

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, December 3, 2019.

 **South China Morning Post**

Opinion

## China could take a leaf out of US containment policy and keep its own hard communist ideology in check



- Diplomat George Kennan's containment policy outlived its usefulness to the US after the cold war but it might have some relevance for China today, especially in its dealings with Hong Kong

**Tom Plate**

Published: 3:00am, 3 Dec, 2019

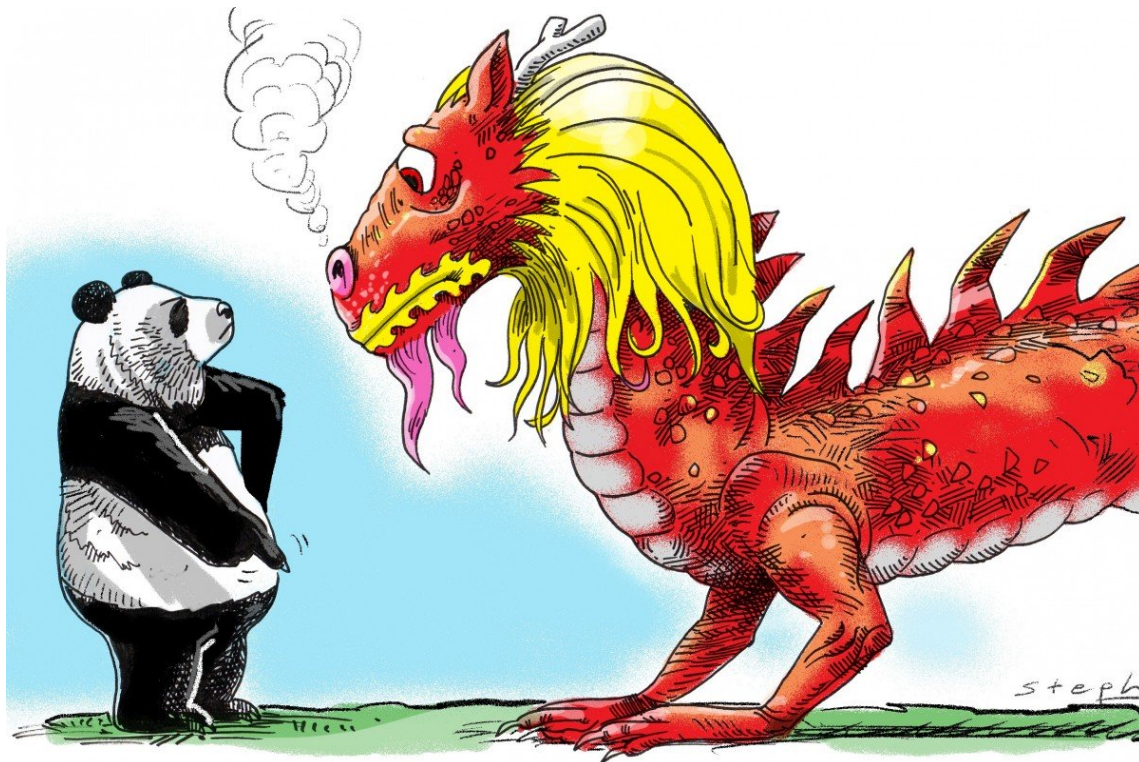


Illustration: Craig Stephens

American foreign policy rarely rises to the degree of coherence recommended by its policy intellectuals and thoughtful diplomats, but without their persistence, it would be bereft of any coherence at all.

When World War II ended, for example, the American establishment came to rally around the idea of containment as the antidote to Russian communism. This emerged particularly from the insights of diplomat George Kennan, later to morph into a Princeton University icon.

But in the late '80s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and with it the need for the cold war, Washington was left with scarcely anything ominous to contain, except perhaps its own bumptious ego. That, for sure, was one huge containment campaign that flopped.

When the great Kennan died at the age of 101 in 2005, he left us as a prophet *summa cum laude*. But rather than departing honourably along with him, his “containment” policy lingered on to fill in the blank about China.

It would have been so much better had it not: Kennan himself refused to recommend a simplistic policy of containment for China in a 21st century world in which he knew a formulaic response would not do.



Then US president George Bush (left) and his Soviet counterpart Mikhail Gorbachev attend a press conference on July 31, 1991 in Moscow concluding the two-day US-Soviet Summit dedicated to disarmament. Throughout the cold war, the US followed a policy of containment towards Russia, championed by diplomat George Kennan. Photo: AFP

In fact, by the mid-'90s, a different perspective was surfacing. Professor Joseph Nye of Harvard, who was lured into State Department service during the Clinton presidency, painted a public policy canvas in broad strokes that gave a sense of balance to the American commitment of about 100,000 troops each to Asia and Europe.

Nye wrote: “There are a number of reasons for East Asian prosperity ... But among the important and often neglected reasons for East Asia’s success are American alliances in the region and the continued presence of substantial US forces.”

Rather than advocating a recycled containment policy for China – which, in any case, could not possibly work – or some cranky isolationist retreat from Asia, which would work just fine for China, Nye proposed the middle ground of “deep engagement”. He noted that “most Americans still hope for a peaceful and beneficial future with China”, citing former US president Bill Clinton who said the US had “more to fear from a poor and weak China than from a rich and democratic China”.

Alas, decades later, the United States wound up with but 50 per cent of the China of its dreams: rich, yes, but, in Western eyes, unforgivably non-democratic.

Was Nye's pragmatism misconceived? No. The Clinton administration got its China policies more right than wrong. Faced with deep-rooted domestic and economic challenges, Beijing was more likely to wind up frustrating itself with home-front errors than anything the US might hope to impose.

Besides, trying to Kennanise US-China policy would only further fuel anti-Americanism on the mainland. The only question was whether there were policies that might help incentivise China's leaders to think positively about relations with the West – or whether our crudest ones would steel further its inclination to fight the West's on-and-off impulse to stifle it.

China's future course will be determined mainly by what the Chinese will do among themselves, for themselves and – last but not least – to themselves. But, understandably enough, Beijing's diplomacy, spooked by remembrances of pains inflicted or perceived, will always seek to deter coalitions of nations from ganging up against it.



US President Donald Trump (centre), Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (left) and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull speak to reporters during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Summit in Manila, Philippines, in November 2017. The US has tried to forge a coalition with Japan, Australia and India to counter China's rise in the Asia-Pacific. Photo: AP

Even so, I have chatted with more than one Chinese diplomat about their historical paranoia of encirclement who insist China's fear is totally singular. "The only one we fear is the US," one veteran diplomat told me. That fear surely weighs heavily on the Chinese President Xi Jinping's mind.

Paradoxically, though, that very fear may offer the US a historic opportunity to reset the bilateral relationship to both a lower temperature and a higher standard. That is evident from the unintended consequence of US President Donald Trump's ill-conceived and obnoxious tariff attack on China.

Its duration has given everyone adequate time to reflect on the global economic instability inherent in US-China political disequilibrium. This is now more than a matter of bad vibes or the inevitable occasional disagreement; when the negativity is structural, the impact on geopolitical order will be global.

The stakes here are epic. As Professor Nye put it: “Analysts who ignore the importance of ... political order are like people who forget the importance of the oxygen they breathe. Security is like oxygen – you tend not to notice it until you begin to lose it.”

A rejuvenated US-China relationship is needed. Beijing can stall and await a new president, or deal with the present one through a possible second term in as businesslike a manner as possible. Washington can yo-yo along, even praying for China’s collapse, or accept China as an equal. Either way, neither country is going to go away.

Illusions are not decisions: it was hard for Americans to quarrel with the sentiment of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, hurled by Congress at the president for his signature, which it got. But what does this accomplish – except to recharge Beijing’s reserves of resentment and offer Hong Kong’s dauntless demonstrators the poetic illusion of US intervention?

It won’t happen, of course, but to keep the world from further rubbernecking and hand-wringing over this otherwise marvellous city that’s now in crisis – perhaps even to make the radical protesters more sensible – Beijing needs to settle matters sensibly with Hong Kong.

To this end, Beijing would do better for itself if it had at hand a kind of mental containment policy to keep its own hard ideology from crossing the borders of common sense. Does the Communist Party have a Kennan?

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