

Isolationism and its Impact on Homeland Security

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December 2, 2016

Introduction

In the past decade, there has been a growing call to return to isolationism. The rhetoric of Donald Trump's campaign and his election as president can be seen as a sign of this. These proponents claim that the United States' traditional stance was isolation from foreign affairs and treaties and a return to isolation would make the country safer. It would no longer make the U.S. a target of foreign nations and terrorist organizations while saving the country money that can be reinvested at home. Others argue that U.S. engagement makes the U.S. more secure. They conclude that globalization and world leadership is a benefit to the country economically and in homeland security.

Before a discussion of U.S. history, current position, and the future impact of Homeland Security (HS) can take place, it is necessary to define the terms used here-in. Isolationism is a *policy of abstaining from economic and political relations with other countries*. Most people use isolationism when they would more accurately mean non-interventionist *which is a foreign policy of political or military non-involvement in foreign relations or in other countries' internal affairs* (Smith, 2010, p. 2). Deep Engagement has been U.S. policy since the end of WWII and consists of the three overlapping objectives: managing the environment outside the U.S. to reduce near and long term national security threats; maximize prosperity by promoting an expanding liberal, global economy; and organizing global institutions to ensure beneficial terms for the U.S. in interstate agreements. Deep Engagement Plus adds the spread of liberal values such as democracy, humanitarian interventions, and fostering human rights to Deep Engagement. Retrenchment or retraction would be a return from Deep Engagement to a non-interventionist policy (Brooks, 2013, p. 1-2, 73-87).

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Birth of the United States until WWI

There is a common assumption from scholars and in politics that prior to WWII, America had a policy of isolation; however, when one looks at America's guiding principles instead of political policy, this is not the case. America maintains its independence and pursues its own interest while standing for liberty, independence, and self-governance. Often cited is U.S.'s neutrality in a war between its once allies of France and Britain in 1793 and the Monroe Doctrine. These were, rather, based on a belief in avoiding permanent foreign entanglements. The government wanted to limit the influence that either government would be able to exercise in American politics.

Many times during the 19th century, the U.S. supported independence movements in South America, Greece, and Hungary. The U.S. also joined with Sweden and Sicily to fight the Barbary Pirates. The Founders of the U.S. believed that liberty, and therefore self-governance, was a right of all people. The Founders believed that, unlike European monarchies, the success of America would come from the people's prosperity and success, not from government control. The Founders believed in the spread of American democracy not by force, but by opportunity. The U.S. traditionally looked for opportunities to support its principles emerging in other countries. The Founders wanted to avoid foreign obligations that would require them to spend blood and treasure in the defense of others (Smith, 2010, p. 1-12).

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WWI to WWII

Between WWI and WWII, the U.S. was divided on its global role. President Woodrow Wilson strove to place the U.S. in a position in world affairs. He sought to build and empower The League of Nations (LN). Unfortunately for Wilson, this would not prevent the Second World War or survive the beginning of hostilities. He sought to spread collective security, self-determination, and democracy through engagement. While in general his ideas were well received, most of the specifics were not. His original drafting of Article X of the LN charter would have allowed the LN to cede portions of a state to another by majority vote, not even requiring a unanimous agreement (Manela, 2008, p. 2-3).

Even with the LN, the U.S. and Europeans tried policies of isolation and appeasement. The misadventure of appeasement by Britain and France between WWI and WWII was not the cause of WWII but did lead to the war unfolding as it did. Many loathed to involve themselves in politics outside their respective borders. The Great Depression of the United States had worldwide effects. European unemployment was high, while at the same time it experienced social change. Britain's Neville Chamberlain naively trusted Adolf Hitler and saw the fascists as a block to the spread of communism and socialism.

France was focused on socialist reforms. The government was spending freely but not on the military. The country focused on non-involvement because WWI had devastated it. Hitler tested what the other powers would let him do. He involved himself in supporting Spanish Fascist and annexation of the northern Czechoslovakia. Hitler was emboldened when Britain and France traded away part of Czechoslovakia for a guarantee that he would not set his eyes west (Coates, 1997).

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After the invasion of France by Germany, the U.S. was divided on a response. In 1940, Representative George Bender from Ohio espoused a common belief that Europe's problems were its own and should not involve America. He saw the call to support the battle against German aggression and expansion as dangerous to the U.S. Mr. Bender did not want to see the U.S. use force to oust a dictatorship. He wanted the U.S. to be a shining beacon of successful democracy that the world would try to emulate. Secretary of State Cordell Hull saw extreme isolation as the exact event that would return the world to medieval chaos. He questioned the point of having principles of liberty and a free government if the U.S. did not support these principles around the world. A turn to isolationism would be self-defeating in that it would foster the exact environment to make the U.S. less secure (Isolationism and Internationalism). In the end, WWII would have happened. There was no stopping Hitler's lust for expansion and domination; however, if the western powers had been more forceful and prepared themselves for conflict, the war would have been a very different one.

Post WWII

At the end of WWII, the U.S. emerged as one of the two global super-powers and is the only one remaining. The U.S. tried to ensure its security, prosperity, and domestic liberty by a grand strategy of deep engagement. Deep engagement's main goal is defensive in trying to prevent the development of an unstable world while benefiting the U.S. at the same time. Much of the world's global economy is the result of U.S. efforts post WWII. The U.S. has been able to leverage its forward security relationships and alliances into fostering a cooperative global economy.

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The U.S. greatly benefits from stability because it is the largest economic player. The U.S. economy dominates the world export and financial markets. Its dollar is the standard by which world trade is measured. The U.S. has not promoted an open system but rather structured it to line up with the country's long term interests. It is the major player in the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It and its allies make up the G5 which exercises enormous control over the IMF. In return, loans from the IMF are typically advantageous to the U.S.

The U.S. has an ability to negotiate better positions on economic issues due to its global security policy. An example of this is the Korea Free Trade Agreement that was beneficial to the U.S. and imitated by Korea to strengthen security ties between the two countries. The EU, which is a larger trading partner with Korea than the U.S., was unable to secure as beneficial a trade agreement. Deep Engagement protects the stability that is so advantageous to the U.S. (Brooks, 2016, p. 155-189).

Since WWII, the U.S. has, at times, strayed from Deep Engagement to Deep Engagement Plus by involving itself in Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, the Balkans, and Iraq. It has attempted to spread liberal democracy and human rights by force and has repeatedly been unsuccessful at the cost of trillions of dollars and tens of thousands of U.S. lives lost. The George W. Bush administration invaded Afghanistan in 2001 after Al-Qaeda attacked the U.S. on September 11th of that year. His administration invaded Iraq in 2003 to try to prevent the government of Saddam Hussein from providing chemical, biological, or radiological weapons to terrorists. In both of these instances, the U.S. tried somewhat unsuccessfully to impose a democratic government in place of a dictatorship.

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Since the election of Barak Obama in 2008, his administration has been attempting to return to a pre-9/11 environment. He is committed to international relations, engagements, and partnerships. The administration has tried to take lessons learned during the Iraq invasion and is trying not to repeat those with unilateral action in trouble spots around the world. President Obama sees it as essential that America remain a player on the world stage. He argued that the U.S. gives up its moral authority to demand that others follow the rules if the U.S. itself is unwilling to follow those rules, hence U.S. restraint in Syria. The administration has worked to include smaller developing countries in partnerships, not to create a multi-polar world but a multi-partnership one. One of the challenges of the administration is military downsizing after a decade and a half of war, while recognizing American security concerns around the world. This has been focused on support of various states in a deterrent role as opposed to direct combat. This administration sees this as not a turn from deep engagement, but instead, small steps to build strong partnerships (Ikenberry, 2014).

Many of the challenges facing the world today can be attributed to U.S. interventionism and mistakes compounded by different administrations. From the beginning of the invasion of Iraq, there was not a coherent strategy to accomplish the U.S. objective of removing a regime hostile to the U.S. and then be able to withdraw. Almost as soon as the government of Saddam Hussein fell, a homegrown insurgency developed, divided mainly between Sunni and Shia sects of Islam. Both of these groups attacked the U.S. led coalition and each other, vying for power in the newly liberated country. Sunni insurgencies received money from Sunni countries like Saudi Arabia along with training and foreign fighters from Sunni terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. Shia groups received money, equipment, and training from Iran, which has been a longtime supporter of anti-American and anti-Western terrorism since the late 1970s.

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Under the leadership of Barak Obama, the U.S. started withdrawing from Iraq in 2010 and finished by the end of 2011 to make good on campaign promises made in 2008. The democratic government of Iraq was unwilling to sign a status of forces agreement with the U.S. and was also a major cause of the withdrawal. Unfortunately, the Shia majority was repressed during the power of Saddam Hussein's Sunni Ba'ath party's rule of the country. Because of this, the Sunni populations, mainly in northern and western Iraq, were excluded from government, positions in the army, and generally discriminated against by Shiites.

During the Arab Spring, a series of popular uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East to overthrow oppressive regimes, a rebellion started in country of Syria. This insurgency was able to gain ground against the government of Bashar Al-Assad and push them out of some major population centers. These groups included moderate Islamic fighters that promoted a more pro-western, democratic, secular government fighting alongside Radical Islamic Jihadis such as Al-Qaeda. However, after initial success, this progress stalled as the two types of fighters divided. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, ISIS, IS, Daesh) developed and started to sweep through Sunni territory in Syria and soon spilled over in to Iraq. Much of the local Iraqi Sunni population was willing to give IS a chance to take charge, or at least not resist, out of antipathy towards the Iraq Shia government that excluded them. While IS is currently losing ground in Iraq and Syria, they have been able to globalize their success through the internet and social media.

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Current Homeland Security External Threats

“He who believes new benefits will cause great personages to forget old injuries is deceived.”

(Machiavelli, 1513, Chap. 7)

There are currently three axes of threat to homeland security, one major and two minor. The current main threat is international and domestic Islamic terrorism. There is also a growing threat from Russia and China as they seek to expand their sphere of influence. Both view the U.S. global dominance as interfering with their spheres of influence and restraining regional ambitions. A future change of U.S. involvement or position would not be effective because of the position it currently holds.

The threat of Islamic terrorism is from terrorist groups and state sponsored terrorist groups. Osama Bin-Laden may be dead but Al-Qaeda is still an international threat with branches in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Al-Qaeda is an organized enemy that will continue to seek out ways to attack the U.S., like 9/11. IS is another threat. While it does not appear to be orchestrating a direct attack by foreign militants against the U.S., it does direct or inspire “Lone Wolf” attacks by those already in a Western country. It has also been successful in recruiting support and attracting individuals to fight in Syria. Since 2013, there have been 103 plots to attack western countries. Plots have also become more deadly with an average of 10 casualties per attack in 2015, now to 58 per attack in 2016. IS will continue to seek out global targets even as its physical territory shrinks. It is estimated that IS has 34 groups in 18 countries outside of the current conflict zone (Aber, 2016a).

Russian President Vladimir Putin often laments the breakup of the Soviet Union and has even referred to it as a disaster. The West sees this as not only nostalgic rhetoric but also a peek

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into plans to reestablish a dominant Russian influence. Once, the Russian Empire and later the U.S.S.R., spanned a large swath of the northern hemisphere and, during the Cold War, was the other major player on the world stage.

Russia sees the emergence of regional poles like the EU and China and feels the need to develop itself into a polar competitor. China has also been globalizing markets and influence in Brazil, Africa, and India. This development will indeed create competition for resources and markets. For 15 years after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Russian policy was one of trying to integrate into the existing global system. In the past decade, however, Russia has focused on enhancing its own power and position. This came from a belief that America and other Western Powers were not going to give Russia a fair chance at becoming an equal partner. Russia sees a future for a multi-polar world in which it plays its part. It is currently trying to secure its position on the Eurasian continent while cooperating with other countries that are also not players in the international system (Russian Dilemmas).

China is in a similar position as Russia. It has expanded into the South China Sea while ignoring the demands of the international community. China seeks to control regional markets and position itself as an emerging super power. China however will have many problems actually attaining super power status. China spends just 7% of what the U.S. does on military R&D. This is not something that can be rapidly changed but rather a long term investment, such as the U.S. made during the Cold War, involving building ships, planes, and submarines with the technology to back it up. When comparing technological ability and innovation, the U.S. is second in the world in number of patents per year (34% to Japan's 40%), and while China may be closing in on the number of technical doctoral degrees awarded every year, graduates have trouble finding employment outside of China because of the quality of its education. It is

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estimated that only 10% of Chinese educated engineers would be able to find employment in a Western country.

The U.S. also possesses a distinct advantage on the world economic stage as well. The U.S. controls 36% of the world GDP compared with China's 21%. However, projections place China as an aging population with a shrinking workforce. It is unlikely that China will be able to continue its growth rate into the future. *America Abroad* also proposed that the U.S. will be the only world super power for the foreseeable future. China is possibly an emerging super power but there are many things that will hold it back. First, the bar for super power status is much higher than it was 70 years ago at the end of WWII. China has a deficient scientific and industrial base. The education and technical manufacturing skills are something it does currently not possess. The U.S. has also spent the past 70 years developing and procuring a stockpile of advanced weaponry. The U.S. has also invested in the training and infrastructure required to exploit its advanced weaponry (Brooks, 2016, p. 14-47).

Analysis

Unfortunately, isolation, retraction, or retrenchment will not make the United States any safer. The U.S. will continue to be a target of Islamic terrorism even if it were to withdraw from the regions in conflict or even from the world stage. It is important for the U.S to build a coalition and not always take unilateral action unless absolutely necessary. The U.S. should coordinate policies with what is reasonable within this coalition, but once these policies are put in the place, countries must stand behind them. The failure to act weakens future threats of action.

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Syria can be looked at as an example of how retraction would be detrimental to the U.S. In the aftermath of the Iraq War, a war weary public and government was loathed to involve themselves in another Middle East ground conflict. The government of Bashir Al-Assad has long been antagonistic to the U.S. and provided a safe haven to Sunni insurgents during the Iraq war. When the popular uprising to overthrow the government started, the U.S. voiced its support in a change of government. The government used chemical weapons against its advisories and the U.S. and international community did nothing. The U.S. said that future use of chemical weapons would constitute crossing a “red line”; however, when this line was crossed, again the U.S. did nothing.

The Obama administration was also unwilling to support moderate rebel groups because it is difficult to identify actual moderate forces and ensure support will not make its way to those groups antagonistic to the U.S. Unfortunately, Radical Islamists were able to take the lead in this conflict anyway. This success has given IS worldwide recognition. It is able to promote Lone Wolf attacks in the U.S. and other countries. According to FBI testimony, 800 of its over 1000 active homegrown terrorist investigations are linked to IS (Aber, 2016a). Allowing IS to retain space would breed a similar environment to Afghanistan in the 1990s, where a brutal totalitarian religious regime allowed Al-Qaeda a safe space to flourish, plan, and train. Retraction could also allow either the spread of IS or other radical Islamists across the middle east and North Africa in the wake of other failed states because of the Arab Spring.

A retraction from this region will not negate the fact that these groups see the power, money, and success of the U.S. as a corrupting influence and something that has to be destroyed before a worldwide Islamic Caliphate can be established. Groups such as IS seek to impose harsh Shira Law and are intolerant to anyone with a differing view of Islam. They proclaim

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moderate Sunnis and all Shia as apostates and worthy only of death. The West is viewed similarly as infidels who also merit death.

Deep engagement has strengthened homeland security by the sharing of intelligence information with international partners. Because of the intelligence sharing networks developed during the Cold War, the U.S. and NATO allies have been able to leverage this when combating Islamic terrorism. It allows for the rapid dissemination of information and strengthens international commitment to stopping these groups (Brooks, 2016, p. 166).

Retraction will also do little to ensure homeland security from other state actors. Russia has already shown willingness to use force to annex Crimea and covertly fight in the Donbass region of Eastern Ukraine. The U.S. and other Western powers have had a weak international response to these crises. In response, Russia has also increased activities in the Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia which are NATO partners. Retraction would only serve to weaken NATO and encourage Russian expansion. Russia has also sought to legitimize itself after actions in the Ukraine by involvement in Syria. It has been a longtime supporter of the current government and is supporting the government with weapons and personnel. This has given Russia a place at the table during negotiations to end the conflict and the appearance of a return to its Cold War position.

The US and Russia continue to butt heads around the world and apparent weakness on the part of the U.S. has only encouraged Russian aggression within the U.S. In the 2016 presidential campaign, the Democratic National Committee was hacked by Russians and material was posted to the internet. While it is unsure whether these were state or non-state actors, it is undeniable that Russia has been building a significant cyber warfare infrastructure. With a

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perceived weakening of the U.S. from being unwilling to stand behind policy on Syria and Ukraine, what would prevent Russia from launching a cyber-attack against the U.S. as Russia takes action elsewhere? China has ambitions similar to Russia. It seeks to expand and gain resources for a growing population. It desires to be a regional hegemon, leading other Asian countries. While it struggles with having a military capable for force projection, it has also built a large cyber capability it could exploit to distract the U.S. during expansion.

Cyber warfare allows a country, or even a non-state group, to strike far beyond their national borders with a large scale effect for little total capital investment. It could be an attack on a dam or power-plant. The effects could be physically disastrous to the plant or surrounding population if a nuclear facility melted down or dam floods a population center. A secondary effect could also be an attack on a power plant in the winter, would leave people without power and cause the death of civilians. Right now, the United States has the most powerful military; however, the country is weak in its cyber infrastructure that could be exploited by an adversarial country (Aber, 2016b).

Limiting nuclear proliferation is a major component of deep engagement. Allies are not seeking to arm themselves, but rather rely on the U.S. to provided nuclear security. Deep engagement also makes it less likely that nuclear material will be exported to a non-nuclear state. Keeping nuclear materials out of the hands of state and non-state actors hostile to the U.S. is essential to homeland security. Reducing this threat makes it more likely that any attempt to bring radiological or nuclear material into the U.S. will be discovered (Brooks, 2016, p 98-101).

Conclusion

“That a blunder aught never be perpetrated to avoid war, because it is not to be avoided but is only deferred to your disadvantage.” (Machiavelli, 1513, Chap. 3)

A weak U.S. is one that will be exploited by adversaries, not one that would ensure security. The best way to ensure homeland security from threats outside the U.S. is through strong foreign policy and deep engagement. Trade deals, like the Trans Pacific Partnership, serve as a buffer against Chinese expansion and ensure partnership with these nations. NATO and the resulting trading relationships serve the same function against Russia. It helps the U.S. keeps combating these enemies beyond its borders instead of at home.

History has shown that isolationism does not ensure security. History also shows that the U.S. has always had a pragmatic approach to international relations. It seeks partnership opportunities that help ensure economic and domestic security. The world has changed since WWII, and the best way to ensure homeland security is through international engagement and leadership. The U.S. is able to leverage its economic and military power into positions advantageous to itself.

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