

# Containing the Dragon

China and the strategy of containment in the 21st century

by Maj Matthew T. Sommer

National strategy involves linking means to ends in pursuit of our nation's interests. The first step in this process is to correctly identify those interests and then to decide on which ends to pursue to satisfy them. For nearly half a century following World War II, the primary strategic interest of the United States lay in stopping the spread of communism and limiting the influence of the Soviet Union throughout the world. In order to do so, we developed and pursued a strategy of containment. This strategy recognized the conventional military superiority of the Soviet Union in Europe and the fait accompli of her dominance over Eastern Europe and sought to prevent her "expansive tendencies."<sup>1</sup> Containment was ultimately successful: communism as a social and economic system indeed bore "within it the seeds of its own decay,"<sup>2</sup> the Soviet Union dissolved, and liberal capitalism emerged victorious—all without having to fight an apocalyptic third world war.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was tangible enthusiasm in the West that liberalism had won—that, to borrow from Francis Fukuyama, we had experienced the end of history. With regard to China, the sole remaining communist power, the prevailing view was that she would either be forced to implement massive liberal reforms or be overthrown by a democratic revolution. Yet, three decades later this has not yet come to pass. The Chinese economy continues to grow despite being only incompletely liberalized, the Chinese Communist Party retains its firm grip on the political and economic spheres, and China continues to buck the trend of global integration.

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In examining the challenges facing the United States today, the *2018 National Defense Strategy* tells us that China will "continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future."<sup>3</sup> A policy of containment, having worked once before, seems an attractive option to deal with the threat of a rising China: contest her on the periphery of her influence, resist her expansion, encourage liberal thought and action in her people, and wait for the day when the totalitarian Chinese government collapses under the weight of its own inconsistencies. However, for this to be a valid strategy, there are two assumptions inherent to our assessment of China, which must be examined. The first is that the United States has essential interests in the Indo-Pacific region and that our displacement from there would be exceedingly harmful to our national security. The second is that China desires global preeminence and thus seeks to displace the United States from its leading role in global affairs. There are problems with both assumptions, as we will examine further.

Attempting to contain China is a mistake, based on a faulty assessment of China's strategic goals; 21st century China is not the Soviet Union. There is no intractable ideological conflict dictating a contentious relationship

between her and the United States, nor has China signaled over the course of its 3,000-year history that it seeks territorial expansion. Contrast this with the history of Russia, which very much revolves around the quest for expansion, especially southward to ice-free ports in the Mediterranean. Further, there are few essential U.S. interests in the Pacific that warrant a zero-sum assessment of China's expanding influence. Indeed, a more involved China, with its immense resources, could help to bear the burden of policing the global commons. We should not attempt to "contain" China, which can only provoke antagonism and distrust and create conflict where it otherwise might not exist. Instead, we should recognize that China has interests in her own region and that her desire for a sphere of influence over that region is quite legitimate. We should work to accommodate those interests while maintaining a peaceful and productive co-existence and encouraging China to assume the global responsibilities of a would-be great power while bearing in mind that her interests in Asia may be more important to her than our interests in the region are to us, and that in any case we have very little leverage with which to influence her in this arena.

## A History of Containment

The policy of containment during the Cold War began with the ideas of

George Kennan who, in his anonymous July 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” pointed out the “innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism.” He recognized that the United States and the Soviet Union, the former espousing liberalist and capitalist beliefs and the latter steeped in communist ideology, could not hope to co-exist peacefully; their systems of governance and economy were anathema to one another. Whatever else it may have been, Kennan saw that the Cold War was at its core an ideological struggle pitting capitalism against communism in which only one system could prevail.

Adding to this intractable ideological conflict was the “basic, inescapable circumstance ... that NATO could not deny Soviet land and air power the ability to occupy the whole of Europe.”<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union outnumbered and outgunned the U.S. and her allies in every relevant military category on the European continent. The best that could be hoped for in a conventional conflict was a “fighting retreat” followed at some point in the indefinite future by “a great counteroffensive to destroy Soviet forces ... in Eurasia in the conflict’s second half,” à la the invasion of Normandy in World War II.<sup>5</sup> Of course, there was always the nuclear option, but by the mid-1950s, this had become irrelevant as the Soviets had developed their own stockpile of nuclear weapons sufficient to ensure mutually assured destruction.

Thus, the dilemma: the two great powers could not co-exist, yet the Western world could not hope to defeat the Soviet Union militarily without risking Armageddon. Further, after World War II, the Soviet Union occupied or controlled a vast swath of Eastern Europe and Asia. Given its military weakness, this Soviet sphere of influence was a reality that NATO was forced to accept. What they sought to avoid was further expansion of the communist sphere, which a thousand years of Russian history (to say nothing of communist propaganda) predicted was likely on the minds of Soviet leaders.

Enter Kennan, who proposed a “patient but firm and vigilant contain-

ment of Russian expansive tendencies.” Through “the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points,” militarily of course but more importantly diplomatically and economically, the West could prevent the eventual communist expansion. That the Soviet Union would expand should they not be prevented in doing so was a fact that Kennan argued “cannot be charmed or talked out of existence.”

There were two critical components to Kennan’s theory of containment. First was that Stalin, while seeking eventual global domination, would be in no hurry to expand since the success of communism over capitalism was predetermined. This was a critical principle of the communist doctrine espoused by

... the sprouting of these seeds is well advanced.” All that remained was to “contain” the communists and prevent their expansion and time would do the rest. After all, according to the West, it was *their* system that was destined to prevail.

And so it happened. The West emerged victorious and the liberal capitalist system remained as the sole legitimate form of social organization after the Cold War. Despite some significant miscalculations on both sides, including several bloody and protracted proxy wars, the Soviet Union did indeed collapse and the West won the Cold War peacefully, which is to say without the occurrence of a third (nuclear) world war. This victory confirmed the Western belief in the absolute superiority and

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Marx and Lenin. Missteps by the Soviets could delay this inevitability, just as adroitly seizing opportunities to expand communist influence could hasten it, but the inherent superiority of socialism dictated its eventual victory. There was no rush, no need for precipitate action leading to armed conflict with all the risks and probabilities that war entails. Thus, in raising the stakes of expansion by resisting it, the United States and her allies would strangle the Soviet Union and eventually cause it to collapse.

The second component of containment was that, from the Western point of view, their own system of liberal capitalism was evidently the superior form of organization. The Stalinist system had already perverted the once salient points of Marx and Lenin: the people were hungry and unhappy and the Soviet system itself, professing communal values but existing only to maintain its own power and exploit the Soviet people, was inherently inconsistent. In perhaps his most famous passage, Kennan writes, “Soviet power ... bears within it the seeds of its own decay, and

inevitability of the liberal democratic model and emboldened Western nations, particularly the United States, to spend the next two decades fighting in the Balkans, the Middle East, and elsewhere to bring about the spread of democracy.

The lesson learned from the victory of democracy was that all other forms of social organization are anachronistic, and we need only wait for the people to rise up and topple their repressive authoritarian governments. In the meantime, the United States could assist this effort through the “patient but firm and vigilant containment” of the remaining, reducing number of governments, which did not subscribe to the liberal democratic model or recognize the United States as the just leader of the free world. Over time, of course, the vast superiority of Western arms led to the neoconservative belief that the victory of democracy could be hastened through the use of force, a doctrine that has proven to be both costly in lives and treasure and disappointing in its results.

**Containing China?**

China’s ascendancy on the world stage over the past three decades has been remarkable. Since the reforms of the Xiaoping era began in the late 1970s, China has experienced stunning economic growth, military modernization, and expansion of her economic, military, and diplomatic power throughout the Indo-Pacific region. She is now considered a great power on the world stage, and her influence stretches from the South Pacific to Africa, the Middle East, and South America. She is economically intertwined with and owns significant amounts of capital and national debt in almost every major industrialized country. Her rising influence and power are often seen as a threat to many in the West, particularly the United States, which since World War II has enjoyed a near-hegemony on economic and political influence in Asia. Chinese leaders, with their rhetorical opposition to the international status quo and insistence on non-interference in their own internal affairs, have contributed to this belief. The response has been an attempt to halt the expansion of Chinese influence through a policy of containment. Why re-invent the wheel when this strategy has already worked once to topple a communist behemoth?

This strategy is a mistake and is based on three faulty assumptions of China’s goals and desires on the world stage and their impacts on U.S. interests. First, 21st century China is not the Stalinist Soviet Union. What communist ideology she retains is mainly used to prop up the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As Mishra writes, the CCP “no longer insists on doctrinal orthodoxy. Indeed, it has tried to replace communism with Confucian notions of the ‘harmonious society.’”<sup>6</sup> Steps taken by China to export communism or to defeat the influence of liberal capitalism have been conspicuously absent since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. When China does employ rhetoric against the West, it is primarily in the form of complaints over interference in what she considers to be her sovereign affairs. Chinese leaders see peaceful co-existence with the West as a viable option and have no fundamental

aversion to capitalist means of economic production per se, so long as they do not dilute the power of the CCP. This is evidenced by the productive steps China has taken over the past three decades to liberalize at least a portion of her economy. The logic of containment presupposes intractable ideological conflict that precludes the possibility of peaceful co-existence. There is no intractable ideological conflict between the United States and China. To continue to act as if there is only invites misunderstanding and unnecessary provocation.

Secondly, the assumption inherent in the *2018 National Defense Strategy’s* assessment of China that she seeks “displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future” is not borne out by the facts. China has a long and rich history stretching back 3,000 years. Throughout this

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time, the Chinese have consistently been invaded and conquered by numerous peoples from outside their borders. Each time, the invaders have eventually been absorbed into Chinese culture and become themselves Chinese. Witness the Late Imperial period in China, lasting from the mid-17th century until the fall of the last emperor in 1912, whose rulers were ethnic Manchu hailing from the northeastern rimlands of the Chinese heartland. Yet, despite this history of invasion, China has rarely, if ever, sought to conquer their neighbors in the name of national security or to preemptively strike against those who might one day invade.

Indeed, the Chinese called theirs the Middle Kingdom not because of its history relative to some earlier period or its geographical location but because they considered themselves to be the center of the universe—with all lesser nations and peoples revolving around them. Traditionally, the Chinese did

not trade, they offered gifts to lesser rulers and accepted tribute from them in turn. The Chinese have never been interested in conquering other lands but only in defending their own Middle Kingdom. China was an empire, yes, but one inherently introspective rather than expansionist. The Chinese have no deep-seated desire to expand their borders or to lay claim to territory outside of what is considered their own traditional sphere of influence

Nevertheless, it is true that China is expanding in other ways. She seeks beneficial (some would say predatory) trade relationships with countries as far away as South America and Africa, and she seeks to expand her economic, diplomatic, and cultural influence throughout Central Asia, the South China Sea, and along the Indian coast to the Middle East through the One Belt, One Road initiative. Chinese leaders are very concerned about energy security and finding outlets for their growing consumer industry, and their recent efforts are an attempt to gain new markets for Chinese goods and secure coal, oil, and other natural resources that their flourishing economy requires. Chinese leaders are cognizant that they must keep the economy growing lest the Chinese people start demanding political freedom.

China’s expansion should not cause undue alarm in the United States. As China’s economy and population expand, so of course do her energy and market needs. Many of the areas in which China is growing her influence are those where the United States either does not have a presence or has not been able to effectively and productively maintain one (Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East). This is not a coincidence; if the Chinese can expand their influence and achieve their goals without risking a costly and disruptive confrontation with America, they believe, so much the better.

The third assumption inherent in our assessment is that China’s intentions are not necessarily relevant. Regardless of intent, her rise as a new superpower will inevitably cause conflict and confrontation in a 21st century recurrence of the Thucydides Trap. This eventuality is as

cynical as it is deterministic and need not come to pass. As China comes to depend more on the global economic network and highways of trade, so too

using her navy to ensure free passage in the international waters of the Pacific or providing development and security assistance to Pakistan and Afghanistan

defines itself only in opposition to liberal democracy. Nor is she an expansionist power who seeks global domination and hegemony. China cares deeply about core Chinese issues but very little about those of the rest of the world. As she continues to expand economically and diplomatically, China will find that these issues are in fact germane to her own interests and will likely recognize that contributing to global security and commerce in the current international system is more beneficial to Chinese interests than seeking to overturn that model through some revisionist stratagem. A globally responsible China is better for everyone, including the United States, than an isolated and bitter China.

***China is not an ideologically pure communist state that defines itself only in opposition to liberal democracy.***

does she become more vulnerable to global opinions, norms, and regulations. In fact, managed correctly, a situation could be envisioned in which all parties benefit. As China expands globally, she will recognize the importance (and costs) of maintaining common goods such as freedom of navigation, international property rights, and security abroad. It would certainly benefit the United States if China were to contribute to securing these goods, perhaps

(through which she hopes to build trade routes and oil pipelines), rather than continuing to free ride on the global policing done by the United States. As the American public wearies of the costs of providing these services and begins to look inward, China may realize that it must pick up some of the slack.

The assumptions made about China that see her as a threat to U.S. interests do not stand scrutiny. China is not an ideologically pure communist state that

**A New Policy for Engagement**

So how to remedy the current situation, so rife with potential conflict and seemingly opposing interests? First, policymakers in the United States



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must force themselves to more narrowly define essential national interests; as Richard Hart Sinnreich writes, “a vital requirement of successful strategic design is to bound the universe of objectives, recognizing that desirable is not the same as important, nor important the same as urgent.”<sup>7</sup> China has core interests in the Indo-Pacific region that are and will remain more important to her than they are to us. She will not compromise on these issues. The United States must realize that China naturally owns, and legitimately should own, a sphere of influence over her own region. She is simply more proximate and more dangerous to her neighbors than are we. To expect countries in Asia to conform to our will when it is in opposition to Chinese interests is illogical. This is not appeasement; it is realism. To assume otherwise can only lead to ineffective policy and disillusion.

With this in mind, we should open an honest dialogue with China to determine what her interests truly are and which of those interests she considers core and which merely desirable. Good diplomacy is built on transparency; without it, we are left groping in the dark and assuming the worst. We should make clear to China what our interests are in the region as well. If we are truthful when we claim that our naval presence in the South China Sea is to protect freedom of navigation and trade routes, we should propose to reduce our forces in the region at the same time that China assumes some of those responsibilities. This situation can only benefit the United States, who would enjoy continued freedom of navigation through these waters at no cost to the American taxpayer or reduction in naval readiness. The same goes for other global goods, such as trade and security. We should show China that we will reduce our presence in their areas of influence at the same time as they show a willingness to assume these responsibilities and contribute to good international relations. We should not couch these proposals in terms of adherence to liberal democratic norms, which China will necessarily resent by claiming we are infringing on their sovereignty, but instead in terms of the economic and

security dividends that cooperation in the current international system would pay.

Of course, diplomatic engagement with China is hardly a new concept. It has been tried in the past, most recently during President Obama’s touted “pivot” to Asia, with mixed results. Despite more or less continued engagement with China since President Nixon’s historic 1972 visit, the CCP remains in power, China continues to practice shady and downright illegal trade practices (by the standards of international regulations, if not its own), and consistently violates the rights of its citizens, including denying free speech, jailing political activists, and abusing its Uighur minority. Still, some progress has been made over this period, including significantly reduced tensions over Taiwan, agreements on global climate issues (in which China is much more involved than the United States), and working together toward a solution to the North Korea problem (though to little effect as yet).

In order to create a positive, constructive relationship with China, we will need to muster every bit of patience and firmness that we previously applied in opposition to the Soviet Union. We must be careful not to get sidetracked by every unpalatable action taken by the CCP at home and realize that short of outright war, we have very little leverage over what China does within its own borders or on issues that they consider to be their core interests. Where we can work together, we should, and where we cannot find common ground, we should peacefully agree to disagree—as befits two powerful sovereign nations. There are limits to what U.S. military power can accomplish, as we have well learned over the past two decades.

More than 70 years ago, George Kennan wrote that we “must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena.” Not so with China. To continue to regard them as a rival risks unnecessary conflict and foregoes significant economic and political benefits. Relations with China are not a zero-sum game, and there are many gains to be had through a peaceful, cooperative, and constructive working relationship between the

two largest economic and military powers in the world today, even if we do not always agree on one another’s methods of governance. If our experiences since the end of the Cold War in unsuccessfully attempting to promote democracy through force should have taught us anything, it is that we should heed John Quincy Adams and go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. Rather, we should take solace in the words, once again, of George Kennan, that “the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.”

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Notes

1. George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, (1947), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>.
2. Ibid.
3. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, (Washington, DC: 2018).
4. C.S. Gray, “Harry S. Truman and the Forming of American Grand Strategy in the Cold War, 1945–1953,” in W. Murray, R.H. Sinnreich, and J. Lacey (Eds.), *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
5. Ibid.
6. Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia*, (London: Picador, 2013).
7. R.H. Sinnreich, “Patterns of Grand Strategy,” in W. Murray, R.H. Sinnreich, and J. Lacey (Eds.), *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

