

This Week in Geopolitics

Isolationism vs. Internationalism: False Choices

BY GEORGE FRIEDMAN MAY 10, 2016

Since World War I, US policy has been split between isolationism and internationalism. From debates over joining the League of Nations to intervention in Europe, Americans have found odd comfort in siding with one of these two camps.

The isolationists wanted to avoid being mired in foreign intrigues, wars, and crises. The internationalists argued that without involvement, the world would evolve in ways that lacked US influence and thus threatened its national security. On December 7, 1941, the internationalists won the debate.

The problem was that the friction was not between true isolationists and internationalists. The fact was, there were no genuine isolationists. The debate was actually between two *internationalist* strategies. The clash between these two camps has been ongoing since the founding of the United States. It is an issue that is simmering towards a boil again today.

During the 1930s, this debate centered on the best way to handle Europe. One side argued that the US had to play a role in shaping Europe.

The counterargument—dubbed isolationism—was that trying to shape Europe was a trap. The Europeans had been engaged in an endless struggle. The US had fought in World War I without ending the continent's conflicts, and it should not be drawn into another war.

It should be noted that the so-called isolationists did not, in general, object to US involvement in China. The US sent gunboats to patrol its rivers, gave military aid to China, and permitted American airmen to volunteer to assist the Chinese.

The story was different for Europe. There was no desire for US engagement. This reflected the reality that the US Army was extremely small, but was the largest force it could field. If

deployed, it would be readily overwhelmed by German forces. So, the internationalists wanted to involve the US in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in China. The isolationists pressed to avoid involvement in Europe and for limited action against Japan. This was not, however, a struggle between isolationists and internationalists. This was a contest between competing internationalist strategies that both supported some degree of foreign engagement.

A Revolutionary Idea

Those that support what they believe to be isolationism frequently cite Thomas Jefferson's warning against involvement in entangling alliances. Yet, the American Revolution was won only because the colonies used extensive diplomacy and alliance building.

Benjamin Franklin was sent to Paris to recruit the French government to the side of the US. Franklin used the conflict between Britain and France to try to position the US as a French ally. The French, at first, provided some covert supplies to the US during the revolution. France would later make a large-scale commitment to the US because it wanted the British defeated in North America.

Jefferson himself had been deeply involved in the first US foreign policy crisis after the French Revolution in 1789. France had formed a republic and, therefore, had a moral bond with the American republic. But the US had reached a reasonable understanding with Britain, a major US trading partner. Britain also controlled the North Atlantic and could blockade American ships, strangling the American economy.

The US had to choose between alignment with Britain and its old ally, France. The US chose Britain. When faced with a choice between reality and morality, the US chose to protect its own interests.

George Washington summed up the ideal American strategy in his Farewell Address:

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in

extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop. Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence, she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.

Washington feared European controversies. The priority for the US was commercial relations, avoiding politics as much as possible. The US, he argued, had formed some alliances that must be honored, but there should be no more.

When his address is read carefully, it is clear that Washington was not promoting isolation. That was impossible given US commercial interests. Rather, he was calling for a minimal level of political engagement. That level will vary over time and is not a fixed point. But Washington believed that the US should pay the lowest price possible to protect its commercial relations.

Moral Versus Strategic

During World War II, the isolationists wanted the European balance of power to hold. They expected war and assumed it would resemble the extended bloodbath of World War I. Some believed that intervention was impractical, given Germany's power. The internationalists supported some means of containing Germany. The British could not stabilize France, and it was doubtful that any military force the US would deploy could do so. The isolationist strategy was to allow France and Britain to block Germany. If that failed, then accept a German-dominated Europe. The internationalist position was that if Germany conquered the Continent, Britain would have to capitulate to Germany. That would hand Germany the British and French fleets, allowing it to dominate the Atlantic and threaten the US.

The internationalist position was to aid Britain after the fall of

France. The isolationists objected, saying the war was over. After December 7, 1941, when the Germans declared war on the US, the isolationists' strategy proved catastrophically wrong.

The critical point is not that there were two competing moral principles regarding US behavior, but two competing strategic concepts. One was proved wrong under the circumstances, but neither was absurd. Had France not collapsed in six weeks, the isolationist strategy might have proved sound.

Nevertheless, the US adopted the position that maximum involvement was optimal.

The internationalist position turned from a strategy into an existential stance. The US must be involved in the world.

Fortunately, it was the right strategy for confronting the Soviet Union. Here, the strategy was containment, which required an extensive network of alliances, a constant deployment of troops, and massive economic involvement. Except for a direct assault on Soviet forces—a military impossibility—it was the only viable strategy, and it worked.

From this emerged a lesson. Isolationism had failed, and internationalism was the only doctrine possible. In the post-Cold War world, it was accepted that the US had to be deeply involved in global affairs. There was no strategy beyond the principle of involvement. Given that the US was the only global power, it was assumed that it had an inherent interest in managing global affairs.

The Limits of Power and Duty

But the US was in no way omnipotent. The idea that the US had an interest in the world's military, political, and economic affairs confronted the reality of the limits of American power. Inevitably, the idea that everything was an American responsibility was countered with the idea that nothing was in the American interest. It necessarily proceeds to a strategic argument.

One side is committed to maintaining the institutions created to fight the Cold War. This includes NATO, various bilateral agreements, and economic structures such as the International

Monetary Fund. The supporting argument is that these were successful in the Cold War, and they remain a useful platform for broad US engagement in the Eastern Hemisphere.

The counterargument is that the Cold War was a contest with a peer power, the Soviet Union. As such, it required the US to create a vast alliance web based on the United States' guarantees. Today, no peer power threatens American interests. Therefore, the Cold War structures are irrelevant and too expensive. More important, they are no longer designed to deal with anything that is essential to the US.

World War II and the Cold War required maximum global effort from the US. That effort is no longer needed. What is needed is to clearly identify American interests and relationships, and forces tailored to those needs. Everything cannot be an American duty, since American resources are limited. Involvement in affairs not central to American interests strain the treasury, and cause wars that can neither be won nor abandoned.

I am not arguing which is the more persuasive view. There is, perhaps, even a third option. But to label as isolationist a view that argues for a shift in prior US policy is in error. The isolationists in the past may have been wrong, but they weren't really isolationists.

The US can't be isolated from the world, as George Washington made clear. That being the case, the question is what should the United States' involvement be? Washington did not have an expansive view of US involvement. He had a realistic view, seeing that the US had minimal resources at the time. His doctrine was to limit American involvement to what was necessary. Necessity shifts with circumstance, but Washington's doctrine is self-evidently correct.

There are those who now argue that maintaining Cold War relationships when there is no Cold War is irrational. Others argue that these institutions are flexible enough to deal with multiple events, all of them requiring American involvement for the American interest.

This is a necessary strategic discussion that must be had now. I will discuss my own view on this in the coming weeks. However, the strategic discussion is impossible until the concepts of internationalism and isolationism are clarified. Otherwise, the two concepts, particularly isolationism, will be used to end the discussion. Only then can we define what the American strategy should be—and, more important, how to define American interests—under current circumstances.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'George Friedman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

George Friedman

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