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A Case Against Containment  
Does China Need to Be Contained?  
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It is often argued that the policy of containment worked to deal with the Soviet threat during the Cold War. Thus diplomat Chas Freeman declares that containment “brought us a bloodless victory in the Cold War,” while Daniel Drezner characterizes it as “persistently effective,” and Scott Sagan substantially agrees.<sup>1</sup>

Many have urged applying that policy to China today. For example, Hal Brands urges that the “elegant” and “winning” strategy can work against China too: “to succeed against a rising China, the U.S. must relearn the lessons of containment,”<sup>2</sup> or, in Aaron Friedberg’s words, “relearn the lessons of the 1940s and 1950s.”<sup>3</sup> And Michael Mandelbaum deems containment to have been a “success” during the Cold War and argues that it should be applied “once again, now to Russia, China, and Iran” although “modified and updated.”<sup>4</sup>

However, it is not clear that containment was all that successful during the Cold War. Nor is it clear that a similar policy should be applied today to China. In fact, containment is given too much credit for winning the Cold War: the errors and weaknesses of the USSR largely caused its downfall. Indeed, U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War did too much, not too little. And like the USSR, China today is its own worst enemy. So the key would be to let this troubled and perhaps declining country make its own mistakes.

### **Kennan and the origins of containment in the Cold War**

The quintessential intellectual presentation of containment policy remains George Kennan’s article “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” published in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947.<sup>5</sup> It is concerned about Soviet military strength, but it argues that what makes that strength threatening is an ideology that is fundamentally expansionist.

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<sup>1</sup> Chas W. Freeman Jr., “The United States and China: Game of Superpowers,” Remarks to the National War College Student Body. Washington, DC: Middle East Policy Council, February 8, 2018. [mepc.org/speeches/united-states-and-china-gamesuperpowers](https://mepc.org/speeches/united-states-and-china-gamesuperpowers). Daniel W. Drezner, “This Time is Different: Why U.S. Foreign Policy Will Never Recover,” *Foreign Affairs* 98(3) May/June 2019, p. 11. Scott D. Sagan, “The Korean Missile Crisis,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2017, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Hal Brands, “Containment Can Work Against China, Too,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 3, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *Getting China Wrong*. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, “The New Containment: Handling Russia, China, and Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019.

<sup>5</sup> George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25(4) July 1947, pp. 566–82.

However, Kennan concluded that there was a “strong” possibility that Soviet power “bears within it the seeds of its own decay, and that the sprouting of these seeds is well advanced.” These “seeds” included the exhaustion and disillusionment of the Soviet population, economic development that was “spotty,” the difficulty of maintaining its control over the peoples of East Europe, and looming uncertainties in the impending transfer of power that would follow the death of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin (something that might “shake Soviet power to its foundations”).

Accordingly, Kennan’s argued that the “main element” of U.S. policy “must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” Eventually, it was hoped, the Soviets, frustrated in their drive for expansion, which he deemed to be primarily ideological, would become less hostile and more accommodating.

In a 1989 speech, President George H. W. Bush, declared that “containment worked” and explained the mechanism this way: “the Soviet Union, denied the easy course of expansion, would turn inward and address the contradictions of its inefficient, repressive, and inhumane system.”

How long it might take for this to happen was not predictable of course, but in his article Kennan opined that it might take 10 to 15 years, strongly suggesting that he was putting his primary emphasis on the transfer of power issue: Stalin was nearing 70 at the time.

As it turned out, however, the Soviet regime managed to survive Stalin’s death (which took place in 1953) quite well, and for decades it was able to maintain its control at home and over people in the middle of Europe.

### **The limited successes of containment**

In the course of this history, containment seems to have prevented few countries from embracing Communism. It may have made some difference here and there, but determining whether containment’s perceived successes—as in Guatemala and Iran in 1954, for example—prevented a left-leaning country from actually toppling into the Communist camp would be difficult. Indeed, the record of success at covert regime change is very limited.<sup>6</sup>

However, the clearest case of success was military: turning back the invasion of South Korea by Communist North Korea in 1950 in a war that then became much more costly and ended in stalemate. At the time, the invasion was almost universally held to be part of a grand Soviet scheme to dominate the world,<sup>7</sup> rather than what it was—an opportunistic foray in a then-remote part of the world.<sup>8</sup> With that, containment policy became much more military, a development Kennan viewed with dismay. Central to this was military deterrence even though there seems to

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<sup>6</sup> Lindsey A, O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics*. New York: Macmillan, 1973, pp. 63-64.

<sup>8</sup> William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 70-75. Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, ed. Edward Crankshaw and Strobe Talbott. Boston: Little, Brown, 1970, pp. 367-68.

be no evidence that the Soviets needed to be deterred—they sought to aid and inspire revolutionary movements around the world,<sup>9</sup> but they never had an interest in waging anything like a repetition of World War II.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth noting that containment policy played little role in three of international Communism's major setbacks or difficulties during the Cold War. Each was substantially self-inflicted. In 1948, Stalin sought and failed to bring Yugoslavia, led by a loyal but independent Communist Party, under tighter control. In 1965, there was a violent crackdown against China-linked Communists who were attempting a coup in Indonesia, an important potential domino at the time—a complete surprise to American policymakers that undercut a chief justification for the earlier entry of the United States into a war in Vietnam. And erupting in the 1960s, the Communist movement was damagingly split by a self-induced and self-destructive theological dispute between China and the Soviet Union.

Moreover, in the end, any mellowing of Soviet expansionism was due not so much to containment's success as to its failure.

If the Soviet system was as rotten at the core as Kennan said, logic might have dictated not containing it, but letting it expand so that it might more readily self-destruct. To a degree, that actually happened. In 1975, Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Laos abruptly toppled into the Communist camp. Then, partly out of fear of repeating the Vietnam experience, the United States went into a sort of containment funk as the Soviet Union, in what seems in retrospect to have been remarkably like a fit of absent mindedness, opportunistically gathered a set of willing Third World countries into its embrace: Angola in 1976, Mozambique and Ethiopia in 1977, South Yemen and Afghanistan in 1978, Grenada and Nicaragua in 1979.

At first, the Soviets were quite gleeful about these acquisitions – the “correlation of forces,” as they called it, had agreeably shifted in their direction.<sup>11</sup> However, almost all the new acquisitions soon became economic and political basket cases, fraught with dissension, financial mismanagement, and civil warfare, and turned expectantly to the Soviet Union for maternal warmth and sustenance. Most disastrous for the Soviets was the experience in Afghanistan. In December 1979, they sent a large contingent of troops there to establish order and to quash an anti-Communist rebellion and soon found themselves bogged down in a protracted war.

The Soviets were soon to realize that they would have been better off contained.

Nor can containment policy be said to have caused the breakup of the Soviet Union in late 1991. Indeed, by that time the United States had long deemed the Cold War to be over, and it had officially deserted containment.

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<sup>9</sup> Historicus [George Allen Morgan], “Stalin on Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 27(2) January 1949, p. 198.

<sup>10</sup> John Mueller. *The Stupidity of War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021, ch. 2.

<sup>11</sup> George W. Breslauer, “Ideology and Learning in Soviet Third World Policy,” *World Politics* 39(3) April 1987, pp. 436–37. Robert Jervis, “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3(1) Winter 2001, p. 50.

It took 40 years for the Soviets, plagued by economic, social, and military disasters, to abandon their threatening ideology as Kennan had hoped. The process culminated in a speech made by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at the United Nations in late 1988 in which he called for “de-ideologizing relations among states.” As George Shultz, the Secretary of State at the time, recalls, “If anybody declared the end of the Cold War, he did in that speech.”<sup>12</sup>

By the spring of 1989, at a time when the USSR still controlled most of East Europe, that conclusion had been accepted by the new George H. W. Bush administration. In a series of speeches about going “beyond containment,” Bush announced that the goal was now to integrate “the Soviet Union into the community of nations,” to welcome it “back into the world order.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1989 and 1990, East European states left the military alliance that had been forced on them by the Soviets (thereby reducing Soviet costs) and worked their way toward democracy and capitalism. The US welcomed this change, but it also made considerable effort to keep the Soviet Union itself from collapsing. Most notably, in 1991 Bush gave a speech in Ukraine in which he essentially urged the various Soviet Republics to work it out and to remain within the country. If there was a Cold War raging at that time, the United States and the Soviet Union were on the same side.

Shortly after Bush’s speech, however, Communist hardliners, intent on keeping the Soviet Union from falling apart, staged a coup attempt at Gorbachev. The attempt failed miserably, but it shifted sentiment (particularly in Ukraine) and resulted in exactly the breakup the conspirators were seeking to prevent.<sup>14</sup> Without that development, it is possible that, with some economic reform including defense spending cuts, the Soviet Union might have been able to survive more or less intact.<sup>15</sup>

As analyst Strobe Talbott put it, the Soviet system went “into meltdown because of inadequacies and defects at its core, not because of anything the outside world had done or threatened to do.”<sup>16</sup> Historian Odd Arne Westad agrees: it came about primarily “because of weaknesses and contradictions in the Soviet system itself.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> William C. Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> John Mueller, “What Was the Cold War About? Evidence from Its Ending,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 119 Winter 2004-05, pp. 609-31.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Wilson, *Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 165-69. Mark Kramer, “The Dissolution of the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 24(1) Winter 2022, pp. 201-04.

<sup>15</sup> Myron Rush, “Fortune and Fate,” *National Interest*, Spring 1993, pp. 19–25. Mark Kramer, “The Dissolution of the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 24(1) Winter 2022, pp. 207-11.

<sup>16</sup> Strobe Talbott, “Remaking the Red Menace,” *Time*, January 1, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> Odd Arne Westad, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?” *Foreign Affairs* 98(5) September/October 2019, p. 86.

## Containment and China

It appears, then, that it was essentially unnecessary to *do* much of anything to deal with the threat or challenge presented by the Soviet Union, and perhaps something like that holds today for policy toward China. In particular, military policies seeking to “balance” against the rise of China scarcely seem necessary.

China doesn’t present the same kind of ideological challenge as the Soviet Union. It has sought to aid other authoritarian kleptocracies to better maintain their hold on power, but that is hardly an expansion of ideology. Moreover, it does not seem to have much in the way of territorial ambitions beyond reincorporating Taiwan at some point and settling disputes over parts of its border and over issues concerning the South China Sea.

However, China, now in second place in total GDP (though 78<sup>th</sup> in per capita GDP), seems to be seeking a spot at center stage. It is building up its military and has sought to gain “influence” by lending money in its Belt and Road Initiative to a vast array of other countries and by engaging in “Wolf Warrior diplomacy” using economic and military muscle to badger and bully.

Xi Jinping has been adept at working his way into unchallenged one-man rule in China and at embedding himself at the center of a compliant echo chamber. However, rather than rising to anything that could be conceived to be “dominance,” China could decline into substantial economic stagnation. Indeed, some analysts worry that it might lash out militarily in the next few years before that condition takes hold.<sup>18</sup>

That seems increasingly unlikely because Xi is preoccupied with a growing set of domestic problems, most of them deriving from his determination to privilege control by the antiquated and kleptocratic Communist Party over economic development. Among the problems are endemic corruption, environmental degradation, slowing growth, capricious shifts in government policies, recovering from its costly and abruptly canceled “zero Covid” policy, favoring inefficient enterprises, fraudulent statistical reporting, a rapidly aging population (and a strong and fearful aversion to immigration), enormous overproduction, huge youth unemployment, increasing debt, a housing bubble, restive minorities, protectionist policies, alienation of Western investors, and a clamp-down on civil liberties (one can get life for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”) that includes a massive policing of the Internet. There also seems to be something of a decline of confidence in, and in the credibility of, Communist Party dictates, a change that could have longterm consequences.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, China’s efforts in recent years to be taken to be a “great power” have been remarkably counterproductive. Rather than generating admiration or obedience by countries that once wished it well, resentment and wariness have soared not only in the West but also in

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, “The End of China’s Rise: Beijing Is Running Out of Time to Remake the World,” *foreignaffairs.com*, October 1, 2021. Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*. New York: Norton, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Barry Naughton lecture at SOAS China Institute, London, 2023  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXLRWYCzoIE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXLRWYCzoIE)

important neighbors like Japan, South Korea, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Australia, pushing some of them further into the embrace of the United States. And the much-touted Belt and Road Initiative, once labeled in the *Washington Post* as a “plan to rule the world,”<sup>20</sup> is wallowing in unpaid debt while loan outlays were cut from \$75 billion in 2016 to \$4 billion in 2019.<sup>21</sup>

The Chinese desire to be treated with respect and deference hardly seems to present a threat. Moreover, if United States can continually declare itself to be the one indispensable nation (suggesting that other nations are, well, dispensable), why should other countries be denied the opportunity to wallow in such self-important, childish, inconsequential, essentially meaningless, and fatuous proclamations?

A policy of “containment,” therefore, is scarcely called for. Indeed, it is likely to fuel, not allay, the common motivating belief in China that the Americans are primarily out to stop its growth. Moreover, as Freeman puts it, “There is no military answer to a grand strategy built on a non-violent expansion of commerce and navigation.”<sup>22</sup>

The alternative is to wait (perhaps for a rather long time) for China to mellow—although currently in eclipse, there is a substantial liberal element in China. This could be pursued while warily profiting from China’s economic size and problems to the degree possible,<sup>23</sup> while maintaining the decades-long comic opera charade in which Taiwan is independent as long as it doesn’t say so, and perhaps while issuing periodic, if unproductive, complaints about civil liberties in China and humoring China by welcoming it into the “leadership” club as if that had some tangible meaning.

Never interrupt an adversary, said Napoleon, when it is making a mistake.

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<sup>20</sup> David Ignatius, “China Has a Plan to Rule the World,” [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com), November 28, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> James Kynge and Jonathan Wheatley, “China pulls back from the world: rethinking Xi’s ‘project of the century’,” *Financial Times*, December 11, 2020. Michael Bennon and Francis Fukuyama, “China’s Road to Ruin: The Real Toll of Beijing’s Belt and Road,” *Foreign Affairs*, [September/October 2023](https://www.foreignaffairs.com).

<sup>22</sup> Chas W. Freeman Jr., “The United States and China: Game of Superpowers,” Remarks to the National War College Student Body. Washington, DC: Middle East Policy Council, February 8, 2018. [mepc.org/speeches/united-states-and-china-gamesuperpowers](https://mepc.org/speeches/united-states-and-china-gamesuperpowers).

<sup>23</sup> Adam S. Posen, “The End of China’s Economic Miracle: How Beijing’s Struggles Could Be an Opportunity for Washington,” *Foreign Affairs*, [September/October 2023](https://www.foreignaffairs.com).