

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

Revisiting America's Greatest 20th Century Diplomat in the 21st Century

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KENNAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY: LESSONS FROM (AND FOR) EAST ASIA

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George F. Kennan's impact on American foreign policy was not confined to Russian and European affairs during the Cold War; the same is true for his contemporary relevance. Kennan exercised his most profound influence over U.S. foreign policy as the inaugural director (1947–50) of the State Department's Policy Planning staff. It was from that position that he proposed containing the Soviet Union and developed the strategic rationale for its original centerpiece: the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan). The purview of the Planning staff was global, however, and Kennan was deeply involved in formulating policies toward other parts of the world, including East Asia. Both his strategic approach to the Far East and his thinking about the Soviet Union during the Cold War apply to the primary strategic challenge the United States faces in East Asia today: the rise of China and its bid for regional and global influence.⁷²

Although some analysts and policymakers advocate containment of China, the doctrine of containment itself, at least as he originally conceived it, is probably obsolete in East Asia. He never thought it was applicable to China. Kennan insisted that containment was aimed exclusively at preventing the spread of *Soviet* Communist influence. During the early Cold War years, Kennan was among those who assessed—correctly—that Beijing would never fall under the effec-

tive control of Moscow. He later deemed the Sino-Soviet split “the greatest single measure of containment that could be conceived.”⁷³

The only place where Kennan thought containment applied in East Asia was Japan, a country he judged both strategically important to the United States and susceptible to Soviet infiltration. Japan was the only Asian country on his list of the five major industrial power centers on the globe; the United States, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union were the others. Kennan long dismissed China and the rest of mainland East Asia as incapable of posing a strategic threat to the United States. Only in Japan should U.S. policy aim at preventing Soviet influence and control. Accordingly, during 1947–48 Kennan was the leading bureaucratic driver of a redirection of American occupation policy in Japan. Policy moved away from a punitive approach and toward an economic reconstruction that would protect the country against potential Soviet inroads. This “reverse course” in occupation policy was essentially the East Asia counterpart to the Marshall Plan.

Kennan nonetheless later advocated elements of an approach to China that seemed to echo his original idea of containment. In the 1960s, he occasionally cited the need to erect barriers against any Communist Chinese influence that upset the post-war balance of power in East Asia. This sounded a lot like his definition of containment in the X article as the “adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.”⁷⁴ Kennan today would probably still be promoting policies and strategies for counterbalancing Chinese influence within East Asia relative to that of the United States), which appears to be a central strategic objective of current U.S. policy. It is precisely this objective, and American policies designed to advance it, which Chinese leaders routinely refer to as “containment.” Yet there is a persistent rhetorical disconnect between Washington’s denial that it seeks to “contain” China and Beijing’s firm belief that U.S. policy toward China constitutes “containment.”

Aside from this semantic difference, the key reason that Kennan's original doctrine of containment does not apply to today's China is that China—contrary to the narrative that has emerged in the 21st century—does not represent the existential or ideological threat to the United States that the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. Kennan would have recognized this, even though he was myopic in his longtime dismissal of China's strategic potential. In the X article, he specified that Soviet ideology asserted a "basic antagonism between the capitalist and socialist worlds" that excluded "any sincere assumption of a community of aims" and instead required Soviet leaders to recognize "that it was their duty eventually to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders."⁷⁵

Chinese Communist leaders have never subscribed to such a zero-sum, winner-take-all strategy. They have moved far beyond any fundamental antagonism between capitalism and socialism. Their "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is essentially a merger with capitalism. Moreover, Beijing's promotion of its governance and economic model abroad is meant to legitimize that model rather than to impose it on the rest of the world. Unlike the Soviet Union, Beijing is genuinely pursuing a "community of aims" with the United States and other Western powers on shared interests and transnational issues of mutual concern. Although Kennan did not anticipate the nature and scope of the strategic challenge from China today, he would have appreciated the differences between China today and the Soviet Union of the early Cold War. Old-school containment would not work against contemporary China.

COMPARING THE SOVIET UNION AND CHINA

Several lessons follow from the distinctions between today's China and the Soviet Union that Kennan dealt with during the Cold War. First, it is crucial not to misattribute motives to an adversary. The current U.S. National Security Strategy characterizes China as a "revisionist power" that is "attempting to erode American security

and prosperity” and to “shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.”⁷⁶ Kennan would have been duly skeptical of these assertions. Among the mistakes that he ascribed to U.S. policymakers after World War II were those “involved in attributing to the Soviet leadership aims and intentions it did not really have.”⁷⁷ Writing in the late 1970s, he criticized Washington for making several false assumptions about Moscow: that Soviet leaders were still “primarily inspired by a desire, and intention, to achieve world domination”; that the Soviet military served “primarily aggressive rather than defensive purposes”; and thus that “the differences in aim and outlook between the Soviet Union and the United States... can be resolved only by war or by the achievement of an unanswerable military superiority by the one party or the other.”⁷⁸

Moreover, recent trends in the characterization of China’s strategic intentions are eerily reminiscent of a shift Kennan perceived in the 1970s toward a “frame of mind in which the Soviet Union appeared in a far more menacing posture than had been the case for the past decade.” He speculated that this “seemingly inexorable advance” of “hysteria of professed fear and hostility” was attributable to “a subconscious need on the part of a great many people for an external enemy...in the light of the frustrations and failures American society had been suffering at the time.” Whatever its causes, Kennan characterized its effects as “the sweeping militarization of the American view of East-West relations...the acceptance of the likelihood, if not the inevitability, of a Soviet-American war; [and] the contemptuous neglect of the more favorable possibilities.” In his estimation, all of these assumptions were “either quite incorrect or highly improbable” but “like all false prophecies and all false images of conflict and enmity, tend to be self-fulfilling.”⁷⁹ As he observed: “A war regarded as inevitable or even probable, and thus much prepared for, has a very good chance of eventually being fought.”⁸⁰

Similar assumptions are widely echoed in American commentary and policy discussions about China today. As the U.S. policy documents cited above show, a menacing and militarized view of China has fueled the fear that Beijing's Communist leaders are determined to undermine American security, prosperity, values, and interests. But this exaggerates the nature and extent of China's strategic objectives, which are essentially focused on maximizing China's own security and prosperity relative to the United States. Beijing clearly is competing with Washington and is doing so broadly and relentlessly. The National Security Strategy correctly asserts that China "will compete across political, economic, and military arenas" using "technology and information...economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda" and "gain competitive advantages against the United States."⁸¹ But this is not, and need not be, an existential winner-take-all contest. Chinese leaders almost certainly recognize that making it so would be destabilizing and probably futile. Yet the American presumption of such an absolutist China goal—and "neglect of the more favorable possibilities," as Kennan warned with regard to the Soviet Union—could be a self-fulfilling prophecy by prompting U.S. strategies that reinforce *Chinese* fears of absolutist *American* goals. This risk would be exacerbated if—as Kennan also suspected in the Soviet case—U.S. perceptions of the Chinese threat today reflect in part the "frustrations and failures of American society."

In another claim of central relevance to China, Kennan attributed Washington's misunderstanding and mischaracterization of Soviet intentions to an American failure to understand the Russians' historical mindset. "I tried to show," he wrote, "that this Soviet threat looked less dramatic when viewed from a historical perspective than when that perspective was absent."⁸² The original X article was built on Kennan's analysis of Russian history as the primary source

of Moscow's world view and its approach to dealing with perceived external challenges. Similarly, the prevailing American understanding and characterization of Chinese strategic goals and behavior largely overlooks or dismisses the historical "sources of Chinese conduct"—especially what the Chinese call their "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers from the 1840s to the 1940s. For the U.S., lack of attention to this Chinese historical experience is a major source of bilateral distrust and misunderstanding. Too often Washington undervalues the crucial defensive element in China's historical mindset.

RATIONALIZING U.S. EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS IN EAST ASIA

In addition to highlighting the risks of misunderstanding China, Kennan would also caution against expecting too much from China. In particular, China is unlikely to replicate American values and modes of governance or diplomatic conduct. Kennan long believed that U.S. policy towards East Asia (as elsewhere) was overly moralistic. He lamented the "tendency to achieve our foreign policy objectives by inducing other governments to sign up to professions of high moral and legal principle," and he specifically complained that this "seems to have achieved the status of a basic diplomatic method" in East Asia.⁸³ Accordingly, Kennan would be skeptical of the current emphasis on Beijing's obligation to comply with Western "rules and norms" in its international behavior. In 1950, during a policy debate over whether Communist China should be admitted to the United Nations, Kennan criticized the "moral indignation about the Chinese Communists" that he saw infecting policy discussions. In another comparison with the Soviet Union, he warned that Washington was grappling with the same problem that had afflicted "we old Russia hands" 20 years earlier: "the fundamental ethical conflict between their ideals and ours." Kennan recommended that Washington not let this derail pragmatic diplomacy: "Let us recognize the legitimacy of differences of interest and philosophy" between countries "and

not pretend that they can be made to disappear behind some common philosophical concept.”⁸⁴ With regard to Russia, he said “there is no use in looking for...a capitalistic and liberal-democratic one, with institutions closely resembling those of our own republic.” Americans should “repress, and if possible...extinguish once and for all, our inveterate tendency to judge others by the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves.”⁸⁵ Kennan would have said the same about China today. U.S. policies aimed at producing regime change or at restructuring China’s economic system to make it less competitive or easier to manage are likely to have only incremental if any success.

In the late 1970s, Kennan recommended a pragmatic approach to China: “tread warily and not too fast, recognizing the great differences in the psychology of the two peoples as well as those that mark the ideals and purposes of the two governments.” This could be done “without neglecting, or failing to manifest, the great respect Americans have traditionally had for Chinese civilization and the sympathy they have felt for the vicissitudes of Chinese life in the modern age.” His bottom line was straightforward: “Let us collaborate where we can, agree to differ where we cannot, and see whether we cannot contrive to live reasonably peaceably together for the time being, despite our differences, not asking too much of each other—or too little.”⁸⁶ Although the strategic challenge from China is substantially greater than Kennan anticipated when he wrote this in 1977, the same guidance seems wholly appropriate today.

Beyond advocating a moderation of American expectations of China, Kennan would go further: recommending a reassessment and recalibration of overall American strategic goals in East Asia. The perennial U.S. policy objectives in the region are: preventing the emergence of an exclusive, hostile hegemon there that threatens U.S. access and vital interests; and sustaining the United States’ own primacy as security guarantor in the Western Pacific. The latter is generally viewed as the best way to avert a hegemonic challenge from China. Kennan probably would be ambivalent about both of these premises. Although China probably does seek to restore what it sees as its

rightful place as the preeminent power in East Asia, there is no compelling evidence that it seeks to establish a hostile, exclusive hegemony that excludes a U.S. role or presence there. On the contrary, Beijing almost certainly sees this as neither achievable nor necessary, and Chinese pursuit of it as likely to be counterproductive, risking China's own security and economic prosperity.

In addition, U.S. primacy is itself not permanently sustainable in East Asia. Kennan was always carefully attentive to American capabilities, emphasizing the need to define interests and objectives so they did not exceed the country's grasp. This applied especially to East Asia, and it still does today. Kennan wrote in 1948 that Washington—despite its enormous international power in the wake of World War II—was “greatly over-extended in our whole thinking about what we can accomplish, and should try to accomplish,” in East Asia: “We will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives.” He advised that “we must observe great restraint in our attitude toward the Far Eastern areas” because “the day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts.”⁸⁷

This thinking was only reinforced by the impact of the Korean War and later the Vietnam War, both of which confirmed the constraints on Washington's ability to secure its preferences and to dictate the course of events in East Asia. Today, given the shifts in the balance of power that have followed the Cold War, Washington again faces the need to “deal in straight power concepts” in the Western Pacific, and to adjust its policies and strategies there accordingly. This should include recognition that defining U.S. primacy in the region as a vital long-term interest would probably be counterproductive. It could fuel a “winner take all” contest that China itself would prefer to avoid.

PURSUING A NEW REGIONAL BALANCE

Because a shifting balance of power in East Asia is eclipsing the “Pax Americana,” Kennan probably would support those who ad-

vocate proactive efforts by the United States and China to pursue a new balance of power in the region and not to risk an escalatory arms race or zero-sum struggle for hegemony. Here too his thinking about U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War is instructive. Kennan judged that Washington's failure to engage Moscow in just such a process in Northeast Asia had contributed to the Korean War: "We Americans had little interest in negotiating with the Russians a political settlement of the problems of that region, and particularly one which would have put an end to our military presence in Japan." In Kennan's view, this was likely because "we had already made up our minds that Moscow was determined to launch a new world war" for which Washington would need Japan "as a military outpost." But it was also because "Russia was already identified as the epitome of evil; and it wouldn't look good, from the domestic political standpoint, to be negotiating and compromising with evil."⁸⁸ Similar sentiments are now fueling reluctance or resistance to any kind of mutual accommodation with China, even though this might be the only viable path to avoiding a new cold war.

Central to this approach would be avoiding a military response to what are essentially non-military problems. China's territorial and maritime sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas are obvious dangers in this respect. Kennan spent the second half of his life insisting that he never intended containment to be a military strategy, and his approach to East Asia always emphasized the need to minimize U.S. military commitments in the region. His early Cold War vision for American policy there generated what became the "defensive perimeter" concept: an offshore balancing approach that excluded American forces or military commitments on the mainland of East Asia. Kennan's version went further in advocating the demilitarization and neutralization of Japan, with the exception of U.S. bases on the island of Okinawa. The Korean War, however, negated the defensive perimeter concept by providing the rationale for U.S. military alliances with South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan and the beginning of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Kennan had advised against all of this.

Nonetheless, and possibly because of that history, Kennan's warnings about the militarization of foreign policy problems remain valid in East Asia today. Here another comparison between China and the Soviet Union is illustrative. When Kennan perceived a "sweeping militarization of the American view" of U.S.-Russia relations in the 1970s, he asked rhetorically what impact this was likely to have on Russian officials, who "have always been prone to exaggerated suspicions." Given that, he predicted that "Soviet leaders will see sinister motives behind these various phenomena—that they will conclude, in particular, that we have come to see war as inevitable and have put out of our minds all possibilities for the peaceful accommodation of our differences"; if so, "then they, too, will tend to put such possibilities out of theirs."⁸⁹ This later formed the basis for Kennan's criticism of the U.S. decision to pursue NATO expansion in the 1990s. He correctly anticipated that the inclusion of former Soviet bloc countries in NATO would fuel post-Soviet Russia's threat perceptions and the subsequent hardening of Moscow's approach to Washington.

Similar worries accrue to Chinese perceptions of the emphasis on military alliances and deployments in the post-Cold War U.S. approach to East Asia. Beijing perceives a range of U.S. policies in the region as military challenges to Chinese interests and security, whereas Washington perceives China itself as expansionist and routinely dismisses the notion that Chinese military behavior is a response to steps taken by the United States or other countries. Recognizing this as a classic security dilemma, Kennan would have advised that U.S. policymakers help mitigate it by focusing more on diplomatic and economic engagement than on military posturing in order to defuse regional tension.

Kennan, however, would not have sought to abandon the U.S. alliance network in East Asia. Despite his reservations about the alliances and the rationale for their establishment, which echoed his resistance to the original establishment of NATO, he would concede their utility as vehicles for shared interests and goals. At the same

time, he cautioned against taking allies for granted. Although he subscribed to and even pioneered the notion that Japan should be the centerpiece of U.S. policy in East Asia, he was always skeptical of the military aspect of the alliance. He correctly anticipated that the U.S. military presence in Japan would become a source of bilateral tension, predicting that Tokyo would eventually seek to make independent judgments about its foreign and security policies. In the 1970s and 1980s, he even encouraged the Japanese to do so. Tokyo to some extent is following that advice today, partly because it is uncertain about the long-term reliability of Washington's attention to Japan's interests.

More broadly, Kennan advised against expecting too much from U.S. allies and partners in East Asia. He anticipated that their nationalism would chafe under perceived U.S. pressure, and observed that their comfort with and confidence in U.S. engagement in the region could be fickle. Referring specifically to the U.S. competition with China for regional influence, Kennan observed in 1964 that "we are working here with and through the reactions of people who are not under our power, and on whose loyalty and obedience we can lay no ultimate claim." In its engagement in the region, Washington was attached "not just to the virtues of our associates...but also to their weaknesses: to their domestic political ambitions, their inefficiencies, their blind spots, their internal rivalries and divisions, their ulterior commitments." The United States had been hampered "at one time or another, by short-sightedness, by timidity, by indifference, by misunderstanding, by deliberately inculcated error, by dislike of foreigners or anti-western prejudices, and above all, by the congenital tendency of people to respond to the efforts of outsiders towards their protection by slackening their own."⁹⁰

All of these variables are amply visible in East Asia today, imposing limits on what the United States can presume to accomplish through its network of alliances and partnerships in the region. There are persistent and, in some cases, expanding fault-lines between U.S.

interests, objectives, and threat perceptions and those of U.S. allies in the region. These fault-lines have been exacerbated by growing uncertainties about the substance and sustainability of Washington's commitment to the region, given the constraints on the resources the United States can devote there. These trends have prompted many countries in the region, including U.S. allies, to recalibrate their foreign and security policies, reinforcing their reluctance to choose sides between the United States and China.

MAKING FOREIGN POLICY

Kennan's wisdom on some East Asian issues notwithstanding, there were flaws and inconsistencies in his approach to the region that would encumber his contributions to foreign policymaking today. Some of his ideas were short-sighted or unrealistic, such as his dismissal of China's strategic potential and his proposal for the neutralization of Japan. His ethnocentric and racist attitudes toward East Asian peoples' capacity for governance, although typical of his generation, marred his judgment and would be anathema in diplomacy today. Some of his ideas were not politically viable because he was often inattentive to the domestic political drivers of foreign policy. He believed that foreign policy should be insulated from the vicissitudes of public opinion. Kennan would no doubt be appalled by the influence of social media on foreign policy today, and by the role that the press and party politics play in constraining policy options or forcing decisions.

He would be particularly dismayed by the marginalization of expertise that often occurs in the politicized fog of the decision-making process. During the intense policy debates in the summer of 1950, when Washington was grappling to understand the motives and actions of the various players in the Korean War, he characterized the debate as "a labyrinth of ignorance and error and conjecture, in which truth is intermingled with fiction at a hundred points [and] in which unjustified assumptions have attained the validity of premis-

es." He complained that substantive expertise was being dismissed as too arcane to serve as the basis for crucial policy decisions, bemoaning the discomfort among policymakers with input from experts "to analyze the probabilities involved in your enemy's mental processes or calculate his weaknesses. It seems safer to give him the benefit of every doubt in matters of strength and to credit him indiscriminately with all aggressive designs, even when some of them are mutually contradictory." Kennan lamented that he and his fellow Russia experts were "inclined to wonder...whether the day had not passed when the Government had use for the qualities of persons like ourselves."⁹¹ The same problem is reflected in many of today's policy debates about China's strategic intentions and behavior, which often appear to be informed and driven by specious evidence, simplistic analysis, conspiracy theories, or ideological bias.

Another flaw in Kennan's approach to East Asia was his failure to reconcile his advocacy for strategic restraint with his belief that American credibility and prestige should not be compromised. He faced this dilemma on the Korean Peninsula, which he had dismissed as strategically unimportant but where he immediately supported U.S. intervention in the Korean War: he deemed the Communist advance an unacceptable setback for U.S. credibility in the region. Similarly, he had advised against U.S. involvement in Vietnam but did not advocate complete withdrawal until American prestige was irretrievably lost. Kennan was not alone in having no easy solution to this dilemma of credibility versus restraint, which continues to complicate U.S. foreign policy—particularly in East Asia, where Washington faces the challenge of adjusting to historical shifts in the balance of power.

Despite these flaws and inconsistencies, one element of Kennan's thinking merits close attention in the strategic environment the United States now confronts in East Asia. Kennan focused consistently on the *limits* on American power and influence and the need to take those limits into account when defining American strategic interests and objectives. His relatively narrow definition of U.S. interests and

his opposition to extensive foreign military commitments almost certainly reflected an understanding that the United States' position in East Asia after World War II was a historical anomaly that could not be eternal. Almost 75 years later, he would see validation of this in the tectonic shifts in the balance of power both within East Asia and globally that have been wrought by globalization, technological change and the rise and fall of great powers. Washington needs to acknowledge the impact of power shifts on its relative capabilities and to recalibrate its foreign policy wish list to bring it into alignment with what is reasonable and achievable.

Kennan would offer one final word of advice. He observed in the X article that the Soviet challenge was "in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations" and that American success in meeting that challenge would depend in large part on "the degree to which the United States can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country that knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problem 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."⁹² He reiterated this theme in the 1970s: "show me an America that has pulled itself together and is what it ought to be, then I will tell you how we are going to defend ourselves against the Russians."⁹³ As for the challenge of dealing with China today, these words are as applicable as they ever were.