



Back from the dead? MAGA and Isolationism

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Pro-Alliance View

- “I believe that our interests will still converge with a Trump-led America, even if our values do not”
- “Any effective balance of military power in the Indo-Pacific will require the continued presence and role of the United States” – National Defence Strategy

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Why it matters to Australia

- Australian strategy assumes continued deep US engagement in the Asia-Pacific, contest for supremacy with China
- Australia dependent on US for key enablers of modern war (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, logistics, integrated air missile defence)
- Australia unable to defend itself at present without US assistance

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Contest for supremacy

- “The fundamental and primary objective of US strategy must be sustainably avoiding another state’s hegemony over one of the key regions of the world. Because Asia has the largest economy in the world, ensuring that China does not establish hegemony over Asia must be the United States’ cardinal strategic aim” – Elbridge Colby



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Rhetorical shifts

- US National Security Strategy – emphasis placed firmly on the Western hemisphere. China viewed as an economic threat and far less salient than culture war issues such as immigration
- US National Defense Strategy – foremost priority ‘defend the US Homeland’. China to be ‘deterred’, but ‘through strength, not confrontation’
- MAGA rhetoric – “We can no longer be the sole author of terms, of commerce, of anything, we have to share power [with [China](#)] ... because of their scale.” – Tucker Carlson

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Actions

- US chip exports to China resume
- Tariffs on US allies in the Indo-Pacific
- Retreat on tariffs against China
- Removal of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela
- Moves to annex Greenland



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Evolution of GOP Strategic Thought..

- Primacy
- ↓
- Contest for the Asia-Pacific
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- Neo-isolationism/Hemisphere Defense?

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What was isolationism?



- In addition to the popular America First movement of the 1930s, the isolationist worldview was worked out in a series of popular writings and talks
- Isolationists represented a variety of views from fascism to socialism
- Isolationist writers included respected academics (Charles A Beard), retired military (General Smedley Butler), lawyers (Quincy Howe) and diplomats (Lawrence Dennis)

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Hemisphere defense

- United States secure in the Western hemisphere
- Cross-oceanic invasion highly unlikely
- Cross-oceanic air attack implausible
- Western hemisphere contains all materials the US would need to defend itself and carry on its national life

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Spykman

- Strategic argument based on US' rational self-interest
- Argued that in the event of a German-Japanese victory in the war, the US would be economically surrounded and vulnerable
- Posited possibility of Germany acquiring a foothold in the Americas via South America (Brazil or Argentina), from which it might be able to attack the US



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Post World War Two

- Isolationism discredited largely due to the moral implications of failing to fight Nazism
- The strategic theory behind isolationism was never tested
- Many of the strategic assumptions of the isolationists are granted even by opponents of isolationism

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Why might isolationism make a comeback?

- Actual nature of US interest in preventing Chinese hegemony in Asia unclear (“Were China—or anyone else, for that matter—to dominate this broad and crucial region, it would be able to effectively veto Americans’ access to the world’s economic center of gravity, with enduring implications for our nation’s economic prospects, including our ability to reindustrialize” – NDS)
- Costs of deterring China in Asia Pacific rising, given China’s military buildup and domination of global manufacturing, especially in areas such as shipbuilding
- US ‘forward presence’ in Asia would not reduce America’s vulnerability to long range missiles or cyberwar originating in China but it may increase China’s incentives to deploy these capabilities against the US
- No great national appetite for a ‘contest for supremacy’ with China. China simply not a highly salient issue for the US public
- Possible ‘stab in the back myth’ on the US right about Trump and Iran (ie “Trump had the right ideas about foreign policy but he had his head turned by the neo-cons/Lindsay Graham/Netanyahu”)

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And why it might not...

- Deep US military and economic interests in the Asia-Pacific, especially the defence industry
- Thermostatic reaction against Trump's foreign policy from an internationalist perspective
- Major US defence build up hard to explain other than for great power competition