

Opinion **US-China relations**

China is right about US containment

But encircling Beijing is not a viable long-term strategy

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Here is a thought experiment. If Taiwan did not exist, would the US and China still be at loggerheads? My hunch is yes. Antagonism between top dogs and rising powers is part of the human story.

The follow-up is whether such tensions would persist if China were a democracy rather than a one-party state. That is harder to say but it is not obvious that an elected Chinese government would feel any less resentful of the US-led global order. It is also hard to imagine the circumstances in which America would willingly share the limelight.

All of which suggests that loose talk of a US-China conflict is no longer far-fetched. Countries do not easily change their spots: China is the middle kingdom wanting redress for the age of western humiliation; America is the dangerous nation seeking monsters to destroy. Both are playing to type.

The question is whether global stability can survive either of them insisting that they must succeed. The likeliest alternative to today's [US-China stand-off](#) is not a kumbaya meeting-of-minds, but war.

This week, Xi Jinping went further than before in naming America as the force behind the [“containment”](#), [“encirclement”](#) and [“suppression”](#) of China. Though his rhetoric

was provocative, it was not technically wrong. President Joe Biden is still officially committed to trying to co-operate with China. But Biden was as easily blown off course last month as a weather balloon. Washington's panic over what is after all 19th-century technology prompted Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, to [cancel a Beijing trip](#) that was to pave the way for a Biden-Xi summit.

Washington groupthink drove Biden's overreaction. The consensus is now so hawkish that it is liable to see any outreach to China as weakness. As the historian Max Boot points out, bipartisanship is not always a good thing.

Some of America's worst blunders — the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution that led to the Vietnam war, or the 2002 Iraq war resolution — were bipartisan. So is the new House committee on China, which its chair, Mike Gallagher, says will “contrast the Chinese Communist party's techno-totalitarian state with the Free World”. It is probably safe to say he will not be on the hunt for contradictory evidence.

A big difference between today's cold war and the original one is that China is not exporting revolution. From Cuba to Angola and Korea to Ethiopia, the Soviet Union underwrote leftwing insurgencies worldwide.

The original idea of containment, laid out in George Kennan's 1947 Foreign Affairs essay, *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, was more modest than the undeclared containment that is now US policy. Kennan's advice was twofold: to stop the expansion of the Soviet empire; and to shore up western democracy. He counselled against the use of force. With patience and skill the USSR would fold, which is what eventually happened.

Today's approach is containment-plus. When Xi talks of “suppression”, he means America's ban on advanced [semiconductor exports to China](#). Since high-end chips are used for both civil and military purposes, the US has grounds for denying China the means to upgrade its military. But the collateral effect is to limit China's economic development.

There is no easy way round this. One possible side-effect will be to accelerate Xi's drive for “made in China” technology. The Chinese president has also explicitly declared Beijing's goal of dominating artificial intelligence by 2030, which is another way of saying that China wants to set the rules.

The one positive feature of today's cold war compared with the last one — China and America's economic interdependence — is thus something Biden wants to undo. Decoupling is taking on an air of inevitability.

When Xi refers to “encirclement”, he is thinking about America’s deepening ties to China’s neighbours. Again, Xi mostly has himself to blame.

Japan’s shift to a more normal military stance, which includes a doubling of its defence spending, probably worries China the most. But America’s growing closeness to the Philippines and India, and the Aukus nuclear submarine deal with Australia and the UK, are also part of the picture. Add in increased US arms transfers to Taiwan and the ingredients for Chinese paranoia are ripe. How does this end?

This is where a study of Kennan would pay dividends. There is no endgame to today’s cold war. Unlike the USSR, which was an empire in disguise, China inhabits historic boundaries and is never likely to dissolve. The US needs a strategy to cope with a China that will always be there.

If you took a snap poll in Washington and asked: one, are the US and China in a cold war; and two, how does the US win it, the answer to the first would be an easy “yes”; the second would elicit a long pause. Betting on China’s submission is not a strategy.

Here is another way to look at it. The US still holds more of the cards. It has plenty of allies, a global system that it designed, better technology and younger demographics. China’s growth is slowing and its society is ageing faster. The case for US resolve and patience is stronger today than it was when Kennan was around. Self-confident powers should not be afraid to talk.

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