

'THE KENNAN - KENNEDY - KISSINGER - KIRKPATRICK QUADRILLE: CONTAINMENT STRATEGY'S FLEXIBILITY AND FLUIDITY DURING THE COLD WAR'

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ABSTRACT

The doctrine of containment was omnipresent within the United States's grand strategy during the Cold War—acting as its kernel throughout the conflict's course. Despite its widespread acceptance by America's foreign policy community after George F. Kennan's 'Long Telegram' established its core principles in 1946, containment's strategic imperatives were constantly evolving and were characterised by both continuity and discontinuity. Unlike mainstream IR theories—which oversimplify grand strategies through rigid theoretical assumptions and disregard historical precedent—this essay views containment as a policy of flexibility that allowed the US to adapt to the evolving configurations of global power competition whenever necessary. However, the extremity of internal and external variables that defined the Cold War's dynamism caused American policymakers to either abandon or misinterpret containment's original tenets for the sake of pursuing a more aggressive interpretation, especially when considering the different schools of historiography on the subject. Only in the latter stages of the Cold War, when certain opportunities arose from the anarchic international order and the domestic base of the US itself, did containment strategy become reacquainted with its original proposals. Such proposals, first articulated by Kennan, were eventually re-adopted under the influence of strategists such as Jeane Kirkpatrick, a key Ronald Reagan foreign policy advisor and the first woman to serve as US ambassador to the United Nations. Given its ongoing strategic relevance, containment should therefore be interpreted primarily in light of the actual events that influenced its imperatives rather than through the rigid theoretical doctrines that continue to plague international relations today.

KEYWORDS: *Containment; United States; Grand Strategy; Imperative; George F. Kennan; Foreign Policy; NSC-68; Rapprochement; Communism; Soviet Union; Vietnam; Eurasia.*

Defining US containment strategy is problematic due to the fluid nature of this critical concept. The American doctrine of containment evolved according to the circumstances—either through a change in American leadership that dictated its strategy, or new challenges and events that provoked a revision of its causal imperatives. Due to the length of the Cold War, such fluctuations happened frequently. Containment strategy becomes even more intricate when taking into account its different interpretations. Some of them derived directly from the manner in which key policy and decision-makers such as George Kennan, John F. Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, and Jeane Kirkpatrick applied containment strategy for more than four decades in complex advance and retreat patterns combining both aggression and restraint moves at various levels of intensity. Other interpretations emerged indirectly from historians' hindsight reflections on containment's actual practice over an extended period. Explaining containment's strategic imperatives is thus far from a simple task and requires a close, yet succinct, analysis of how these imperatives changed at certain critical points of the Cold War as well as of the extent of such changes. This can be achieved by analysing the documentary evidence of key individuals's actions that decisively influenced the practice of containment strategy during this period.

A PRAGMATIC STRATEGY

Containment's fluid nature has been facilitated by its lack of a consistent core doctrine and a lack of a singular set of rules or principles. American containment strategy emerged as a result of US foreign policy adjustments towards an expansionist

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Japan. Prior to America's entry into the Second World War, US containment strategy "rested on four firm, apparently proven pillars" which consisted of avoiding diplomatic agreements that weakened China and favoured Japan; economic and military aid to the former; increasing US martial power and military presence in Asia; and "a multifaceted program of sanctions" to weaken the Japanese economy (Pash, 2010: 39). These were only abandoned when they proved "too successful" and forced the Japanese to retaliate at Pearl Harbour (Ibid.: 38). George F. Kennan's concept of containment gained public recognition with the publication of a revised version of his February 1946 'Long Telegram' sent from Moscow to Washington, DC whilst he was US Ambassador to the USSR, in the July 1947 issue of the leading Foreign Affairs magazine under the title "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", also known as the 'X Article'. In the article, Kennan was primarily diagnosing the historical and internal factors that influenced Soviet foreign policy rather than proposing an official American post-war containment doctrine. Pollard (1989: 211) argues that neither 'The Long Telegram' nor 'X Article' aimed to "prescribe greater economic or military aid to countries threatened by communist takeover" nor to "clarify the distinction between economic and military containment." While future documents such as NSC-68 would give more specific guidelines on how to define containment strategy and its aims, their deployment in conjunction with successive presidents' grand strategies continued the practice of purposeful ambiguity that defined its original post-war conception. As Gaddis (2005: viii) noted, "American leaders consistently perceived themselves as responding to rather than initiating challenges" that would come to periodically punctuate the Cold War status quo. This was a recurrent theme in several presidencies, such as Richard Nixon's (1969-1973) and Ronald Reagan's (1981-1989), both of whom did not apply their own doctrines' principles consistently (Kimball, 2006; Brands, 2014). Each president's specific strategic aims and the domestic and geopolitical circumstances they had to confront

during their mandates thus prevented the emergence and consolidation of a clear and coherent long-term containment doctrine. This made containment's prescriptions easily alterable, especially when comparing such variations to Kennan's own ideas on the matter.

KENNAN'S CONCEPTION OF CONTAINMENT

Whilst Pollard's analysis suggests that Kennan's writings gave little specific advice as to how to conduct containment in practice, the American diplomat's direct experience as US Ambassador in Moscow shaped the foundations of the emerging Cold War containment strategy (Lascurettes, 2020: 184). Other American officials in Russia also believed, like Kennan, that American foreign policy towards the Soviet Union should be one of caution, for "it was officials with direct experience of service in the Soviet Union" that encouraged a retreat from Roosevelt's policy of "open-handedness" towards the Soviets (Gaddis, 2005: 14). Construing the USSR as "a rival, not a partner," Kennan (1947: 580, 572) described Soviet legitimacy as being sustained through the imagination of external threats, such as "the aims of the capitalist world [being] antagonistic to the Soviet régime, and therefore to the interests of the peoples it controls." His was an understanding of the USSR based on direct experience of Soviet foreign policies and the degree to which these posed a direct threat to American national security. Kennan thus stimulated the Truman administration to fundamentally rethink its grand strategy towards the Soviet Union.

Some members of Truman's inner foreign policy circle—such as Navy Secretary James Forrestal—chose to focus more on the militant messages of Kennan's original telegram than on the descriptive analysis the latter gave of Soviet goals and how to counteract them. The more cautious spirit of Kennan's argument was nonetheless put into practice by the Truman Administration (Pollard, 1989).

Although Kennan (1967: 359) later criticised Truman for his “failure to distinguish between various geographic areas” in his application of containment strategy principles, he had the opportunity to directly influence the elaboration of American containment strategy from the very beginning, beyond merely the publication of his ‘Long Telegram’, when he became Director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff in January 1947. According to Gaddis (2005: 54-55), Kennan “did more than anyone else in the administration to articulate containment as a strategy” by making it “a particularist rather than a universalist conception of American security interests.” Rather than basing American defence commitments on ‘perimeters’ deployed on fixed lines of largely peripheral interests, Kennan’s version of containment focused on ‘strongpoints’ that represented vital interests of industrial-economic importance, thus emphasising economic factors rather than solely military objectives as an effective means of opposing Soviet expansionism (Lascurettes, 2020: 194).

Kennan’s conceptualisation of containment coincided with President Truman’s own grand strategy vision in two main aspects. Firstly, it enabled the US to replace on the international scene those European nations, like the United Kingdom, that were “reducing or liquidating its commitments in several parts of the world,” specifically in Greece and Turkey, so as to prevent the “[c]onfusion and disorder [that] might well spread throughout the entire Middle East” if these critical countries fell under Soviet influence (Our Documents, 2020). Secondly, it matched the demands of both the US administrative and congressional branches of government to reduce the possibility of a Soviet threat whilst simultaneously avoiding overstressing America’s foreign policy objectives and exceeding the limited capabilities at its disposal to achieve them (Gaddis, 2005). This was necessary when short-range US atomic bombers could not reach the Soviet Union due to Truman’s claim that no atomic bombs were stationed in any American overseas bases, in addition to cuts in military personnel (Pollard, 1989).

Truman was thus adhering to Kennan’s strongpoint theory, realising that he could maintain a political consensus in the US by balancing the interests animating both his Administration and Congress with the balance of power emerging between the US and the Soviet Union. The selective and pragmatic means of containment through aid programmes given to individual ‘vital’ countries in accordance with the Marshall Plan was a cost-efficient contrast to the broader, more expansive and expensive military commitments practiced by the Soviet Union. This strategic use of American strengths against Soviet weaknesses advocated by Kennan was the original impulse of containment strategy as expressed by the Truman Doctrine, despite the fact that it did not put into practice all Kennan’s policy recommendations. Whilst orthodox historians are right that American strategy was originally formed as a response to Soviet actions affecting the European balance of power, the Truman Doctrine clearly also considered the repercussions this would have globally, and particularly in the Middle East—a region where President Truman had previously made “no concessions of significance to the Soviet Union” in response to the Iranian crisis in 1946 (Gaddis, 2000: 316).

NSC-68 AND MCCARTHYISM: OVERSTRETCHING CONTAINMENT

By the 1950s, the imperatives driving the Truman Doctrine of containment had vastly expanded due to a concentration of new geopolitical circumstances and resulting changes in US policy-making. The Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons and China’s fall under the control of Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communist Party in 1949 had ended both America’s monopoly of the atomic bomb and its strategic advantage of balancing globally against only one major communist power. While China itself would only develop its first nuclear weapon in 1964 and would not expand its nuclear capabilities at the same rate as the US or the Soviet Union, American policymakers interpreted it as an immediate threat. The rise of a communist ‘Empire of the Middle’

posed a serious strategic challenge to classic containment theory both during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 and thereafter, in the ensuing Taiwan Straits Crises that unfolded throughout the 1950s. At the same time, these events may have been exacerbated by successive US Administrations' application of the containment strategy to the entire Eurasian landmass, as prescribed in the seminal NSC-68 policy paper first presented by the Departments of State and Defence to President Truman in April 1950. This document officially formulated a defensive perimeter strategy that advocated for the development of both military and economic strength, as it was "not an adequate objective merely to seek to check the Kremlin design," as Kennan's original proposal had sought to do initially (FAS, 2020). NSC-68 also put forward that recent geopolitical developments had made the risk of war with the Soviets "sufficient to warrant, in common prudence, timely and adequate preparation by the United States" (*Ibid.*).

This position represents a stark contrast to Kennan's original dismissal of the possibility of direct conflict between American and Soviet forces, based on his belief that the "possibility of [US] intervention against USSR today" was "sheerest nonsense" (Truman Library, 2020). Whilst revisionists such as Costigliola (2012: 286) opine that the public knowledge of Kennan's "emotional, exaggerated warnings" of the Soviet threat had made future cooperation between the two nations more difficult, Pollard (1989: 211) believes Kennan "had not intended to imply that negotiations with the Soviets were futile." Kennan himself explicitly mentioned that the "Soviet Government may eventually again do lip service" in resuming international trade and cooperation as it did in the 1930s (Truman Library, 2020). Nevertheless, the rhetoric used by Kennan and his more hawkish successors had—in the words of Costigliola (2012: 286)—"opened the way for far-right anticommunists" who criticised Truman's own practice of containment as being in effect a policy of appeasement towards the Soviet Union.

Kennan (1967: 500, 359) by then regarded US foreign policy as "a labyrinth of ignorance" and was opposed to containment being pursued outside the four core Western industrial regions of the US, UK, Rhineland Germany, and Japan that were "the sinews of modern military strength," none of which were located in Asia except for the notable, but unique, exception of Japan. However, NSC-68's new interpretation of containment in response to emerging new global challenges had encouraged the US to adopt a more symmetrical strategic imperative, contrary to the asymmetrical one advocated by Kennan. This is especially clear with the proclamation of President Dwight Eisenhower's 'New Look' policy, which was determined primarily by the power structure of Eisenhower's policy circle that made "hard-nosed assessments of strategic situations" created by the Soviet Union and China (Gaddis, 2005; Choi, 2012: 120).

Anti-communist extremism emerging in the US in the 1950s caused containment's imperatives to be heavily influenced by and, in turn, shaped American domestic politics. Containment thus strayed further away from its original precepts as outlined by Kennan in 1947. Republican Senator Eugene McCarthy's political witch-hunts of the early 1950s, triggered in part by the Soviet Union's acquisition of nuclear capabilities thanks in large measure to the US-based Atomic Spy Ring, significantly affected the United States' capacity to effectively contain the Soviet Union's global ambitions. The extensive publicity garnered by McCarthy's 'trials' proved "invaluable in throwing the Truman administration off balance" (Schrecker, 1994: 67). At the same time, the ensuing 'Red Scare' in the United States represented a major deviation from Kennan's emphasis on maintaining American internal unity. In effect, Kennan warned that American disunity would have "an exhilarating effect on the whole Communist movement" and would thus serve Soviet interests (Kennan, 1947: 581). McCarthyism moved even further away from Kennan's advice when it prosecuted those with the mildest of communist tendencies within sections of American society,

including members of the State Department and the US military – ironically mimicking and legitimizing the Soviets' own practices of persecuting the “false friends of the people, namely moderate-socialist or social-democratic leaders [...] more dangerous than out-and-out reactionaries” (Truman Library, 2020). Even though McCarthy finally lost all credibility as a result of these authoritarian practices, Schrecker (1994: 1) argues that the Wisconsin senator's efforts nonetheless allowed the fight against communism to have “a much longer life,” deep into the 1960s—as demonstrated, for example, by Junius Scales' imprisonment in 1961. McCarthyism thus created long-term consequences for containment's ideological imperatives. As argued by revisionist historians, the US's miscalculations of Soviet and communist threats exacerbated by McCarthy's campaigns would continue into the 1960s, when it became even less like the pragmatic aims postulated by Kennan.

'FLEXIBLE APPROACH' AND THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF STRATEGY

John F. Kennedy's presidency (1961-1963) and its reforms would briefly clarify containment strategy's imperatives. Kennedy realised that the most critical decisions made amidst the excessive bureaucracy of Eisenhower's presidency were taken independently by the President and a few key advisers in “the privacy of the Oval Office” (Gaddis, 2005: 198). This was a sharp contrast with earlier practice when Kennan, for example, was “only one of several key advisers on international affairs during the Truman administration” (Gaddis, 2005: 53). Kennedy's new approach to the practice of containment allowed for “an unalloyed American triumph” in the Cuban Missile Crisis (Lebow and Stein 1994: 110), even if the administration “bore a substantial share of the responsibility for [its] onset” (Stern, 2011: 155). It nevertheless showed that crises such as this had forced containment strategy to incorporate non-nuclear strategies, flexible responses, and avenues of cooperation with the Soviets. This new approach led eventually to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Treaty negotiated between 1965 and 1968 under the administration of Kennedy's successor in the White House, Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), as well as to subsequent nuclear limitation treaties. It thus discouraged the use of atomic diplomacy as a viable strategy of containment in future years. Kennan, however, criticised Kennedy's separate handling of the Berlin Crisis, stating that “[w]e have overplayed our show of strength” instead of showing “a clearer demonstration of our willingness to negotiate” (National Archives, 2011). Johnson would later make a similar mistake in Vietnam by overstressing the US's capacity to conduct conventional warfare in a less familiar part of the world.

The reasons for Johnson's intervention in Vietnam were similar to Truman's previous concerns for Turkey and the Middle East. Johnson felt that if Vietnam fell to communism, the rest of Southeast Asia would as well. At the same time, Johnson was continuing Kennedy's regional conflict management in the area, at a time when containment strategy was becoming increasingly influenced by American public opinion. As Dallek (1998: 238) points out, that at first Johnson “had no intention of escalating the conflict ‘just because the public liked what happened last week,’” whilst wanting “maximum results with minimum danger.” However, further escalation did occur, and was duly criticised by Kennan for violating “the critical link between military action and political ends” (Hixson, 1988: 153). Johnson's ad hoc Vietnam policy became a clear example of the friction between containment's imperatives and the domestic interests of a changing American civil society.

This friction, exacerbated by concerns for the anti-war movement raising public awareness and the American electorate's disillusionment with Johnson's ‘Great Society’, was evident in US government documents during both the escalation and de-escalation phases of the Vietnam War. Assistant Secretary of Defence John McNaughton's 1965

memo to Defence Secretary Robert McNamara concluded that no less than 70% of American objectives in Vietnam aimed to “avoid a humiliating US defeat” and lasting damage to its reputation, with only 20% seeking to contain Chinese influence in South Vietnam (Gravel, 1971: 695). This demonstrated that US foreign policy officials were guided by political imperatives aiming primarily to contain the American public’s demand for government accountability for its foreign policy decisions. These imperatives took precedence to any specific strategic goals designed to contain both the expansion of Soviet influence in Asia and China’s perceived emergence as a separate and larger threat in Vietnam. The CIA (2020) also concluded this after the 1968 Tet Offensive, stating that the rest of the campaign will “decline somewhat in the military sphere, and increase considerably in the political sphere.” Regardless of whether or not the Vietnam War would have had a more successful outcome for the US if its military had early on conducted an effective counterinsurgency strategy, American civilian officials and the general public—to quote Caverley (2009/2010: 155)—had “played an essential role in the selection of a [US] capital-intensive strategy.” This strategy appealed to the American electorate, as “the costs of fighting an insurgency with firepower are relatively low for the median voter compared to a more effective but labor-intensive COIN [counterinsurgency] approach” (Caverley, 2009/2010: 120). Despite its high economic cost, it appealed to Johnson as the most electable strategy that continued the US’s presence in Vietnam. America’s domestic politics thus increasingly influenced containment’s strategic imperatives, much like McCarthyism had shaped its ideological foundations a decade earlier.

Even if McAllister (2010/2011) disagrees with Caverley’s view, President Johnson’s declining opinion poll ratings during the course of the Vietnam War—as well as his attempts to “discredit the public polls” and “cultivate the pollsters” to increase his ratings (Altschuler, 1986: 294)—showed

that containment strategy’s imperatives had become oversensitive to public opinion accountability. Johnson himself admitted that there was a “division in the American house now” when announcing the limiting of the war in 1968 (LBJ Presidential Library 2020). The costly capital-intensive strategy used—which had increased US military spending by nearly \$30 billion between 1965 and 1968 (MacroTrends, 2020)—was a far cry from Kennan’s preference for restrained and peaceful industrial-economic means to pursue containment. It was also a catalyst for conceiving a new approach under the Nixon administration.

‘CONTAINMENT THROUGH DIPLOMACY, APPEAL, AND OPPORTUNITY

The challenge to withdraw from Vietnam “as an expression of policy and not as a collapse” provided two fundamental changes to containment’s strategic imperatives under President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor, then Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger (1979: 298). The impact public opinion had on their early Vietnam policy significantly diminished in later years largely thanks to Kissinger’s deft deployment of triangular, shuttle, and backchannel diplomacy. By using these methods, the Nixon Administration reduced its public accountability, US military commitments, and the overburdening costs that were concomitant to such policies. By pursuing this new approach to containment strategy, Nixon and Kissinger also changed containment’s imperatives to ones that limited both Soviet and Chinese influence by playing the two nations “off of each other to achieve progress in Vietnam” (Moss, 2017: 199).

This approach allowed the United States to both maintain a much-needed foreign policy consensus within the American public while also preserving an active containment strategy now pursued through proxy agents. At the same time, the United States’ rapprochement towards China, thus taking advantage of the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s,

managed to reduce onerous US commitments to contain the Soviet Union by buck-passing some responsibility to China through offshore balancing. This was possible even while pursuing a policy of détente with Moscow itself. Just like “Vietnamization” simultaneously attempting an American withdrawal and a buttressing of South Vietnam’s defences (Moss, 2017: 199), this approach was founded on a two-pronged strategy that accommodated the US with the Soviet Union and China separately, whilst placing the former communist allies against one another. The opportunity for this was ideal due to the CIA concluding in 1971 that China “intends to attain the status of a major nuclear power” to balance against its external rivals, including the Soviet Union. However, some of Nixon’s initial actions in Vietnam “were not dramatically different” from those of Johnson’s (Strong, 2015: 88). Nixon’s more significant decisions were also hindered by the 1972 Vietnamese Spring Offensive exposing “the inherent limits and weaknesses of triangular diplomacy” (Hanhimäki, 2004: 202). Nevertheless, the realpolitik imperatives and methods of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s deployment of containment strategy returned it to one of pragmatism.

Kissinger’s covert methods would go on to indirectly influence President Ronald Reagan’s containment strategy by proxy in the Soviet-Afghan War and the Iran-Contra Affair. Ironically, Reagan was a vocal critic of Kissinger’s realpolitik-based containment strategy “as an abdication of America’s moral heritage” and an ardent proponent of returning containment’s strategic imperative to its overt ideological ethos of the 1950s (Brands, 2014: 102). This approach allowed President Reagan to maintain public confidence in his foreign policies in contrast to Richard Nixon, who had vainly sought to avoid public accountability altogether. Reagan’s ‘Evil Empire’ speech, whose content and tone was strongly influenced by his main foreign policy advisor, Jeane Kirkpatrick, in which he equated Marxist-Leninism to “the second-oldest faith, first proclaimed in the Garden of Eden with the words of temptation”

(Voices of Democracy, 2020), gave him support amongst his core evangelical voters for his foreign policies whilst establishing a moral imperative for them, despite the dubious methods employed to achieve these aims. As an implicit expression of his containment doctrine, Reagan’s speech restored American “courage and self-confidence to cling to our own methods and conceptions of human society” that Kennan saw as one of containment’s central goals (Truman Library, 2020) and to advocate them with unflinching conviction in international institutions such as the United Nations, especially after Reagan appointed Kirkpatrick as the first female US Ambassador to the World Body in February 1981. Reagan’s own blend of covert and overt elements of containment also continued to influence post-Cold War strategies regardless of whether its practitioners were fully aware of this or not. President George W. Bush’s (2001-2009) overt “pre-emption” in the Iraq War, for example, “did not replace containment” but “led back” to it (Gaddis, 2005: 383-384).

CONTAINMENT'S CONTINUING RELEVANCE FOR CURRENT US GRAND STRATEGY

US containment strategy’s imperatives thus experienced periods of rapid change based on the equally evolving global circumstances that enframed its practice since 1947. It was first a pragmatic and cautious means of restricting a Soviet Union that needed a means to legitimise its internal authority and its gains from World War II, albeit with the US responding realistically within its actual capabilities. However, after the Soviets had acquired the atomic bomb in a rapidly evolving geopolitical ecosystem, American imperatives became more aggressive, more globalist and were revised until limited by the pressures of domestic public restraint—only returning to a stage of ideological fervour once the Soviet Union approached its demise. The changes to containment’s imperatives that were engineered over time by key political actors such as

Kennedy, Kissinger, and Kirkpatrick have been judged as miscalculations by some schools of historiography when compared to Kennan's original focus on strongpoints. However, the continuous emergence of global strategic challenges meant that an official American containment doctrine was never fully elaborated, therefore making such changes inevitable. This is why the U.S.'s containment strategy, like Leffler's (1999: 502) description of the Cold War, "will defy any single master narrative." The same can be said for US grand strategy due to its symbiotic relationship with containment strategy, thus forcing one to change in correlation with the other's developments in objectives or methods. Nevertheless, US grand strategy's own evolving imperatives continued the necessity to use containment due to its flexibility—even beyond the Cold War towards other threats emerging at the cusp of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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