

Isolationism in the U.S. and China (part I - III)

Mainstream Media and Organic Views

Dr. Wordman

Abstract

Isolationism as a political term used in real world has different meaning and interpretation from its dictionary definition. We first discuss the meaning of isolationism from human society point of view and what did isolationism mean and get practiced in the U.S. (part I), why isolationism did not appear as a vocabulary but observable as a phenomenon in China (part II), and then discuss the current US – China relation and its future prospect in view of the foreign policy change in the U.S. oscillating between “balancing power” and “domination” and in China coming out of isolation to globalism (part III).

Isolationism in the U.S. and China (I)

Meaning of Isolationism

The definition of isolationism is generally derived from political concept. Hence, in dictionary it is defined as the belief or a policy that a country should not be involved or not making agreements with other countries by abstention from alliances and other international political and economic relations. In US and Chinese history, the philosophy (sometimes a clear doctrine) of isolating oneself from the affairs of other nations by resisting interaction with, thus rejecting influence from, other nations did occur at some point in time producing drastically different consequences. This happened either by declining to enter into alliances, international agreements, or foreign economic commitments (for example, measured engagement in the U.S. foreign policy in the early twentieth century) or by seeking complete independent development and advancement of one’s country while avoiding foreign entanglements and responsibilities and remaining at peace with other nations (for example, China had tried on and off to maintain a rather closed-door economy in 19th century and earlier). However, in both countries, the isolationism was not advocated or applied according to the above ‘rigorous dictionary definition’ rather it was interpreted, sometimes debated, in political sense to suit ‘the then existing situation’. The reason for never practiced rigorous isolationism can be traced to the traits of human, a social being and never isolationist. In the following, we will illustrate that point first then discuss what kind of isolationism really happened in the U.S. and China in the modern centuries and what is their current relation heading to.

Human Nature

The evolution of human from genus homo (primates) to homo sapiens (great apes) and hominae (African apes) [14-20 million years ago] to departure from gorillas [8-9 million years ago] has been illustrated by scholars Charles Darwin (1859, *On the Origin of Species* and 1871, *The descent of Man*) and Thomas Henry Huxley (1863, *Evidences and Man's Place in Nature*). The fossil evidence and later DNA sequencing studies have concluded that genus homo migrated out of Africa three or four times as late as 1.85 -2.6 million years ago. Though the exact migration model is still in question and whether one single species or multiple species migrated and ultimately became one is not absolutely certain, humans did live as groups (forming societies and nations) and never preferred isolation. The occurrence of societal or national conflicts is not caused by intrinsic human traits but more by external factors such as: 1. Resource shortage, 2. Natural disaster (earthquake, climate change etc) and 3. Artificial political differences created by political leaders. Humans living under different political system and cultivated diversified culture (language, customs, food preference etc) still prefer having interaction than adhering to isolationism. The fact that the separation of earth continents by vast oceans did not prevent humans to explore, emigrate, and intermingle speaks clearly that humans are not isolationists. However, politically, isolationism seems to have been touted in the history of the U.S. and China.

Isolationism in the U.S.

The U.S. is a young country with less than two and half century of history since her independence in 1776. In that time span, isolationism has been touted as a proper foreign policy many times with different interpretations creating serious debates. The very first time, isolationism appeared in the U.S. was in the farewell address by George Washington (1796). The following two excerpts did explain his thinking at the time: "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."....."Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice? It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it."

From Washington's speech, it was clear that he did embrace isolationism to a degree, but he also accepted temporary alliances and would honor them. He did not preach isolationism as the sacred foreign policy in a permanent sense. In 1823, James Monroe delivered the later (1850) referred as Monroe Doctrine at his State of the Union Address. At that time, nearly all Latin American colonies of Spain and Portugal had achieved independence. The doctrine stated that further efforts by various European states to take control of any independent state in North and South America would be viewed as "the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States." At the same time, the doctrine noted that the U.S. would recognize and not interfere with existing European colonies (this affected the European powers' behavior in Asia) nor meddle in the internal affairs of European

countries. Hence, the Monroe doctrine was interpreted as a form of isolationism. However, in essence, the doctrine defined a new world and an old world as two separate spheres of influence where the U.S. could exert her influence unchecked in the new world. So, Monroe doctrine is not really an isolationism for the U.S. but an attempt to isolate America Continent from European interference except US influence. This policy persisted through out 19th century. After 1898, the Monroe doctrine was reinterpreted in terms of multilateralism and non-interventionism by Latin American intellectuals which was accepted by Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. This notion persisted through WW II (1941-1945) and Cold War (1948-1990) until twenty first century when some South American countries welcomed the investments from Asia (from Japan and China) threatening the U.S. dominance.

The Interpretation of Monroe doctrine as some form of isolationism may have influenced the U.S. to practice her “absentive neutrality” through out WW I, but she was deeply pulled into WW II by Japan’s attack of Pearl Harbor. After the WW II victory, the U.S. became a super power while the European powers were devastated by the war and so was the entire Asia. As the world super power, the U.S. shed all traces of isolationism and practiced the role of world police championing the anti-communism movement by forming alliances and balancing regional powers to maintain her supreme world leader position. This process was not a piece of cake as the U.S. had to maintain a costly arms race against the Soviet Union including development of nuclear weapons and space technology as well as supporting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in competition with the Warsaw Pact. The process was known as the Cold War. The U.S. began to engage China in the quest of demolishing the Soviet Union in the 70’s through the 80’s. The strategy worked and the Soviet Union collapsed, that ended the Cold War. Post Cold War, the U.S. was obviously declining in her economy relative to the growth of the global economy. When the U.S. economy was close to 40% of the world economy, she was able to sustain her world police role by maintaining hundreds of US military bases worldwide and giving out financial aids. When the U.S. economy became below 20% of the global economy in the 21st century, it became apparent that she felt stressful in maintaining her role as the world leader. It is at this juncture, we begin to hear the term, isolationism, being raised in the foreign policy debate again. Should the U.S. adopt the isolationism or not?!

Isolationism in the U.S. and China (II)

Isolationism in China

China is an old country with at least four thousand years of history as a sovereign nation. In her long history, there were numerous times of separation into parts and then reunification into one country. This experience gave her one unique characteristic, that is, as a nation she has a strong resilience, deep self-confidence and far and long-term perspective regarding governance. In her political history, isolationism did not appear as a vocabulary or doctrine but can be observed as a phenomenon due to her long history of being a self-sufficient, prosperous and richly cultured nation. China throughout of her four thousand year history hardly needed anything from her neighbors. China has a large mass of land separated from her poor neighbors north by the desert, East and south by the ocean and west by the high mountains. China made her self-sufficient in many centuries with her economy being the number one of the world before the 19th century. When the Western powers came to China in early part of 19th century, she was the richest country in the world. She did not make concerted effort to engage with foreign countries because her emperor did not feel the need to. In diplomatic sense, China

appeared to the West as being practicing isolationism. The West needed trade with China but China did not need much from the West.

However, China in her own comfortable life did miss the industrial revolution (due to isolation from the West) that has transformed the European nations. Even a tiny country like Holland was able to build a navy with big guns to invade foreign country. The industrial revolution boosted the military power of Europe, eventually extended to the U.S. The military power fed the colonialism throughout 18th, 19th and half of the 20th century and created a colonial world of more than half the world population ruled by a small fraction of people. Chinese intellectuals blamed the Qing Dynasty government being incompetent corrupt isolationists, but the real problem was that the four hundred million Chinese people mostly peasants were too disconnected from the industrial revolution. China needed time to transform but the foreign invaders won't give her the chance. In addition, her transformed neighbor, Japan, had an ambition to conquer China to make her as Japan's colony. When the Chinese revolution toppled the Qing government in 1911 and formed a Republic government, it did not start a nation building process rather it was struggling against the encroachment of the Japanese Imperial Army and paying off debt to the Eight foreign powers who forced China into various unequal treaties.

Official time period of WW II is September 1, 1939 to September 2, 1945, but to China it started from September 18, 1931 and ended in July 26, 1945. After WW II ended, unfortunately, China was split into two factions engaging in internal fight led by two political parties, one, KMT, was supported by the U.S and the other, CCP, was supported by Russia. This indicated that the foreign influence in China never ended with the ending of WW II. The CCP party eventually controlled the entire mainland and established the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the KMT retreated to Taiwan and kept the name, Republic of China (ROC), creating a separation lasted over seventy two years till today. PRC is recognized by 178 countries today including the U.S. whereas ROC is only recognized by 14 UN member states. The eventual reunification of one China is expected by most Chinese citizens including oversea Chinese ex-patriots but oddly the timing of reunification may depend on the foreign policy of the U.S. - whether the U.S. will adopt some kind of isolationism or not, meaning she will stop interfering with China's reunification. The U.S. maintains an ambiguous China policy - recognizing only one China and the CCP government being China's legal representative but still supports Taiwan and sells military equipment to Taiwan. As the U.S. initiated a trade war with China, she has been using Taiwan to agitate China by passing Taiwan Travel Act in Congress. This kind of behavior is certainly not taken out of the idea of isolationism.

After consolidated the mainland, PRC experimented with communism and quickly parted way from the Soviet Union and decided to find her own path of development. With the U.S. leading a global anti-communism campaign, China was forced into an involuntary isolation during the 50's to 70's having no interaction with the Western world nor any substantial engagement with the Russia led Soviet Union. In 1971, Richard Nixon, the 37th President of the U.S. initiated a strategy of opening to China to help further isolating Russia; but the U.S. did not formally recognize China until January 1, 1979. China began to interact with the world and managed to maintain a fast growth averaging a 10% economic growth rate from 1978 to 2005. China has a trade surplus with the U.S. since 1985. China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and ever since then China maintained a growing trade surplus with most of her trading partners. With the U.S. the trade surplus reached \$419 B in 2018 causing the U.S. to launch a tariff war with China. Although the two countries have reached a phase one trade agreement recently, but the long-term outlook of U.S.-China trade relations does not show any bright light. To maintain her economic growth, China has launched a global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious global project to stimulate global economic development. Such a program is a sure sign that China would never go back to isolationism.

Isolationism in the U.S. and China (III)

The Current U.S. and China Relations

The U.S. never practiced real isolationism. Isolation was only used and interpreted diplomatically for her benefit. President Washington did not want to get involved in European competition and conflicts but certainly took advantage of European power struggle to strengthen the U.S. independence and freedom. Monroe doctrine was a measured foreign policy to protect the U.S. interest in the American Continent and isolate it from European powers' expansion there. Subsequently, the U.S. interpreted isolationism as a way of balancing regional power and extending the U.S. domination in South America and later in other parts of the world. Looking back to the past century, the U.S. foreign policy essentially oscillated from "balancing power" to "domination" even though isolationism often appear in policy discussion. At present time, the U.S. is swinging back from domination to balancing power since the world situation had changed. The rapid and consistent rise of China made the U.S. to realize that she needs to focus on balancing power - meaning aligning with other countries such as Japan, India, Australia and Vietnam to suppress China's growing power. The term isolationism is brought back in the foreign policy debate simply because the U.S. felt difficult to maintain world domination.

China never wanted to have isolationism. In the past (two century ago), she appeared to be in isolation state simply because she was self-sufficient in her economy and did not need anything from the rest of the world. China had been viewed qualitatively as the world's number one economy before the world had any means of measuring quantitatively the strength of each nation's economy. In the past two centuries, however, China became the victim of the European colonial powers (as well as from Japan, Russia and the U.S. who followed the footsteps of colonialism) after she missed the industry revolution and neglected her military defense which was highly dependent on industrial power. China was forced to open her market to the invading foreign powers by numerous unequal treaties resulted from defeats in her war defending against the invading foreign nations. China's revolution establishing a Republic nation in 1911 did not change much her national status with the foreign powers present in China. In fact, Japan's ambition of conquering China had set back China's nation building at least three decades until Japan admitted defeat in 1945 ending the half century Japanese encroachment in China and the formal Sino -Japan war from 1931 to 1945.

China was forced into isolation when she was sanctioned to stay outside of the West economy (50's to 70's). Now China is highly integrated in the global economy and playing a critical role in keeping world prosperity. If China fails in her economy, the global economy fails. Will China ever become completely self-sufficient one day and adopt isolationism? It is unlikely unless the U.S. pushes her into it with world-wide sanctions. The recent US initiated trade war has been extended into a technology war. The semiconductor industry was singled out as the target then extending into communication technology and products. The U.S. is launching an all out effort to suppress the Chinese Company Huawei leading in the 5G inter-network communication solution encompassing networks, cell towers, servers and cell phones. President Washington in his farewell speech may have entertained political isolationism but he had clearly stated the necessity of extending commercial relations with other nations. If the U.S. would maintain a semiconductor technology war and orchestrate a sanction against China (not selling to China, a kind of isolationism), it might force China to develop a complete self-sufficient semiconductor industry thus becoming independent of the U.S. semiconductor industry. Such an isolationism seems to be so obvious a mistake to be acceptable by US business communities. .

China's nation building and development model is clearly not based on isolationism, rather China's economic growth has been fueled by globalization or globalism. In another word, China has come out of isolationism and entered into globalism. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the proof. Apparently, China has been able to maintain a trade relationship with nearly every country on Earth. To her benefit, China has been able to maintain a trade surplus with most of her trading partners. Trade should always be a fair process. No one is forced to make a trade in today's world trade environment (unlike the colonial days, unfair trade can be forced onto the colony by gun boats). Trade surplus or deficit between two trading partners is produced voluntarily by traders. The so called unfair trade issues such as currency manipulation and technology theft are really non-issues. At a given time, a currency exchange rate either favors exports or favors imports. Since there are always buyers and sellers at a given time on either side and they are free to decide whether to buy or sell different goods, currency exchange manipulation is only an issue for a trader who only buys and never sells or vice versa. There is no such trader (country) in this world. As for technology theft, it is an ancient issue; low tech countries will try all means to get technology and they will stop and worry about technology theft themselves when they become high tech countries. Look into the history, this technology transfusion process occurs all the time (the U.S., U.K., Japan, and China were all seekers and possessors of technology at different times) but it is a self healing process. China being the number one patent producer today has legitimate reason to worry about technology theft.

The future U.S. -China relation has to be an open collaborative relationship for mutual benefits. Isolationism in any form or interpretation is not a solution for foreign policy between the U.S. and China. The two countries must accept the reality, each country's size of population, her nature given resources, her people's desire to have better living condition and inevitable never ending competition, and develop their own strategy to maintain a collaborative and competitive relationship. The two countries must revive an "engagement" foreign policy between the U.S. and China keeping dialogues on competitive and collaborative issues rather than believing in the theory of Thucydides Trap. The U.S. should not shy away from China's BRI program, on the contrary the U.S. should view BRI as an opportunity to engage collaboration for mutual benefit. The political leaders must understand and respect that the people of the U.S. and China would prefer interaction such as collaborating in BRI than remain as adversary leading to war.