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CONSEQUENCES OF ISOLATIONIST POLICIES

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JCSP 43 DL

Exercise Solo Flight

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Consequences of Isolationist Policies

There has been a dramatic change in international and economic policies over the last two decades. The internationalist policies that marked the post-World War II era and were a critical part of the international relations of many nations, have changed, and have become increasingly more isolationist. We have seen this change in countries like Austria, Poland, and most surprisingly the United States, which have moved steadily toward isolationist economic and foreign policy. In Austria, the far-right populist Freedom Party has been making substantial grounds with a platform of, “Anti-immigration sentiments, an anti-cosmopolitan isolationism in the name of defending traditional values and identities.”¹ In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party has advocated isolationist policies with the promise, “to put Poland first and pursue the country’s interests on the international state in a more assertive manner.”² Since the election of President Trump, the policies of the United States have become more isolationist and have provided short-term domestic gains. Through the use of historical examples, this essay will demonstrate how the United States policy of isolationism could negatively affect the United States. Specifically, it will discuss the isolationist policies of the United States during the interwar period and compare them to the current policies in the areas of economics, immigration, and international relations.

President Woodrow Wilson would lead the United States through the Great War with a focus on internationalism, with the intent of making sure there is never another war like the war

¹ Anna Grzymala Busse, “Austrian Election Proves Right-Wing Populism is New Normal in Europe,” *The Hill*, 22 October 2017. <http://thehill.com/opinion/international/356575-austrian-election-proves-right-wing-populism-is-new-normal-in-europe>

² Lukasz Pawlowski, “Poland’s Flirtation with Nationalism will Backfire,” *Financial Times*, 6 December 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/9d6f4924-daa8-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482>

they just finished. President Wilson took very progressive actions toward liberal internationalism, which was highlighted by his speech outlining the 14 Points of Light and included his vision of establishing the League of Nations. The 14 Points of Light speech established a set of principles that would be utilized for negotiations and in the writing of the Treaty of Versailles, ending World War I. President Wilson was also a fierce advocate of creating an organization that would focus on international peace and security. The organization that he envisioned would be called the League of Nations and “he meant it to be both the protector and promoter of not only peace but also democratic government.”³ Ultimately, President Wilson’s goal:

Was to safeguard American democracy, and that the surest way of doing this, aside from constant vigilance at home, was to work for world peace by defending and promoting democracy through the multilateralism of the League of Nations, guided by Washington’s leadership⁴

Ironically, even though President Wilson was a staunch advocate of the League of Nations and spent a lot of political capital to encourage the inclusion of the United States in to the League of Nations, the United States Congress would never approve the United States’ entry in to the organization. As President Wilson advocated for more internationalist policies, he encountered a wave of isolationism that would control United States policies for the next two decades. These policies were based on the effects of World War I and, “led the United States to retreat from global affairs and engage in isolationist policies to help foster internal growth and development—with decidedly mixed results.”⁵ Wilson’s dream to establish a lasting peace and

³ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ Norwich University, “Isolationism and U.S. Foreign Policy After World War I,” 2 November 2017. <https://graduate.norwich.edu/resources-mair/articles-mair/isolationism-and-u-s-foreign-policy-after-world-war-1/>

establish a United States foreign policy focused on free trade and internationalism would not come to fruition in his lifetime. It was the isolationist policies of his successors that would define United States international and economic policy for the next two decades and contribute to a period of isolationism that would significantly impact the United States and the globe.

Just like the isolationist policies from early 20th century, current United States policy has pulled the United States out of the multilateral agreements that have been the cornerstone of its post-World War II foreign policy and supported the international community through several major international crises including the Cold War and the Global War of Terrorism. Since the election of President Trump, we have seen a gradual withdrawal from international norms by the United States. Due to these changes we are seeing significant diplomatic fissures developing between key allies including Canada, France and Germany. These fissures can be seen by recent visits from the President of France and the Chancellor of Germany. Their recent diplomatic trips were focused on encouraging President Trump not to deviate from current international policies and maintain a multilateral approach to foreign policy. In President Macron's speech to the United States Congress he speaks about the need for multilateralism:

The only answer to today's global challenges is to build a new "twenty-first century world order." And the foundation of that order must be "a new breed of multilateralism" that is "more effective, accountable, and results-oriented." The champions of this new order must be more humane in their approach to globalization, wiser stewards of the only planet available, and unapologetic in their defense of freedom.⁶

One of the distinctive internationalist policies of President Wilson was his belief in the use of United States economic policy as a diplomatic tool. In fact, Wilson thought that using

⁶ Stewart M. Patrick, "Emmanuel Macron and the Franco-American Ties That Bind," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 April 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/emmanuel-macron-and-franco-american-ties-bind>

internationalist economic policies could have major implications in the development of world peace. Wilson believed, “To end balance-of-power competition and the threat of war, an open, integrated international economic system was of fundamental importance.”⁷ The years following President Wilson’s departure from office, we would see policy changes from his successors that would focus on isolationism and would contribute to severe economic crisis.

The Tariff Act of 1930 or otherwise known as the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act is one of those isolationist policies and would be a significant factor in the economic crisis. The Tariff Act of 1930, “increased nearly 900 American import duties, was debated, passed and signed as the world was tumbling into the Depression.”⁸ The co-sponsors of this bill Willis Hawley and Reed Smoot would become synonymous with economic isolationism and the bill that would contribute to the worsening economic situation during the Great Depression. Ultimately, the Smoot-Hawley Act did the most harm by creating discord between major trade partners and allies. The isolationist economic policies of the early 20th century demonstrates that:

Narrowly nationalistic policy of the United States, as exemplified again in the tariff of 1930 --inexcusable from an economic point of view and definitely harmful from a broader national standpoint - - has been one of the great complicating and accelerating factors in the cumulation of abnormal unbalances and rigidities which brought the world to the Great Depression.”⁹

Historically, the issue of tariffs has had negative consequences in regards to economic growth and international policy, so it is surprising that President Trump would emphasize tariffs in his economic policy. President Trump has threatened to levy tariffs on specific products from

⁷ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 14.

⁸ The Economist. “The Battle of Smoot-Hawley.” 18 December 2008. <https://www.economist.com/node/12798595>

⁹ Edwin Gay, “The Great Depression,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1 July 1932. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1932-07-01/great-depression>

the Canada, European Union, Australia, and China, which has caused international concern. Allied nations have requested waivers for their tariffs and China has countered with the threat of tariffs on United States products. The Trump administration is using trade deficits and an America first mentality to garner the support of his base and to justify these actions. Ultimately, President Trump's, "slogans constitute an economic nationalist agenda that point in protectionist and unilateral directions."¹⁰ President Trump has been able to utilize his rhetoric to rally his base and garner significant domestic support for his economic agenda. The primary concern with President Trump's focus on an economic nationalist agenda is, "that it deludes us into thinking that our problems mainly originate abroad and can be fixed by "tougher" trade policies."¹¹

In contrast to current isolationist economic policy, the policies of the United States immediately after World War II is an internationalist example of utilizing economic power as a means to improve the United States economic indicators and international peace and cooperation. The results of this policy are best seen through the results of economic recoveries of the nations involved in World War II. The European Recovery Plan or what became known as the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of Japan are examples of how the United States used economics as a tool to strengthen and rebuild war-ravaged areas in Europe and Japan. These actions demonstrated a multilateral approach to foreign policy and provided necessary assistance to rebuild the severely damaged infrastructure that remained after the war. Never before had programs been executed with such positive outcomes for those countries and the international community and can best be described in this way:

¹⁰ Jonathan D. Pollack, "Donald Trump and the Future of U.S. Leadership: Some Observations on International Order, East Asia, and the Korean Peninsula," *The Brookings Institution*, 8 February 2017. 10.

¹¹ Robert J. Samuelson, "Trump's Risky Nationalism," *The Washington Post*, 4 December 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-risky-nationalism/2016/12/04/dabc8f66-b8bd-11e6-a677-b608fbb3aaf6_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3ae8a39681bb

Western Europe and Japan staged strong economic recoveries that strengthened their wobbly democracies. So what we got for championing open trade — aside from the usual benefits of more consumer choice and greater economic efficiency — was a more stable postwar world.¹²

President Wilson described the virtues of United States power and support to the international system best by stating, “By virtue of recognizing its dominant position in world affairs, the United States has assumed the role of representing not only its own self- interest but also the common interest of a region, if indeed not all the globe, in its foreign policy.”¹³ President Trump’s economic policies and intense domestic focus, “suggests that he will devote less time and attention to major foreign policy and national security issues that have been the hallmark of all American presidents since World War II.”¹⁴

Another similarity between isolationist policies of the early 20th century and today is immigration policy. The Coolidge, Hoover and Trump administrations have all focused-on immigration controls and an American first ideology. From his 1923 State of the Union message President Coolidge stated, “New arrivals should be limited to our capacity to absorb them into the ranks of good citizenship. America must be kept American. For this purpose, it is necessary to continue a policy of restricted immigration.”¹⁵ Immigration policy for the United States during the early 1900’s became very restrictive and led to Johnson-Reed Immigration Act that was signed in to Law on 24 May 1924 by President Calvin Coolidge. The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act was:

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 15.

¹⁴ Jonathan D. Pollack, “Donald Trump and the Future of U.S. Leadership: Some Observations on International Order, East Asia, and the Korean Peninsula,” *The Brookings Institution*, 8 February 2017. 11.

¹⁵ Rushad L. Thomas, “We’re All in the Same Boat Now: Coolidge on Immigration,” *Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation*, 19 February 2016. <https://coolidgefoundation.org/blog/were-all-in-the-same-boat-now-coolidge-on-immigration/>

One of the strictest immigration laws ever enacted in American history. The law reflected the isolationist mood of the time. Provisions halting most immigration from east Europe were intended to stanch the proliferation of communist and dictatorial ideas. Americans on both sides of the aisle lamented the purportedly negative effect large scale immigration had on wages and job competition.¹⁶

Similarly, President Herbert Hoover restricted immigration even more, at the height of the Great Depression. President Hoover nearly halted immigration based on Executive Order 1930. He believed, “that blocking immigration would preserve the jobs and wages of American citizens against competition from low-wage immigrants.”¹⁷ It was not until after World War II that the United States took a serious look at immigration and the economic and social benefits that immigrants were bringing to the Nation.

In the case of President Trump, he won the Presidency advocating for stronger immigration controls, framing immigration as major economic and national security threats. The Trump administration’s record on immigration includes, “rising enforcement, reduced refugee flows, and the gradual elimination of temporary protection regimes.”¹⁸ Those protected regimes include the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Temporary Protected Status, and refugee admissions. These actions have brought praise from the President’s base but has not been well received by the international community. The policies advocated by Presidents Coolidge, Hoover and Trump are all America first policies with the same basic concern in regards to immigrants. The rationale of the isolationists in the early 1900s was the same as it is today,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Steven Horwitz, “Hoover’s Economic Policies,” *Library of Economics and Liberty*, Last Accessed 12 May 2018. <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/HooversEconomicPolicies.html>

¹⁸ Sarah Pierce and Andrew Selee, “Immigration under Trump: A Review of Policy Shifts in the Year Since the Election,” *Migration Policy Institute*. (December 2017): 9.

The cost of living had become unmanageable for most Americans and unemployment rates had spiked, with many citizens holding a belief that their misfortune was due to a disproportionate number of recent immigrants claiming jobs that would normally be worked by native U.S. citizens.¹⁹

Contrary to isolationist rhetoric, there are multiple positive aspects to immigration. One aspect is, “Evidence suggests that when immigration increases the supply of labor, firms increase investment to offset any reduction in capital per worker, thereby keeping average wages from falling over the long term.”²⁰ Another aspect is there is very little competition between immigrant workers and citizens because they are not generally vying for the same positions. It was identified that, “immigrants are often imperfect substitutes for native-born workers in U.S. labor markets. That means they do not compete for the same jobs and put minimal downward pressure on natives’ wages.”²¹ Lastly, as the United States steadily moves to full employment there will be an increasing shortage of laborers. It is believed, “While the long-term impact of immigrant arrivals may have depressed wages in some job categories, many employers continue to complain that they cannot fill unskilled positions in agriculture or tourism at any wage without immigrants.”²²

An effective immigration policy can assist with filling critical shortage of labor and could lead to expanded operations in the U.S. so manufacturers won’t have to move operations overseas. Ultimately, the scare tactics utilized by isolationists have been applauded by supporters, but run contrary to current economic literature in which, “Economists generally agree

¹⁹ Norwich University, “Isolationism and U.S. Foreign Policy After World War I,” 2 November 2017. <https://graduate.norwich.edu/resources-mair/articles-mair/isolationism-and-u-s-foreign-policy-after-world-war-1/>

²⁰ Penn Wharton Budget Model, “The Effects of Immigration on the United States Economy,” *University of Pennsylvania*, 27 June 2016. <http://budgetmodel.wharton.upenn.edu/issues/2016/1/27/the-effects-of-immigration-on-the-united-states-economy>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Christopher Smart, “Economy,” in *America’s International Role Under Donald Trump*, ed. by Xenia Wickett (London: Chatham House-The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2017), 15.

that the effects of immigration on the U.S. economy are broadly positive. Immigrants, whether high- or low-skilled, legal or illegal, are unlikely to replace native-born workers or reduce their wages over the long-term.”²³ Instead of reducing the number of immigrants in to the United States, the Trump administration would do better in improving America’s immigration system to ensure that it meets the demands for today’s economy.

Another key perspective of President Wilson was his belief in American leadership in international policy. He believed the United States had the ability to be, “the primary force in the pursuit of world peace because Washington, D.C., alone has the power, the character, and the interest to act in this manner.”²⁴ Unlike President Wilson’s view on the role of the United States to support the international community, President Trump has taken a much more isolationist approach. Two examples of isolationist policies are the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the environmentally focused Paris Agreement. The JCPOA brought together negotiators from Iran, the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China, and the European Union (P5+1 countries) to finalize an agreement that was intended to stop or at least severely delay Iran’s ability to acquire nuclear weapons. The key to this agreement is, “If fully implemented, the physical constraints and verification provisions of this comprehensive nuclear agreement will effectively prevent Iran from producing fissile material for nuclear weapons at its declared nuclear facilities for at least 10 to 15 years.”²⁵ The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs reviewed the benefits of the JCPOA and found,

²³ Penn Wharton Budget Model, “The Effects of Immigration on the United States Economy,” *University of Pennsylvania*, 27 June 2016. <http://budgetmodel.wharton.upenn.edu/issues/2016/1/27/the-effects-of-immigration-on-the-united-states-economy>

²⁴ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 15-16.

²⁵ Gary Samore, “The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide,” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs: Harvard Kennedy School*. (November 2017): 4.

Without the agreement in place, Iran could manufacture, install, and bring more centrifuges on line (including the more advanced centrifuges); accelerate research on even more advanced centrifuges; increase its stockpile of low-enriched and near 20% enriched uranium; and resume construction of the Arak heavy-water research reactor.²⁶

On 8 May 2018 President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA. This action will have severe implications for the United States and international security. First, withdrawing the JCPOA, “will corrode any prospect of sustaining Iranian compliance with the deal’s constraints on its nuclear program as well as the transparency provided via the deal’s rigorous inspection regime.”²⁷ Additionally, due to the bellicose commentary of the Trump administration, “Many project that the end of the nuclear deal would launch an inexorable march toward a direct military conflict with Iran, with ruinous consequences for regional stability and the global economy.”²⁸ Lastly, the withdrawal from the JCPOA could have serious consequences on future relationships, namely with North Korea and create an acrimonious rift between allies.

Another example of President Trump’s isolationist policies is his actions in regards to the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement is meant to be, “a bridge between today’s policies and climate-neutrality before the end of the century.”²⁹ With 195 countries signing the agreement and only two countries, Syria and Nicaragua, electing not to be a signatory, this is truly an international agreement. Immediately upon being elected President, he committed the United States to withdraw from this international agreement. Although the announced withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will have consequences to the United States’ attempts to control climate

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

²⁷ Suzanne Maloney, “Trump’s New National Security Team Likely Spells Disaster for the Iran Nuclear Deal: What Happens Next?,” *Brookings*, 2 April 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/04/02/trumps-new-national-security-team-likely-spells-disaster-for-the-iran-nuclear-deal/>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ European Commission, “Paris Agreement,” Last Accessed 12 May 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/international/negotiations/paris_en

change, the biggest consequence for the United States will be the inability to establish a leadership role in this area. The Council on Foreign Relations believes the:

U.S. retreat on climate would empower China to fill the leadership vacuum, ceding U.S. influence in the clean energy race and strengthening China's hand on other fraught issues like territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Already, indications are emerging that China is forging a new alliance with the European Union to advance common climate policies without the United States.³⁰

The potential consequences of the loss of leadership in international diplomacy by the United States can be quite grave. Current United States policy, “neglects the reality of shared risks to global prosperity and major threats to international peace and security that cannot be addressed without ever deeper cooperation among states with closely shared interests.”³¹ By withdrawing from international policies that share near global unanimity there is concern that the United States will be sidelined in conversations or treaties that are vital to its national interest.

As Ronald Krebs Points out:

If Trump wants others to respect his country, he needs to start by adopting a very different narrative—acknowledging that the world is not America's to shape and casting others as equals and partners in a world order that yields mutual benefits. Denying other countries what they understand to be their legitimate rights provokes anger and invites aggression. Granting them esteem from the start is more likely to lead to reciprocity, trust, and compromise.³²

In his speech to Congress, President Macron highlighted the to have a multilateral approach to foreign policy, “Closing the door to the world will not stop the evolution of the

³⁰ James McBride, “The Consequences of Leaving the Paris Agreement,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 June 2017. <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/consequences-leaving-paris-agreement>

³¹ Jonathan D. Pollack, “Donald Trump and the Future of U.S. Leadership: Some Observations on International Order, East Asia, and the Korean Peninsula,” *The Brookings Institution*, 8 February 2017. 12.

³² Ronald Krebs, “Nationalism Makes Bad Foreign Policy: What Trump Gets Wrong,” *Foreign Affairs*, 29 May 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-05-29/nationalism-makes-bad-foreign-policy>

world,” Macron declared. It would just set free forces of disorder and allow enemies of freedom to fill the void.”³³ Just as President Macron has advocated an internationalist foreign policy that includes the United States, President Wilson believed that, “Washington’s efforts to create a world order dominated by free-market democracies linked by multilateral organizations under its leadership are thus the essence of the liberal promise for peace.”³⁴

As we saw from the isolationist policies of the early 20th century, isolationism can have serious ramifications on the economic and international policies of the United States. In a flat world, cooperation and multilateralism will be key to future foreign policy and economic success. It is important to learn the lessons of the past and understand the critical role the United States has globally. As we learned during the early part of the 20th century and it continues to be an important fact today, “The World War affirmed the international political responsibilities of the United States; the World Depression demonstrates the economic interdependence of the United States with other states. It cannot be a hermit nation.”³⁵

³³ Stewart M. Patrick, “Emmanuel Macron and the Franco-American Ties That Bind,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 April 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/emmanuel-macron-and-franco-american-ties-bind>

³⁴ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 15.

³⁵ Edwin Gay, “The Great Depression,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1 July 1932. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/1932-07-01/great-depression>

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