
The New Containment

Handling Russia, China, and Iran

Michael Mandelbaum

The quarter century following the Cold War was the most peaceful in modern history. The world's strongest powers did not fight one another or even think much about doing so. They did not, on the whole, prepare for war, anticipate war, or conduct negotiations and political maneuvers with the prospect of war looming in the background. As U.S. global military hegemony persisted, the possibility of developed nations fighting one another seemed ever more remote.

Then history began to change course. In the last several years, three powers have launched active efforts to revise security arrangements in their respective regions. Russia has invaded Crimea and other parts of Ukraine and has tried covertly to destabilize European democracies. China has built artificial island fortresses in international waters, claimed vast swaths of the western Pacific, and moved to organize Eurasia economically in ways favorable to Beijing. And the Islamic Republic of Iran has expanded its influence over much of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen and is pursuing nuclear weapons.

This new world requires a new American foreign policy. Fortunately, the country's own not-so-distant past can offer guidance. During the Cold War, the United States chose to contain the Soviet Union, successfully deterring its military aggression and limiting its political influence for decades. The United States should apply containment once again, now to Russia, China, and Iran. The contemporary world is similar enough to its mid-twentieth-century predecessor to make that old strategy relevant but different enough that it needs to be modified and updated. While success is not guaranteed, a new containment policy offers the best chance to defend American interests in the twenty-first century.

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Now as before, the possibility of armed conflict exerts a major influence on the foreign policies of the United States and countries throughout Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The Cold War divided the world into rival camps, with regions and even countries split in two. Today, similar cleavages are developing, with each revisionist power seeking its own sphere of influence separate from the larger U.S.-backed global order.

Now as before, the revisionist powers are dictatorships that challenge American values as well as American interests. They seek to overturn political, military, and economic arrangements the United States helped establish long ago and has supported ever since. Should Vladimir Putin's Russia succeed in reasserting control over parts of the former Soviet Union, Xi Jinping's China gain control over maritime commerce in the western Pacific, or Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Iran dominate the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf, the United States, its allies, and the global order they uphold would suffer a major blow.

But today's circumstances differ from those of the past in several important ways. During most of the Cold War, Washington confronted a single powerful opponent, the Soviet Union—the leader of the international communist movement. Now it must cope with three separate adversaries, each largely independent of the other two. Russia and China cooperate, but they also compete with each other. And while both have good relations with Iran, both also have large and potentially restive Muslim populations, giving them reason to worry about the growth of Iranian power and influence. Cold War containment was a single global undertaking, implemented regionally. Contemporary containment will involve three separate regional initiatives, implemented in coordination.

The Soviet Union, moreover, presented a strong ideological challenge, devoted as it was to advancing not just Moscow's geopolitical interests but also its communist principles. Neither Russia nor China has such a crusading ideology today. Russia has abandoned communism completely, and China has done so partially, retaining the notion of party supremacy but shedding most of the economics and the messianic zeal. And although the Islamic Republic represents a cause and not just a stretch of territory, the potential appeal of its ideology is largely limited to the Muslim world and, primarily, its Shiite minority.

None of today's revisionist powers possesses the Soviet Union's fearsome military capabilities. Russia is a shrunken version of its older



Eye in the sky: a U.S. Navy helicopter in the South China Sea, October 2015

self militarily, and Iran lacks formidable modern military forces. China's economic growth may ultimately allow it to match the United States in all strategic dimensions and pose a true peer threat, but to date, Beijing is concentrating on developing forces to exclude the United States from the western Pacific, not to project power globally. Moreover, the initiatives each has launched so far—Russia's seizure of Crimea and Middle East meddling, China's island building, Iran's regional subversion—have been limited probes rather than all-out assaults on the existing order.

Lastly, the Soviet Union was largely detached from the U.S.-centered global economy during the Cold War, whereas today's revisionist powers are very much a part of it. Russia and Iran have relatively small economies and export mostly energy, but China has the world's second-largest economy, with deep, wide, and growing connections to countries everywhere.

Economic interdependence will complicate containment. China, for example, may be a political and military rival, but it is also a crucial economic partner. The United States depends on China to finance

its deficits. China depends on the United States to buy its exports. Containment in Asia will thus require other policies as well, because although a Chinese military collapse would enhance Asian security, a Chinese economic collapse would bring economic disaster.

Together, these differences make today's containment a less urgent challenge than its Cold War predecessor. The United States does not have to deal with a single mortal threat from a country committed to remaking the entire world in its own image. It must address three serious but lesser challenges, mounted by countries seeking not heaven on earth but greater regional power and autonomy. But if today's challenges are less epic, they are far more complicated. The old containment was simple, if not easy. The new containment will have to blend a variety of policies, carefully coordinated with one another in design and execution. This will tax the ingenuity and flexibility of the United States and its allies.

STRONGER TOGETHER

As during the Cold War, containment today requires American military deployments abroad. In Europe, ground troops are needed to deter Russian aggression. The Putin regime has already sent forces into Georgia and Ukraine. The United States is committed to protecting its NATO allies. These include the Baltic states, tiny countries on Russia's border. By defending them, the United States could encounter some of the same difficulties it did defending West Berlin, including, in the worst case, having to decide whether to bring nuclear weapons into play rather than accept military defeat.

East Asia requires a robust U.S. naval presence to fend off China's campaign to dominate the western Pacific. The United States is committed to protecting allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan and maintaining open sea-lanes, and it conducts what it calls "freedom-of-navigation operations" in international waters newly claimed by China to make clear that the rest of the world does not accept Chinese claims and Chinese dominance there.

And in the Middle East, American naval and air forces are needed to safeguard shipments of Persian Gulf oil to Europe and Asia and to support a successful rollback of the Iranian nuclear program, should that become necessary. American troops on the ground are not required; it is local forces that must check Iranian efforts at regional subversion (which are carried out by local militias).

Diplomatically, Washington needs to maintain or assemble broad coalitions of local powers to oppose each revisionist challenge. In Europe, NATO was created to carry out this very mission and so should be the pillar of the United States' strategy there. In Asia and the Middle East, the "hub and spoke" pattern of American Cold War alliances still exists, even as regional powers have begun to collaborate among themselves.

Working with partners exploits Washington's greatest strength: its ability to attract allies and create powerful coalitions against isolated opponents. Coordinating with other countries also endows American foreign policy with a legitimacy it would otherwise lack, showing that the United States is not simply acting for itself but defending broad principles of international order that many others support.

The dependence of the revisionists on access to the global economy gives the United States and its coalition partners a potential source of leverage. Washington and its allies have tried to exploit this through sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, tariffs on China for its trade practices, and sanctions on Iran for its nuclear weapons program. But interdependence cuts both ways. Russia has tried to pressure Ukraine by restricting Ukrainian access to Russian energy. China has placed targeted embargoes on Japan and Norway to express displeasure with specific Japanese and Norwegian policies. Moreover, economic instruments have at best a mixed record in achieving political goals; the broader the sanctioning coalition is, the greater its impact will be.

MAKING IT OFFICIAL

The prospect of a twenty-first-century triple containment strategy raises several questions. Since the United States is already doing much of what is required, how much change in American foreign policy is needed? Is it necessary or feasible to confront all three revisionist powers at once? And how does all this end?

As for the first, explicitly committing the United States to containment would build on many existing policies while reframing them as part of a coherent national strategy rather than the products of inertia or inattention. A public commitment to containment would enhance the credibility of American deterrence and lower the chance of opportunistic attacks by opponents hoping for easy gains (as happened in Korea in 1950 and Iraq in 1990). That, in turn, would reassure actual and potential allies and increase their willingness to join the effort.

Adopting containment as a strategic frame would also help restrain Washington's occasional impulses to do more (try to transform other societies) or less (retreat from global engagement altogether).

As for confronting all three at once, geopolitical logic and historical experience suggest that reducing the number of threats is the best course, as the United States did by joining with the Soviet Union to defeat the Nazis and then aligning with Mao Zedong's China to defeat the Soviet Union. Post-Soviet Russia would have been a natural partner for the West. But Moscow was needlessly alienated from its logical geopolitical partnership by NATO expansion, which brought foreign armies to its doorstep over its objections. At this point, all three revisionist regimes rely for domestic support on nationalist hostility to the United States specifically and Western democracies more generally and reject being part of a U.S.-led coalition. Fortunately, Russia is much weaker than the Soviet Union, China is restrained by both deterrence and the knowledge that military conflict would damage its economy, and Iran is a regional power. So the United States can afford to pursue the containment of all three simultaneously (so long as it does so as part of robust coalitions).

Cold War containment was an open-ended policy with a hoped-for eventual outcome. The same will be true for the new version: the policy should continue as long as the threats it is intended to counter continue, and ideally it will end similarly. Constructive regime change, for example, especially the advent of democracy, would alter the foreign policy orientations of the revisionist powers. Such a change would have to come about through internal processes and is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Still, none of the regimes can be confident of its longevity; repeated outbreaks of political turbulence over the years have shown that each faces significant domestic opposition, maintains itself in power through coercion, and fears its people rather than trusts them. Situations like that can shift rapidly. A well-executed policy of containment could increase the chances of disruption by creating an external context that would encourage it. But when or, indeed, if it would bear fruit is impossible to predict.

BEWARE OF FREE RIDERS

The biggest obstacles to a new policy of containment come, ironically, not from the powers being contained but from the countries doing the containing. The United States needs to relearn how to manage dura-

ble coalitions of allies and persuade its own citizenry that the exercise of global leadership is still worth the effort required.

Coalitions are difficult to manage in the best of circumstances. It was hard to hold the Western alliance together during the Cold War, even though it faced a single powerful threat. Building and maintaining comparable coalitions today, confronted by diverse smaller threats, will be more difficult still. In Europe, although all countries are wary of Russia, some are more so than others. Those closest to Russia's borders most strongly support an enhanced Western military presence. Years of crisis over Europe's common currency, meanwhile, have taken a political toll, increased intra-European tensions, and made cooperation of all kinds more difficult. The continuing Brexit drama will only compound the problems.

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In Asia, the Philippines and South Korea have sometimes taken a more benign view of Chinese power than other countries in the region. And among those agreeing on the need to check Chinese ambitions (including Australia, India, Indonesia, and Japan), developing common policies is difficult because they are an amorphous, heterogeneous group.

In the Middle East, crucial American allies, such as Qatar (which hosts a U.S. air base) and Saudi Arabia, are sharply at odds. The government of Turkey, a member of NATO, identifies with the Muslim Brotherhood, which Egypt and Saudi Arabia regard as a mortal enemy. Ironically, the one unproblematic member of the anti-Iran coalition is Israel, a country that for decades was anathematized as the root of all the problems in the Middle East but that is now recognized as a dependable counterweight to Persian power.

All coalitions encounter free-rider problems, and the dominant members usually pay more than their fair share of the costs involved. So it will be with the new containment. The imbalance will be most glaring in Europe, where a tradition of letting Washington carry much of the burden of collective defense has persisted for too long; it originated when U.S. allies were weak and poor but continued even after they became strong and rich. During the Cold War, every American president tried, without much success, to get European countries to pay more for NATO, but none pushed the issue hard because the priority was to maintain a common front against the Soviet threat. There

may be a lower tolerance for such free-riding today, as U.S. President Donald Trump's comments make clear.

The Asian countries wary of China have increased their spending on defense. Still, the United States is destined to take the lead in opposing China because the most pressing threat the People's Republic presents is a maritime one—one that requires major naval forces to contest, of the kind that only the United States commands.

In the Middle East, Israel has capable armed forces. Saudi Arabia has purchased expensive military hardware from the United States but has not demonstrated the capacity to use it effectively. Turkey has a formidable military, but the present Turkish government cannot be counted on to use it to contain Iran.

WILL AMERICA LEAD?

The weakest link in the chain may be the most powerful country itself. There are reasons to expect the American public to support a leading role in the containment of Russia, China, and Iran. The United States has a long history with such a foreign policy. The approach has geopolitical logic behind it, promising to protect American interests in crucial parts of the world at a reasonable price. But there are also reasons for skepticism. Today's threats appear less urgent, coping with them will be more complicated, and the country's attitude toward foreign entanglements has understandably soured over the last two decades.

The United States was pulled into both world wars by external attacks, and Americans gave their support to a foreign policy of global reach during the Cold War because they were persuaded it would head off yet another world war. After the Soviet collapse, many of the Cold War arrangements persisted through inertia and gained support because they seemed to entail little expense or risk. Now that the expenses and risks of such a policy have increased, many Americans may reconsider their support.

The skepticism has deepened because of the country's recent misadventures abroad. The interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya turned out poorly, and the public has little taste for more. This view has much to recommend it. But it need not threaten the prospects of a new containment, because that course is quite different from the failed crusades of recent decades. Those involved efforts to transform the internal politics and economies of weak states. Containment involves the opposite, checking the external conduct of strong states. If

national leaders can appreciate and explain the difference, they may be able to bring the public along.

The resurgence of populism, finally, makes any such project more difficult. The essence of populism is hostility to elites, and the design and conduct of foreign policy are elite activities. The foreign policy establishment favors a robust American role in the world. That may be a good enough reason for antiestablishment rebels, including the populist in chief now residing in the White House, to oppose one.

So the future direction of American foreign policy is unclear. Washington might forgo leading coalitions to contain the three revisionist powers, in which case their strength will increase. Emboldened by the American abdication, they may grow aggressive and try to coerce their neighbors. Those neighbors currently rely on the American nuclear arsenal to protect them; if they come to doubt the credibility of American security guarantees, they may follow Israel and opt to develop or acquire their own arsenals in order to protect themselves. An American retreat would thus make the world more dangerous and nuclear proliferation more likely.

Thanks to the size, geography, and power of the United States, Americans for many generations have been able to pay less attention to American foreign policy than have the citizens of other countries, whose lives and fortunes that policy has more immediately and directly affected. Should the country turn decisively away from its global role and allow the revisionist challenges to advance unchecked, however, Americans' happy detachment from the world beyond their borders may disappear. And by the time they realize what they need to protect, it may be too late to do so without great difficulty and high cost. 

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