



WHAT'S IN A WORD? CALLING IT "CONTAINMENT" MAKES A HUGE DIFFERENCE

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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Any discussion of US-China relations will, without fail, include Chinese denunciations of America's mistaken efforts to wage "a new Cold War" against China to check its rise and contain the spread of its influence. The US reply that heightened competition is not containment and attempts to show differences between the two policies are dismissed as empty rhetoric or outright deceptions.

It's a frustrating conversation because the US policy *is* to compete with China, not to contain it, and there *is* a real and important distinction between those two approaches. The problem is that when I began to explore what a real containment strategy would look like—thinking, "that'll show 'em!"—it was quickly clear that it's easy to confuse the two. Even rollback, an aggressive Cold War policy that sought to reverse Soviet influence, can be espied in elements of Western policy toward China.

But it's critically important to differentiate between clear-eyed competition and blunt-force containment. Competition holds out hope for cooperation and a constructive relationship; containment does not. That hope could make all the difference.

When China looks at the United States, it sees a country increasingly subject to the growing influence

of hostile forces. Following the Biden-Xi summit last month, *Xinhua* [noted](#) the Biden administration's vow "that it does not intend to have a new Cold War with China." But that grudging concession followed a long complaint about those in Washington who are "still latching onto looking at the world through a zero-sum lens and creating 'imaginary enemies.'" Those "die-hard zero-summers" "resurrect Cold War metaphors" and reflect "Washington's deeply ingrained Cold War paranoia." This "obsolete thinking and entrenched ideological bigotry" is "exactly the way in which the United States once reacted to the Soviet Union's achievements in the Cold War years."

The commentary then provided a list of US actions that it says confirm the United States' hostility to China's rise. They include formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue "to counter China." Conducting Freedom of Navigation operations and regional war games "to flex its muscles." Playing the Taiwan card—selling weapons, sending warships through the Taiwan Strait, and strengthening ties—"to disrupt China's drive for national reunification and development."

China's ambassador to the United States Qin Gang added more items to the indictment in recent [remarks](#) to the Brookings Institution's Board of Governors. He denounced plans "to host a Leaders' Summit for Democracy to throw ideological labels on others, attack those different from them, and refuse to respect and recognize other countries' development paths." He rejected attempts to "abuse and overstretch the concept of national security, set up the so-called 'Clean Network' and 'democratic technology alliance,' and suppress foreign companies without any justifiable grounds." And he dismissed US efforts to "politicize" the COVID-19 outbreak, contrasting the response to the pandemic—arguing over its origins—with the joint effort by the two countries to halt the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Africa.

It's easy to lengthen the list of charges: establishing the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership; strengthening US alliances around the region; the campaign to deny Huawei markets around the world; promoting diplomatic campaigns to secure international condemnation of Chinese actions in

Hong Kong and Xinjiang; and encouraging a boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics that China will host.

Each of those US actions makes sense to me, either as a reaction to Chinese behaviors that threaten US interests or those of its neighbors. From my perspective (and that of many others), US responses are defensive and designed to protect the status quo.

But as Qin countered in his remarks, “what are the rules? Who made these rules? Who are the traffic police?” Beijing looks to the United Nations for authorization for such actions and it has been silent. (A Chinese veto at the Security Council—actual or potential—could have something to do with that.) In that vacuum, US action looks capricious and unilateral.

What is troubling is my effort to contemplate a real containment strategy produced something that looked awfully similar to existing policy. It included the strengthening of security relationships throughout the region, with particular attention to China’s neighbors. The United States would engage in frequent exercises and shows of force to keep China off balance and force it to direct resources to the military. It featured diplomatic campaigns to spotlight Chinese transgressions and vigorous efforts to isolate the country. On the economic front, countries are discouraged from accepting Chinese aid, provided alternatives to those funds, and compelled to deny Chinese companies, its new technology competitors in particular, access to their markets. US companies are also discouraged from investing in or doing business with Chinese counterparts. All were designed to halt the spread of Chinese influence and isolate the country within the international order—to contain it.

The biggest difference would be this strategy’s efforts to undermine stability within China. These initiatives would identify sources of tension and friction in Chinese society and actively work to widen and magnify them. This would be the most aggressive expression of containment and is quite dangerous since it’s hard to mistake it for anything other than what it is: an attempt to destabilize the Chinese Communist Party and promote regime change.

My attempt to differentiate between competition and containment failed. That is frustrating because I genuinely believe—as do virtually all US policymakers and analysts—that US policy is designed to compete, not contain. Even hardline critics of US policy accept that conclusion since they complain that the United States isn’t doing enough to challenge China.

Does it matter? Is it significant that the United States is containing China but doesn’t use that word to describe its policy?

Absolutely. Containment asserts that the Chinese government is fundamentally illegitimate and cannot be given space in the international system. Competition, by contrast, bounds that enmity. By insisting that the United States “will cooperate when it can, compete when it should and confront when it must,” opportunities to work with the world’s second-largest economy and a formidable power are not dismissed out of hand. (The United States occasionally cooperated with the Soviet Union during the Cold War across a narrow range of issues, all directly related to security. There are more issues with which the West can work with China because of entrenched interconnections that never existed in Western-Soviet relations.)

Containment draws sharper, thicker lines between China and the West. It legitimates a wider range of actions, including offensive ones. Those then justify China’s pursuit of its own narrowly framed interests and validates responses that the West has already dismissed and condemned. It reinforces a downward spiral in relations. And since the goal is to contain China, there is little reward for Beijing to moderate its behavior—cooperation is no longer on the table.

Most significantly, containment and its dismissal of cooperation threatens to alienate US allies and partners. Those governments are concerned by Chinese behavior but they are not all in on the hard line. The European Union strategy toward China echoes the current tripartite US approach [identifying](#) China as “simultaneously (in different policy areas) a cooperation partner, a negotiation partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival.” Japan

aligns closely with the United States but it too [worries](#) about closing the door on relations with China. A shift from competition to containment could fracture the broader coalition of forces that is essential if there is to be any hope of changing the Chinese government's behavior.

It isn't clear if China cares one way or another. In one moment, Chinese interlocutors call for changes in US declaratory policy—such as accepting “mutual vulnerability” or adopting a no-first use policy. In the next, they dismiss US rhetoric as empty talk, highlighting gaps in words and its actions. Ironically, in the next breath, they ask—in some cases demand—that those countries accept its own assertions of benign intent, and ignore all material changes in Chinese capabilities, as well as any steps that it has taken that undercut its professions of goodwill and desire for peaceful coexistence.

The Chinese are right about one thing: trust is in short supply. While there is blame enough to go around, the failure to recognize their part in that downward spiral guarantees continued deterioration.

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