

China and America: War, Engagement or Containment

On September 24, 2021 the leaders of the informal alliance Quad declared, “Together, we recommit to promoting the free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.” [1] The leaders did not name China as the main target of their statement, but it was very clear that Beijing was principal recipient. Additionally, use of the term Indo-Pacific instead of Asian Pacific is the clearest indication that India, US, Japan and Australia will not tolerate Chinese expansionism in the region.

The meeting of the Quad swiftly followed the declaration of AUKUS, where US, UK and Australia announced a new military pact with nuclear submarines destined for Australia amongst other items. In 2016, the US and UK entered a military alliance with Japan—albeit nuclear submarines for Japan were off the menu. The Chinese have vehemently opposed both developments. China has described the Quad as a mechanism that perpetuates a cold war mentality. [2] Regarding AUKUS, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, said that the move “seriously undermines regional peace and stability.” [3]

When such maneuvers are viewed within the context of Obama’s pivot to Asia strategy and Trump’s trade war with China, there is a growing sense of unease that perhaps finally the US has moved towards confrontation. Writing in the Financial Times, Edward Luce believes that the US will soon clash with China. [4] Other observers contend that the US has adopted a containment posture with China. Brands and Beckley suggest that over the past five years the US has engaged in neo-containment of China. [5] According to Larson, the US resurrected containment from the Cold War era (Cold War 2.0) to halt the nefarious designs of both Russia and China. [6] Meanwhile, John Ikenberry represents a small clique of thinkers who firmly believe in engagement with China. This involves integrating China into the West’s rule based international order. [7]

Words like clash and confrontation are often equated with war, but this is misleading and do not accurately reflect America’s relations with China. Broadly speaking US interaction with nations can be categorized into three stages: war, containment and engagement. The transition from one phase to another can often appear unclear, and observers usually use terms like clash or confrontation to describe US relations with a particular state.

Of the three stages, war is understood by most in its simplest terms as violence perpetrated by a state against another state. Engagement is to accommodate states—even revisionist states—by integrating them into the West’s rule based international system. In this way, such states like Russia and China will seek to uphold West’s rule based system even if the West’s share of the international system is in terminal decline. [8]

Containment is a difficult concept to grasp because it is ambiguously defined. According to George Kennan—the chief architect of the concept—containment was always about restricting the influence of the communist ideology around the globe, and never about militarization of US foreign policy. Writing in his memoirs, Kennan articulated his thoughts on containment as “political containment of a political threat”. [9] It appears that successive US governments intentionally embellished Kennan’s containment idea to include curbing any state’s military power, economic might, territorial expansionism, and ideological ambitions that were deemed dangerous to America’s interests.

Soon after WWII, the US went to war with China to prevent the spread of Communism on the Korean peninsula. After 1953, the US engaged in the containment of China to curb the influence of the communist ideology in the Asian Pacific region. Sometimes the US conducted proxy wars with the Soviets in Africa and the Chinese in Vietnam to limit the influence of communism around the globe. However, the Sino-Soviet split followed by a 7-month border war between erstwhile friendly communist states in 1969 enabled the US to slowly engage China.

Between the late 1970s to the first decade of the 21st century, America tried to accommodate China into the international order. The apex of this endeavor was America's support for China's entry into WTO. By the mid-2000s China was widely regarded as America's strategic competitor. If the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had not preoccupied Bush and Obama, America would have moved to the neo-containment of China much earlier.

Today, America has abandoned engagement in the favour of containment or Cold War 2.0. The US is working with its partners to actively challenge China's navy in the South Asian Sea. Make it difficult for China to resolve North Korea, Taiwan, and territorial disputes with its neighbours. And undermine China's OBOR in Eurasia. Evidently since 1950s, America's ideological imperatives have been at the heart of its relations with China and this has taken the shape of war, containment and engagement eclipsed by neo-containment.

The stages of war, containment and engagement are not peculiar to a specific nation. Rather they are general but driven by ideological considerations. The first Islamic state in Madina quickly adopted a war footing against the Quraysh. Prior to the Battles of Badr and Uhud, the messenger of Allah (saw) carried out several raids against Quraysh with the sole intention of instigating war. This state of war with Quraysh was changed to a state of containment via the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah.

The treaty allowed the Messenger of Allah (saw) to greatly reduce the influence of Quraysh in the Arabian Peninsula by almost simultaneously executing both war and engagement with other tribes and states. Just two weeks after signing the treaty, the Messenger of Allah (saw) removed the power of Banu Khaybar who were allied with the Quraysh. The treaty also encouraged the Messenger of Allah to openly invite tribes and states neighbouring Arabia to Islam. Therefore, the engagement with other tribes and nations rapidly diminished the power of Quraysh and encouraged the expansion of Islam. The Khulafaa (Caliphs) after the Messenger of Allah (saw) continued with war (jihad), engagement (invitation to Islam or to live by Islam) and containment (ceasefire treaties), and this enabled the rapid growth of Islam.

Therefore Muslims should not remain idle spectators watching the containment or war debate in America's relations with China. Rather, Muslims should meticulously pursue relations between China and America to anticipate the point of maximum tension and then seize the moment to re-establish the second Khilafah Rashidah (rightly guided Caliphate) After all, the Messenger of Allah (saw) was diligently tracking the war between the Romans and Persians when he (saw) established the Islamic state in Madina.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
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