trevor Reed and Konstantin Yaroshenko. It should be noted and recalled that Trevor Reed was dishonorably discharged from the Marine Corps, which is significant information. When a U.S. military servicemember is dishonorably discharged, it indicates that the U.S. government does not consider them a veteran and will not provide them with severance compensation. The dishonorable discharge status also hinders the servicemember's future career prospects as they are unable to reapply for civil service employment.

The criticism and negative comments regarding the prisoner exchange between Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout are likely not based on suspicions of significant influence or political agenda from the Democratic Party in the formulation of American foreign policy. Rather, they stem from two factors: the notoriety of Viktor Bout and the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the time of the exchange. Viktor Bout had already made a name for himself in the minds of American citizens even before his arrest in Thailand. He received significant media attention and inspired the Hollywood film "Lord of War," starring renowned actor Nicholas Cage (The Economist, 2008). He was also the main subject of the documentary "The Notorious Mr. Bout" and featured prominently in an episode of the television series "Manhunt: Kill or Capture" (IndieWire, 2014). This exposure made his name familiar among the public, and it is understandable that American citizens would oppose his return to Russia, especially in 2022 when Russia was invading Ukraine.

4. Conclusion

The foreign policy implemented during Donald Trump's presidency created a perception that the United States would only assist other countries if it benefited them. The transactional nature of Trump's policy posed a challenge for Joe Biden's administration, which aimed to steer American foreign policy in a new direction. However, it is not impossible to bring about change. The prisoner exchange case involving Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout is an example of the Biden administration's efforts to demonstrate a new era in foreign policy formulation. The decision was made based on the obligation of the state to protect its citizens wherever they may be, regardless of the cost involved, rather than focusing on the potential gains. This signifies a shift towards prioritizing duty rather than self-interest, exemplifying the Biden administration's commitment to a new approach in American foreign policy.

Meanwhile, from an objective perspective, the prisoner exchange of Brittney Griner with Viktor Bout was not driven by the agenda of a particular political party but rather by the agenda of the United States to rescue its citizens held in foreign countries. This is evidenced by the case of the prisoner exchange involving Trevor Reed and Konstantin Yaroshenko, which is fundamentally similar to the Griner case but did not receive the same level of criticism and negative reactions. Based on the arguments used to prove a prioritization of liberal individuals through the Griner case, it can be argued paradoxically that the Reed case is evidence of a prioritization of conservative individuals. In other words, it can be demonstrated that there is no influence from a specific political party in the decision of the United States to exchange Brittney Griner with Viktor Bout.

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