

## The Case for Containing China

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Ever since the end of the Cold War, American policymakers have been torn between engagement and containment of China. The George H. W. Bush administration advocated the unreasonable and unattainable goal of preventing the emergence of a new peer competitor, as if the United States could somehow prevent China's rise. Successive U.S. administrations were at times distracted from a focus on China by Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf, the Serbs in the Balkans, and al-Qaeda and the Global War on Terror after 9/11, but in the end 21st century geopolitics was always going to be dominated by the U.S.-China rivalry.

Foreign policy realists understood this better than most observers because they view international politics without using ideological, progressive, or sentimental lenses. China is a great power and will act like great powers have always acted: It will seek to expand its power and influence. Nothing the United States could have done after the end of the Cold War would have changed that. For some Americans, especially those who view the world through Wilsonian lenses, that is hard to admit. What Charles Krauthammer called America's "unipolar moment" was just that — a moment, and a brief one at that.

Robert Kaplan and Niall Ferguson, among others, have repeatedly pointed out that modern Americans disdain the concept of "empire," even though empires in one form or another have been ubiquitous throughout history. Americans of the 18th and 19th centuries were not like that. Indeed, those centuries witnessed the beginnings and the growth of the American Empire, which Thomas Jefferson called an "empire of liberty," and John O'Sullivan called "manifest destiny."

The United States expanded over the center of the North American continent by war, conquest, and migration. Once that was accomplished, statesmen and geopolitical thinkers like Theodore Roosevelt, Brooks Adams, and Alfred Thayer Mahan envisioned an overseas empire, which the United States established after the Spanish-American War of 1898. This was the same time period during which European powers were scrambling for colonies in Africa and expanding their interests and political influence in Asia.

World War I resulted in the collapse of four empires (the German, Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian) and in the United States the rise of Wilsonian foreign policy. President Woodrow Wilson naively envisioned a world without empires; where every nationality would have its own country and where conquest and territorial expansion would be erased from the Earth. That vision should have been dispelled by the reconstitution of the Russian Empire under the Bolsheviks and the German Empire under the Nazis, and the growth of the Japanese Empire in the 1930s. Instead, during World War II, Wilson's vision was advanced by President Franklin Roosevelt, who relished the inevitable end of the British Empire but who was complicit in the expansion of the Soviet Empire.

After the war, Mao Zedong successfully fought for control of the Chinese Empire against the Nationalists. The "century of humiliation," when China was at the mercy of Western colonial powers, was over. The People's Republic of China (PRC) under communist rule would reconstitute the Chinese Empire, despite naïve Western progressives who portrayed the communists as democratic agrarian reformers.



Image Credit: Illustration by Catherine Putz

The Cold War was in essence another clash of empires, though most Americans did not see it that way. There was, to be sure, an ideological component to the conflict, but in the end geopolitics trumped ideology. The United States effectively allied with other communist powers, especially the PRC, to contain and defeat the Soviet Empire. Realists understood that Francis Fukuyama was wrong when he declared the “end of history” in the wake of the Cold War.

After the Cold War, China continued its economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping but it never reformed its politics. There was to be no Chinese Gorbachev. As China’s economy grew, so too did its military and its political ambitions. Today, observers not blinded by a Wilsonian worldview see nothing surprising in China’s growing naval power, its actions in the South and East China Seas, and its Belt and Road Initiative. This is what empires have always done. China under President Xi Jinping is not hiding its ambitions.

In classical geopolitical terms, China is a great Eurasian-based land power that has taken to the sea. The United States should view the Belt and Road Initiative as a geopolitical development of the first order. One does not have to accept Graham Allison’s entire argument to appreciate that the “Thucydides Trap” has a sound basis in history and human nature. China’s challenge to U.S. preeminence cannot be wished away.

The only sensible U.S. policy, therefore, is a policy of “firm and vigilant containment,” in the words of George F. Kennan written in the early years of the Cold War. Kennan was the ultimate realist, unblinded by ideology or sentiment. He counseled patience and prudence and took the long view, understanding that there are no permanent solutions to international problems.

Containment does not mean war, though war is a possibility in any great power rivalry and should be adequately prepared for. American sea power, its Asian allies (especially Japan and hopefully India), and the geography of the East Asian littoral make containment doable. What is needed from the United States is an unambiguous policy that will not be misunderstood by the Chinese leadership. Containment is passive and reactive, not bellicose, but it demands American willpower and steadfastness.

China, like the Soviet Union before it, is a peer competitor of the United States but it is not invincible. Like the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, it has domestic problems and economic vulnerabilities that can be patiently and prudently exploited. When George Kennan wrote about containment in 1947, he said that Americans should find no cause for complaint, but rather should “experience a certain gratitude to Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.”

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