



## CHINA'S "CONTAINMENT" POLICY AGAINST AMERICA

BY DENNY ROY

*Denny Roy ([RoyD@EastWestCenter.org](mailto:RoyD@EastWestCenter.org)) is a senior fellow at the East-West Center, Honolulu. He specializes in strategic and international security issues in the Asia-Pacific region.*

Chinese officials and government media constantly [decry](#) what they [call](#) the US "containment" policy against China. They allege that Washington's [intention](#) is to [prevent](#) China from becoming relatively stronger or more globally influential, lest Beijing impede the pursuit of the [US agenda](#) in international affairs.

Calling a policy "containment" when it tolerates China having an annual bilateral trade surplus of \$350 billion is questionable, to say the least. More importantly, such Chinese propaganda obscures the fact that the PRC also tries to limit America's influence. When it comes to containment, China gives as good as it says it gets.

The PRC tries to contain the United States in several ways.

First, Beijing has sought to maintain an anti-US coalition, even if there are few takers. The main basis for Sino-Russian cooperation is a common interest in blocking and, where feasible, rolling back US strategic influence. As an example, China's diplomatic position on the war in Ukraine prioritizes containment of America. Beijing [blames](#) the war on Washington, accepting the reputational cost of refusing to condemn Russia and blowing off China's previous [profession](#) of support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. The Chinese see [North Korea](#), as well, as a [partner](#) in countering the United States.

North Korea often [repeats](#) PRC and Russian anti-US propaganda. Kim Jong Un [reportedly](#) told Xi Jinping earlier this year that the DPRK and China "are strengthening strategic cooperation and unity to destroy the undisguised hostile policy and military threat of the United States."

Second, Beijing pressures third party governments, particularly US friends and allies, to not support Washington's agenda. Xi and other Chinese officials have repeatedly [implored](#) Europe to "to pursue an independent policy towards China," meaning independent of the United States. In March, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi metaphorically [warned](#) Japan against military cooperation with the United States, saying Tokyo "should not pull someone's chestnuts out of the fire." In May, Wang [told](#) his Japanese counterpart that "people [are] on alert" because of "the view that Japan and the United States were joining hands to confront China."

When Canada detained Huawei executive Meng Wangzhou at Washington's request, the Chinese government punished Ottawa by detaining two Canadians in China as political hostages. Even after Canada freed Meng, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs [re-emphasized](#) the broader message: "Canada should draw lessons and act according to its own interests"—i.e., not America's interests.

One form of Chinese pressure is attempting shame US partners as exploited pawns. PRC officials and government media have recently called [Australia](#), [Canada](#), and [Lithuania](#) US "running dogs." In October 2021, the French representative at a UN meeting read a statement signed by 43 countries condemning China's persecution of Chinese Uyghurs. The PRC ambassador to the United Nations [responded](#), "To France and other followers of the US: what you are doing is submitting your independence and autonomy, and serving as the henchmen of the US...[Y]ou are giving up your own dignity, and will win no respect from others."

Another PRC method is threats. The Chinese government warned the [United Kingdom](#) and [Sweden](#) that if they heeded US pressure

to exclude Chinese IT infrastructure builder Huawei, these countries would stop getting Chinese investment. Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party-owned *Global Times* [said](#) that “Australia will have to pay an economic price if the South Pacific nation, blinded by lust to act as a US attack dog, opts to destroy ties with its most important trade partner.”

The threats are not limited to the economic sphere. China has [warned](#) Australia, for example, that if it hosts US troops, “Australia itself will be caught in the crossfire.”

Conversely, Beijing [praises](#) governments that appear to decline security cooperation with Washington as admirably “independent.”

Third, China promotes alternative international institutions that will be vehicles for Chinese rather than US influence. The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment between China and the European Union, for example, would have pulled Western Europe closer to China and farther from the United States had implementation of the agreement not halted in 2021. China was more successful with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). To counter the US-supported Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Beijing put its weight behind RCEP, which suited Chinese preferences with its weak provisions for the protection of labor, the environment, and intellectual property. America’s withdrawal from the TPP along with the accession of 15 countries, including China, to RCEP in 2020 handed regional economic rule-making leadership to Beijing.

China is also changing the character of pre-existing institutions such as the United Nations to [re-orient them](#) away from reinforcing the US-sponsored liberal international order. The PRC is [successfully prodding](#) UN human rights agencies toward holding abusive individual governments less accountable to the international community. At the same time, the Chinese government has used the UN Human Rights Council to [criticize](#) US actions in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Having provided investment and economic assistance to many UN member developing countries, Beijing

can call in favors from business partners to thwart US objectives in the United Nations. In 2019, for example, China offered economic gifts to [buy the votes](#) necessary to defeat the US-backed candidate for the position of head of the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization.

In May, China vetoed a US-sponsored proposal in the UN Security Council for additional sanctions against North Korea. China’s fundamental North Korea policy goal is to protect the Kim regime from collapsing in order to keep the US bloc from expanding (via a united, Seoul-led Korean Peninsula) up to the Chinese border.

Finally, Beijing works to discredit US regional and global leadership. Since 2020, when many Americans criticized Beijing’s initial non-transparency about the coronavirus outbreak in China, Chinese officials have tirelessly pushed the narrative that the United States is unworthy to wield international influence. “For the US politicians,” goes a representative [criticism](#) from the PRC foreign ministry, “democracy is their tool to seek personal and partisan gains at home, and a weapon to serve US hegemony abroad.” The delegitimization of US global leadership includes much Chinese government [effort](#) to highlight social and political problems inside the United States, a task made easy for Chinese speechwriters by the open and critical US press.

The much-hyped “[Global Security Initiative](#)” attributed to Xi is largely a statement of opposition to the US alliance system (expressed in phrases such as “Cold War mentality,” “bloc confrontation,” and “pursuit of one’s own security at the cost of others’ security”). The criticism of alliances does not apply to China itself, of course, because China’s relationship with Russia is a “partnership” rather than an alliance, albeit one with “[no limits](#).”

This is not the first time China has accused the United States of doing what China itself is doing. Questions about the role of the Wuhan Institute of Virology in the outbreak of Coronavirus in China led to Chinese government accusations that the virus started in a US Army laboratory in Maryland. Washington’s publicity of the persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang led to a

vigorous PRC campaign of [criticizing](#) injustices in the United States.

What China and the United States do to each other is standard for rival great powers in a period of tense peace. The Xi cult of personality, however, restricts China from describing its own external behavior in terms other than hyper-exceptionalism, benevolence, victimization, and righteous indignation. As a sad consequence, the Chinese don't give themselves enough credit their own containment policy.

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