

Washington and Beijing Need Straight Talk on Containment

by Joseph A. Bosco

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In public remarks during his Washington visit, neither Vice President Xi Jinping nor his US interlocutors directly addressed the diplomatic malady that afflicts both governments — call it acute containment confusion syndrome.

Kurt Campbell, assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, who has astutely managed the administration's focus on the Asia-Pacific region (including the dramatic opening to Burma), told a Washington audience last week that he and his colleagues would be at pains to convince Xi that America's new strategic "pivot" in no way seeks to inhibit China's regional and global rise. At the CSIS conference, speaker after speaker, in and out of government, waxed almost indignant at the very notion of China containment, saying we couldn't do it even if we wanted to, and we most certainly do not want to.

President Obama has gone even further, asserting that the United States has no need to pursue a counter-China strategy. "[T]he notion that we fear China is mistaken," he proclaimed in Canberra as he announced a new long-term rotation of US forces to Australia. Other administration officials have repeated that profession of equanimity regarding Chinese intentions.

China's leaders remain unconvinced by US assurances. They see a series of recent actions and statements in the region as a transparent yet devious US strategy not only to contain an expanding China but to encircle it and stifle its rise. Washington denials of such intent simply confirm their perception of American duplicity — and hostility.

Despite 40 years of US engagement and generous transfer of Western wealth, knowledge, and technology to China, some Americans say Chinese paranoia is still justified. They cite historical wrongs committed by the West during China's "century of humiliation." A contrary view is that Beijing skillfully deploys a calculated self-aggravation tactic to put Washington on the psychological defensive and exact concessions. The sense of Western containment of China, always deep in the national psyche, boils to the surface, stirred by official rhetoric, whenever others react against Chinese behavior seen as violating international norms.

That characterized the first 2.5 decades after Mao Zedong's Communists came to power — when China joined North Korea's aggression against South Korea, or when Beijing fomented "wars of national liberation" around the world, including opposing the United States in another conflict, this time in Vietnam.

Despite Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the 1980s, the 1989 Tiananmen massacre shocked many in the West into believing that a government that would commit such an atrocity against its own people could threaten its neighbors.

In the mid-1990s, China's missile firings and threatening rhetoric toward Taiwan also stirred US concerns. In 2001, the EP-3 incident when a Chinese fighter jet collided with a slow-moving US reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace again revealed Beijing's aggressive refusal to abide by established legal norms.

China's default response to Western action in each case was to cry containment and/or violation of Chinese sovereignty. In recent years, the pattern has reemerged. As China's military capabilities, particularly its naval assets, have expanded dramatically, its actions, rhetoric, and territorial claims in the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, and the South China Sea, have become more assertive. Southeast Asian countries call the conduct aggressive and welcome the US presence.

Some US scholars argue that a reverse dynamic is at work, that China's military has grown, normally and naturally, simply to protect its widening economic interests. But it is difficult to accept that attack submarines and anti-ship ballistic missiles are the kinds of weapons systems needed to protect Chinese commercial shipping from ragtag pirates.

In fact, these area-denial and anti-access weapons target precisely the US carrier battle groups that, ever since the end of World War II, have kept the international sea lanes open for all commerce, including China's. Yet Beijing denies that it seeks to push the US out of Asia — generating as much skepticism in Washington as US disavowal of a containment strategy renders in China.

Henry Kissinger has written: "[W]ere any nation determined to achieve dominance, would it not be offering assurances of peaceful intent?" Deng Xiaoping, after all, advised Chinese leaders to "hide your capabilities, bide your time."

President Obama gave China another message during his Asia trip: "It's important for them to play by the rules of the road." As Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick said in 2005, China must be a "responsible stakeholder" in the system that greatly benefits it.

Kissinger says China resents the insinuation that it has been less than responsible or that it has violated international norms — but he also says it feels no obligation toward an international system “it had no part in creating.”

Hopefully, administration officials made clear to Xi in private meetings that a China that respects the international system need not fear being held back by it — and, conversely, China’s own policies and actions will determine whether an unsuccessful engagement strategy must yield to one of actual containment.

US officials should state US policy in an honest and straightforward way: We have no desire to “contain” the aspirations of the talented and hardworking Chinese people for a prosperous and successful future. On the contrary, we will continue to support the economic and political freedoms that will enable them to achieve their full potential.

But, consistent with our history of resisting aggression and preserving the freedom of the seas and the airspace for all nations, we will resist the use of force or coercion by any power to achieve its ends or interfere with the rights of other nations or peoples. That kind of constructive containment proved its value by preventing major superpower conflict in the Cold War and it will serve equally effectively the cause of peace in the 21st century.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

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