

# The Sources of Chinese Conduct

## Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?

By Odd Arne Westad

In February 1946, as the Cold War was coming into being, George Kennan, the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Moscow, sent the State Department a 5,000-word cable in which he tried to explain Soviet behavior and outline a response to it. A year later, the text of his famous "Long Telegram" was expanded into a Foreign Affairs article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." Writing under the byline "X," Kennan argued that the Soviets' Marxist-Leninist ideology was for real and that this worldview, plus a deep sense of insecurity, was what drove Soviet expansionism. But this didn't mean that outright confrontation was inevitable, he pointed out, since "the Kremlin has no compunction about retreating in the face of superior force." What the United States had to do to ensure its own long-term security, then, was contain the Soviet threat. If it did, then Soviet power would ultimately crumble. Containment, in other words, was both necessary and sufficient.

Kennan's message became the canonical text for those who tried to understand the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Always controversial and often revised (not least by the author himself), the containment strategy that Kennan laid out would define U.S. policy until the end of the Cold War. And as Kennan predicted, when the end did come, it came not just because of the strength and steadfastness of the United States and its allies but even more because of weaknesses and contradictions in the Soviet system itself.

Now, more than 70 years later, the United States and its allies again face a communist rival that views the United States as an adversary and is seeking regional dominance and global influence. For many, including in Washington and Beijing, the analogy has become irresistible: there is a U.S.-Chinese cold war, and American policymakers need an updated version of Kennan's containment. This past April, Kiron Skinner, the director of policy planning at the State Department (the job Kennan held when "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" was published), explicitly called for a new "X" article, this time for China.

But if such an inquiry starts where Kennan's did—with an attempt to understand the other side's basic drivers—the differences become as pronounced as the parallels. It is these differences, the contrast between the sources of Soviet conduct then and the sources of Chinese conduct now, that stand to save the world from another Cold War.

### FROM WEALTH TO POWER

There are two central facts about China today. The first is that the country has just experienced a period of economic growth the likes of which the world had never before seen. The second is that it is ruled, increasingly dictatorially, by an unelected communist party that puts people in prison for their convictions and limits all forms of free expression and association. Under Xi Jinping, there are abundant signs that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to roll back even the limited freedoms that people took for themselves during the reform era of Deng Xiaoping. There are also indications that the party wants to bring private enterprise to heel, by intervening more directly in how businesses are run.

Behind these policies lies a growing insistence that China's model of development is superior to the West's. In a 2017 speech, Xi claimed that Beijing is "blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization" and "offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence." According to the CCP, Western talk about democracy is simply a pretext for robbing poorer countries of their sovereignty and economic potential. Just as China has needed dictatorship to achieve extreme economic growth, the thinking goes, other countries may need it, too. Although such convictions have been slow to find acolytes abroad, many Chinese have bought into the party's version of truth, believing with Xi that thanks to the party's leadership, "the Chinese nation, with an entirely new posture, now stands tall and firm in the East."

Such views are the product of both the unprecedented improvement in living standards in China and an increase in Chinese nationalism. The CCP issues relentless propaganda about the greatness and righteousness of China, and the Chinese people, understandably proud of what they have achieved, embrace it enthusiastically. The party also claims that the outside world, especially the United States, is out to undo China's progress, or at least prevent its further rise—just as Soviet propaganda used to do.

Making this nationalism even more sinister is the particular view of history endorsed by the Chinese leadership, which sees the history of China from the mid-nineteenth century to the Communists' coming to power in 1949 as an endless series of humiliations at the hands of foreign powers. While there is some truth to this version of events, the CCP also makes the frightening claim that the party itself is the only thing standing between the Chinese and further exploitation. Since it would be untenable for the party to argue that the country needs dictatorship because the Chinese are singularly unsuited to governing themselves, it must claim that the centralization of power in the party's hands is necessary for protecting against abuse by foreigners. But such extreme centralization of power could have extreme consequences. As Kennan correctly observed about the Soviet Union, "if . . . anything were ever to occur to disrupt the unity and efficacy of the Party as a political instrument, Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies."

Another troubling aspect of nationalism in China today is that the country is a de facto empire that tries to behave as if it were a nation-state. More than 40 percent of China's territory—Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang—was originally populated by people who do not see themselves as Chinese. Although the Chinese government grants special rights to these "minority nationalities," their homelands have been subsumed into a new concept of a Chinese nation and have gradually been taken over by the 98 percent of the population who are ethnically Chinese (or Han, as the government prefers to call them). Those who resist end up in prison camps, just as did those who argued for real self-government within the Soviet empire.

Externally, the Chinese government sustains the world's worst dystopia, next door in North Korea, and routinely menaces its neighbors, including the democratic government in Taiwan, which Beijing views as a breakaway province. Much of this is not to China's advantage politically or diplomatically. Its militarization of faraway islets in the South China Sea, its contest with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and its attempts at punishing South Korea over the acquisition of advanced missile defenses from the United States have all backfired: East Asia is much wrier of Chinese aims today than it was a decade ago. (The percentage of South Koreans, for example, who viewed China's rise favorably fell from 66 percent in 2002 to 34 percent in 2017, according to the Pew Research Center.) Despite this dip in China's popularity,

people across the region overwhelmingly believe that China will be the predominant regional power in the future and that they had better get ready.

This assumption is based primarily on China's spectacular economic growth. Today, China's economic power relative to the United States' exceeds what the Soviet Union's relative power was by a factor of two or three. Although that growth has now slowed, those who believe that China will soon go the way of Japan and fall into economic stagnation are almost certainly wrong. Even if foreign tariffs on Chinese goods stayed high, China has enough of an untapped domestic market to fuel the country's economic rise for years to come. And the rest of Asia, which is a much larger and more economically dynamic region than Western Europe was at the beginning of the Cold War, fears China enough to refrain from walling it off with tariffs.

It is in military and strategic terms that the competition between the United States and China is hardest to gauge. The United States today has tremendous military advantages over China: more than 20 times as many nuclear warheads, a far superior air force, and defense budgets that run at least three times as high as China's. It also has allies (Japan and South Korea) and prospective allies (India and Vietnam) in China's neighborhood that boast substantial military capabilities of their own. China has no equivalent in the Western Hemisphere.

And yet within the last decade, the balance of power in East Asia has shifted perceptibly in China's favor. Today, the country has enough ground-based ballistic missiles, aircraft, and ships to plausibly contend that it has achieved military superiority in its immediate backyard. The Chinese missile force presents such a challenge to U.S. air bases and aircraft carriers in the Pacific that Washington can no longer claim supremacy in the region. The problem will only get worse, as China's naval capabilities are set to grow massively within the next few years, and its military technologies—especially its lasers, drones, cyber-operations, and capabilities in outer space—are fast catching up to those of the United States. Even though the United States currently enjoys far greater military superiority over China than it did over the Soviet Union, Beijing has the potential to catch up much more quickly and comprehensively than Moscow ever could. Overall, China is more of a match for the United States than the Soviet Union was when Kennan wrote down his thoughts.

## **PLUS ÇA CHANGE**

The similarities between China today and the Soviet Union of old may seem striking—starting, of course, with communist rule. For almost 40 years, blinded by China's market-led economic progress, the West had gotten used to downplaying the fact that the country was run by a communist dictatorship. In spite of occasional reminders of Chinese leaders' ruthlessness, such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the Western consensus held that China was liberalizing and becoming more pluralistic. Today, such predictions look foolish: the CCP is strengthening its rule and intends to remain in power forever. "The great new project of Party building . . . is just getting into full swing," Xi announced in 2017. He added, "We must work harder to uphold the authority and centralized, unified leadership of the Central Committee. . . . The Party remains always the backbone of the nation."

Another similarity is that just as the Soviet Union sought predominance in Europe, China is seeking it in East Asia, a region that is as important to the United States today as Europe was at the beginning of the Cold War. The methods China is using are similar—political and military extortion, divide-and-rule tactics—and its capabilities are in fact greater. Unless the United

States acts to countervail it, China is likely to become the undisputed master of East Asia, from Japan to Indonesia, by the late 2020s.

Like Soviet leaders, Chinese ones view the United States as the enemy. They are careful and courteous in public, and often declare their adherence to international norms, but in the party's internal communications, the line is always that the United States is planning to undermine China's rise through external aggression and internal subversion. "So long as we persist in CCP leadership and socialism with Chinese characteristics," went one 2013 communiqué, "the position of Western anti-China forces to pressure for urgent reform won't change, and they'll continue to point the spearhead of Westernizing, splitting, and 'Color Revolutions' at China." Such anti-Americanism bears a striking resemblance to the type Stalin promoted in the late 1940s, including open appeals to nationalism. In 1949, the Soviet-led Cominform proclaimed that the West had "as its main aim the forcible establishment of Anglo-American world domination, the enslavement of foreign countries and peoples, the destruction of democracy and the unleashing of a new war." The Americans, the CCP leadership tells its followers, hate us because we are Chinese. They are out to rule the world, and only the Communist Party stands in their way.

### **NOW AND THEN**

But China is not the Soviet Union. For one thing, Soviet ideology was inherently opposed to any long-term coexistence with the United States. From Lenin onward, Soviet leaders saw the world in zero-sum terms: bourgeois democracy and capitalism had to lose for communism to win. There could be alliances of convenience and even periods of *détente*, but in the end, their form of communism would have to be victorious everywhere for the Soviet Union to be safe. The CCP does not share such beliefs. It is nationalist rather than internationalist in outlook. The party sees Washington as an obstacle to its goals of preserving its own rule and gaining regional dominance, but it does not believe that the United States or its system of government has to be defeated in order to achieve these aims.

Moreover, Chinese society is more similar to American society than Soviet society ever was. In the Soviet Union, citizens generally accepted and conformed to socialist economic policies. Chinese, by contrast, appear to be interested above all in getting ahead in their competitive, market-oriented society. For the vast majority of them, communism is simply a name for the ruling party rather than an ideal to seek. True, some sympathize with Xi's efforts to centralize power, believing that China needs strong leadership after the individualism of the 1990s and early years of this century went too far. But nobody, including Xi himself, wants to bring back the bad old days before the reform and opening began. For all his Maoist rhetoric, Xi, both in thought and practice, is much further removed from Mao Zedong than even the reform-minded Mikhail Gorbachev was from Lenin.

What's more, the Chinese have enjoyed a remarkably peaceful few decades. In 1947, the Russians had just emerged from 30-plus years of continuous war and revolution. In Kennan's words, they were "physically and spiritually tired." The Chinese have had the opposite experience: some two-thirds of the population have known nothing but peace and progress. The country's last foreign military intervention, in Vietnam, ended 30 years ago, and its last major conflict, the Korean War, ended almost 70 years ago. On the one hand, the past few decades of success have demonstrated the value of peace, making people wary of risking it all in war. On the other hand, the lack of near-term memories of war has led to a lot of loose talk about war

among people who have never experienced it. These days, it is increasingly common to hear Chinese, especially the young, espousing the idea that their country may have to fight a war in order to avoid getting hemmed in by the United States. Xi and his group are not natural risk-takers. But in a crisis, the Chinese are more likely to resemble the Germans in 1914 than the Russians after World War II—excitable, rather than exhausted.

The global balance of power has also changed since Kennan's time. Today, the world is becoming not more bipolar but more multipolar. This process is gradual, but there is little doubt that the trend is real. Unlike in the Cold War, greater conflict between the two biggest powers today will not lead to bipolarity; rather, it will make it easier for others to catch up, since there are no ideological compulsions, and economic advantage counts for so much more. The more the United States and China beat each other up, the more room for maneuver other powers will have. The result may be a world of regional hegemons, and sooner rather than later.

The U.S. domestic situation also looks very different from the way it did at the beginning of the Cold War. There were divisions among voters and conflicts between parts of the government back then, but there was nothing compared to the polarization and gridlock that characterize American politics today. Now, the United States seems to have lost its way at home and abroad. Under the Trump administration, the country's overall standing in the world has never been lower, and even close allies no longer view Washington as a reliable partner. Since well before the presidency of Donald Trump, U.S. foreign policy elites have been lamenting the decline of any consensus on foreign affairs, but they have proved incapable of restoring it. Now, the rest of the world questions the United States' potential for leadership on issues great and small, issues on which American guidance would have been considered indispensable in the past.

The U.S. economy is also intertwined with the Chinese economy in ways that would have been unimaginable with the Soviet economy. As Kennan knew well, economically speaking, the Soviets did not need to be contained; they contained themselves by refusing to join the world economy. China is very different, since about one-third of its GDP growth can be traced to exports, and the United States is its largest trading partner. Attempting to disentangle the United States' economy from China's through political means, such as travel restrictions, technology bans, and trade barriers, will not work, unless a de facto state of war makes economic interaction impossible. In the short run, tariffs could create a more level playing field, but in the long run, they may end up advantaging China by making it more self-reliant, to say nothing of the damage they would inflict on American prestige. And so the rivalry with China will have to be managed within the context of continued economic interdependence.

Finally, China's leaders have some international cards to play that the Soviets never held. Compared with the class-based politics Moscow was peddling during the Cold War, China's appeals for global unity on such issues as climate change, trade, and inequality could find far greater traction abroad. That would be ironic, given China's pollution, protectionism, and economic disparities. But because the United States has failed to take the lead on any of these issues, China's communist government may be able to convince foreigners that authoritarian governments handle such problems better than democracies do.

## **FOCUSING THE AMERICAN MIND**

The sources of Chinese conduct, along with the current global role of the United States, point to a rivalry of a different kind than the one Kennan saw coming in 1946 and 1947. The risk of immediate war is lower, and the odds of limited cooperation are higher. But the danger that

nationalism will fuel ever-widening circles of conflict is probably greater, and China's determination to hack away at the United States' position in Asia is more tenacious than anything Stalin ever attempted in Europe. If the United States wants to compete, it must prepare for a long campaign for influence that will test its own ability for strategic prioritizing and long-term planning. That is especially true given that fast-moving economic and technological changes will make a traditional containment policy impossible—information travels so much more easily than before, especially to a country like China, which does not intend to cut itself off from the world.

Even though the pattern of conflict between the United States and China will look very different from the Cold War, that doesn't mean that Kennan's advice is irrelevant. For one thing, just as he envisioned continued U.S. involvement in Europe, the United States today needs to preserve and build deep relationships with Asian countries that are fearful of China's rising aggression. To counter the Soviet threat, Washington rolled out the Marshall Plan (which was partly Kennan's brainchild) in 1948 and created NATO (of which Kennan was at least partly skeptical) the following year. Today, likewise, U.S. alliances in Asia must have not only a security dimension but also an economic dimension. Indeed, the economic aspects are probably even more important today than they were 70 years ago, given that China is primarily an economic power. The removal of U.S. support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership was therefore much as if the Americans, having just invented NATO, suddenly decided to withdraw from it. The Trump administration's decision may have made domestic political sense, but in terms of foreign policy, it was a disaster, since it allowed China to claim that the United States was an unreliable partner in Asia.

Kennan also recognized that the United States would be competing with the Soviet Union for decades to come, and so U.S. statecraft would have to rely on negotiations and compromises as much as on military preparedness and intelligence operations. Kennan's fellow policymakers learned this lesson only gradually, but there is little doubt that the process of developing a mutual understanding contributed to the peaceful end of the Cold War. U.S. and Soviet officials had enough contact to make the best of a bad situation and stave off war long enough for the Soviets to change their approach to the United States and to international affairs in general.

China is even more likely to change its attitude than the Soviet Union was. The current struggle is not a clash of civilizations—or, even worse, of races, as Skinner suggested in April, when she pointed out that China is a “competitor that is not Caucasian.” Rather, it is a political conflict between great powers. A substantial minority of Chinese resent their current leaders' power play. They want a freer and more equitable China, at peace with its neighbors and with the United States. The more isolated China becomes, the less of a voice such people will have, as their views drown in an ocean of nationalist fury. As Kennan stressed in the Soviet case, “demands on Russian policy should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige.”

The United States also needs to help create a more benign environment beyond Asia. At a time when China is continuing its rise, it makes no sense to leave Russia as a dissatisfied scavenger on the periphery of the international system. Washington should try to bring Moscow into a more cooperative relationship with the West by opening up more opportunities for partnership and helping settle the conflict in eastern Ukraine. If Washington refuses to do that, then the strategic nightmare that haunted U.S. officials during the Cold War yet never fully materialized may actually come true: a real Sino-Russian alliance. Today, the combination of Russia's resources

and China's population could power a far greater challenge to the West than what was attempted 70 years ago. As Kennan noted in 1954, the only real danger to Americans would come through "the association of the dominant portion of the physical resources of Europe and Asia with a political power hostile to [the United States]."

One of Kennan's greatest insights, however, had nothing to do with foreign affairs; it had to do with American politics. He warned in his "X" article that "exhibitions of indecision, disunity and internal disintegration" within the United States were the biggest danger the country faced. Kennan also warned against complacency about funding for common purposes. Like 70 years ago, to compete today, the United States needs to spend more money, which necessarily means higher contributions from wealthy Americans and corporations, in order to provide top-quality skills training, world-class infrastructure, and cutting-edge research and development. Competing with China cannot be done on the cheap. Ultimately, Kennan argued, American power depended on the United States' ability to "create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time."

Although one might phrase it differently, the challenge is exactly the same today. Will the competition with China focus, to use one of Kennan's favored phrases, "the American mind" to the point that the United States abandons domestic discord in favor of consensus? If some unifying factor does not intervene, the decline in the United States' ability to act purposefully will, sooner than most people imagine, mean not just a multipolar world but an unruly world—one in which fear, hatred, and ambition hold everyone hostage to the basest instincts of the human imagination