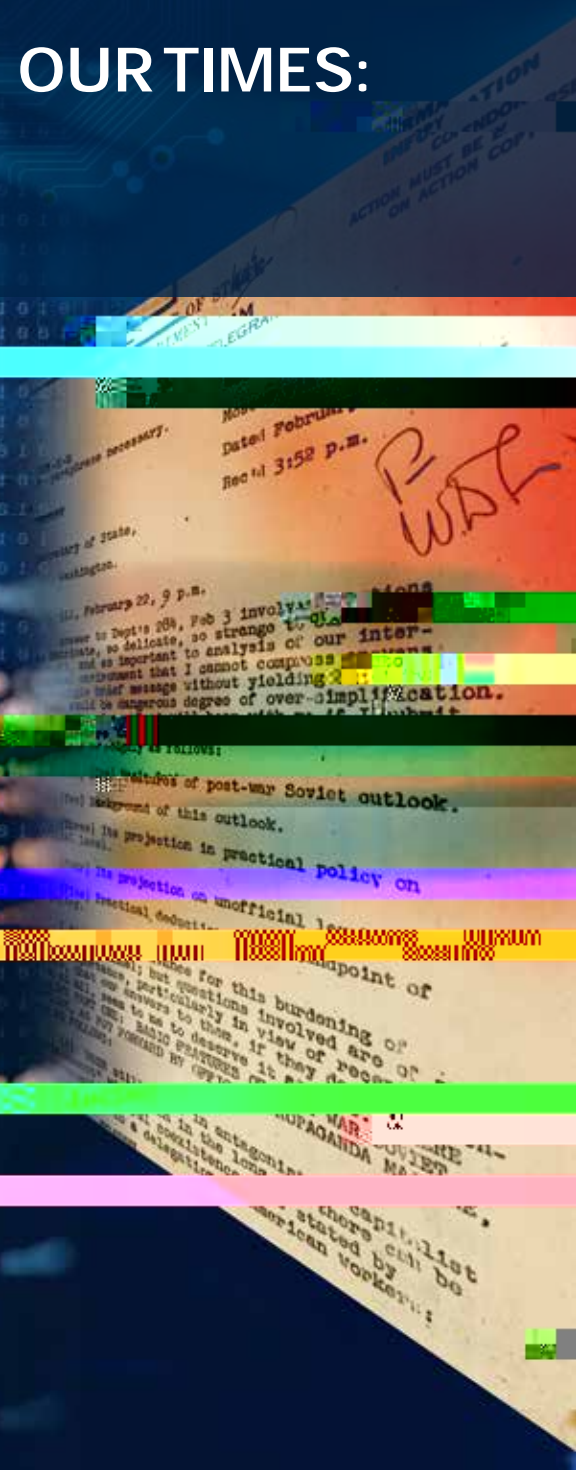


# A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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mirror_mod.use_y = False  
mirror_mod.use_z = False  
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Paul Heer

**G**eorge F. Kennan's impact on American foreign policy was not confined to Russian and European affairs during the Cold War; the same is true for his contemporary relevance. Kennan exercised his most profound influence over U.S. foreign policy as the inaugural director (1947–50) of the State Department's Policy Planning staff. It was from that position that he proposed containing the Soviet Union and developed the strategic rationale for its original centerpiece: the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan). The purview of the Planning staff was global, however, and Kennan was deeply involved in formulating policies toward other parts of the world, including East Asia. Both his strategic approach to the Far East and his thinking about the Soviet Union during the Cold War apply to the primary strategic challenge the United States faces in East Asia today: the rise of China and its bid for regional and global influence.<sup>72</sup>

Although some analysts and policymakers advocate containment of China, the doctrine of containment itself, at least as he originally conceived it, is probably obsolete in East Asia. He never thought it was applicable to China. Kennan insisted that containment was aimed exclusively at preventing the spread of *Soviet* Communist influence. During the early Cold War years, Kennan was among those who assessed—correctly—that Beijing would never fall under the effec-

tive control of Moscow

Aside from this semantic difference, the key reason that Kennan's original doctrine of containment does not apply to today's China is that China—contrary to the narrative that has emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—does not represent the existential or ideological threat to the United States that the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. Kennan would have recognized this, even though he was myopic in his longtime dismissal of China's strategic potential. In the X article, he specified that Soviet ideology asserted a "basic antagonism between the capitalist and socialist worlds" that excluded "any sincere assumption of a community of aims" and instead required Soviet leaders to recognize "that it was their duty eventually to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders."<sup>75</sup>

Chinese Communist leaders have never subscribed to such a zero-sum, winner-take-all strategy. They have moved far beyond any fundamental antagonism between capitalism and socialism. Their "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is essentially a merger with capitalism. Moreover, Beijing's promotion of its governance and economic model abroad is meant to legitimize that model rather than to impose it on the rest of the world. Unlike the Soviet Union, Beijing is genuinely pursuing a "community of aims" with the United States.

and prosperity" and to "shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests." <sup>76</sup> Kennan would have been duly skeptical of these assertions. Among the mistakes that he ascribed to U.S. policymakers after World War II were those "involved in attributing to the Soviet leadership aims and intentions it did not really have." <sup>77</sup> Writing in the late 1970s, he criticized Washington for making several false assumptions about Moscow: that Soviet leaders were still "primarily inspired by a desire, and intention, to achieve world domination"; that the Soviet military served "primarily aggressive rather than defensive purposes"; and thus that "the differences in aim and outlook between the Soviet Union and the United States... can be resolved only by war or by the acyw9than dm[le military superiority by the one party or the other." <sup>78</sup>

Moreover, over the 1970s, trends in the Soviet strategic intentions are eerily reminiscent of and shift Kennan perceived in the 1970s toward a "frame4 anmind in whicviet Union appeared in a far more Tc3acing posture than had been the case for the past decade a e

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Similar assumptions are widely echoed in American commentary and policy discussions about China today. As the U.S. policy documents cited above show, a menacing and militarized view of China has fueled the fear that Beijing's Communist leaders are determined to undermine American security, prosperity, values, and interests. But this exaggerates the nature and extent of China's strategic objectives, which are essentially focused on maximizing China's own security and prosperity relative to the United States. Beijing clearly is competing with Washington and is doing so broadly and relentlessly. The National Security Strategy correctly asserts that China "will compete across political, economic, and military arenas" using "technology and information...economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda" and "gain competitive advantages against the United States."<sup>81</sup> But this is not, and need not be, an existential winner-take-all contest. Chinese leaders almost certainly recognize that making it so would be destabilizing and probably futile. Yet the American presumption of such an absolutist China goal—and "neglect of the more favorable possibilities," as Kennan warned with regard to the Soviet Union—could be a self-fulfilling prophecy by prompting U.S. strategies that reinforce *Chinese* fears of absolutist *American* goals. This risk would be exacerbated if—as Kennan also suspected in the Soviet case—U.S. perceptions of the Chinese threat today reflect in part the "frustrations and failures of American society."

In another claim of central relevance to China, Kennan attributed Washington's misunderstanding and mischaracterization of Soviet intentions to an American failure to understand the Russians' historical mindset. "I tried to show," he wrote, "that this Soviet threat looked less dramatic when viewed from a historical perspective than when that perspective was absent."<sup>82</sup> The original X article was built on Kennan's analysis of Russian history as the primary source

of Moscow's world view and its approach to dealing with perceived external challenges. Similarly, the prevailing American understanding and characterization of Chinese strategic goals and behavior largely overlooks or dismisses the historical "sources of Chinese conduct"—especially what the Chinese call their "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers from the 1840s to the 1940s. For the U.S., lack of attention to this Chinese historical experience is a major source of bilateral distrust and misunderstanding. Too often Washington undervalues the crucial defensive element in China's historical mindset.

## **RATIONALIZING U.S. EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS IN EAST ASIA**

In addition to highlighting the risks of misunderstanding China, Kennan would also caution against expecting too much from China. In particular, China is unlikely to replicate American values and modes of governance or diplomatic conduct. Kennan long believed that U.S. policy towards East Asia (as elsewhere) was overly moralistic. He lamented the "tendency to achieve our foreign policy objectives by inducing other governments to sign up to professions of high moral and legal principle," and he specifically complained that this "seems to have achieved the status of a basic diplomatic method" in East Asia.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, Kennan would be skeptical of the current emphasis on Beijing's obligation to comply with Western "rules and norms" in its international behavior. In 1950, during a policy debate over whether Communist China should be admitted to the United Nations, Kennan criticized the "moral indignation about the Chinese Communists" that he saw infecting policy discussions. In another comparison with the Soviet Union, he warned that Washington was grappling with the same problem that had afflicted "we old Russia hands" 20 years earlier: "the fundamental ethical conflict between their ideals and ours." Kennan recommended that Washington not let this derail pragmatic diplomacy: "Let us recognize the legitimacy of differences of interest and philosophy" between countries "and

not pretend that they can be made to disappear behind some common philosophical concept.”<sup>84</sup> With regard to Russia, he said “there is no use in looking for...a capitalistic and liberal-democratic one, with institutions closely resembling those of our own republic.” Americans should “repress, and if possible...extinguish once and for all, our inveterate tendency to judge others by the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves.”<sup>85</sup> Kennan would have said the same about China today. U.S. policies aimed at producing regime change or at restructuring China’s economic system to make it less competitive or easier to manage are likely to have only incremental if any success.

In the late 1970s, Kennan recommended a pragmatic approach to China: “tread warily and not too fast, recognizing the great differences in the psychology of the two peoples as well as those that mark the ideals and purposes of the two governments.” This could be done “without neglecting, or failing to manifest, the great respect Americans have traditionally had for Chinese civilization and the sympathy they have felt for the vicissitudes of Chinese life in the modern age.” His bottom line was straightforward: “Let us collaborate where we can, agree to differ where we cannot, and see whether we cannot contrive to live reasonably peaceably together for the time being, despite our differences, not asking too much of each other—or too little.”<sup>86</sup> Although the strategic challenge from China is substantially greater than Kennan anticipated when he wrote this in 1977, the same guidance seems wholly appropriate today.

Beyond advocating a moderation of American expectations of China, Kennan would go further: recommending a reassessment and recalibration of overall American strategic goals in East Asia. The perennial U.S. policy objectives in the region are: preventing the emergence of an exclusive, hostile hegemon there that threatens U.S. access and vital interests; and sustaining the United States’ own primacy as security guarantor in the Western Pacific. The latter is generally viewed as the best way to avert a hegemonic challenge from China. Kennan probably would be ambivalent about both of these premises. Although China probably does seek to restore what it sees as its



rightful place as the preeminent power in East Asia, there is no compelling evidence that it seeks to establish a hostile, exclusive hegemony that excludes a U.S.



Nonetheless, and possibly because of that history, Kennan's warnings about the militarization of foreign policy problems remain valid in East Asia today. Here another comparison between China and the Soviet Union is illustrative. When Kennan perceived a "sweeping militarization of the American view" of U.S.-Russia relations in the 1970s, he asked rhetorically what impact this was likely to have on Russian officials, who "have always been prone to exaggerated suspicions." Given that, he predicted that "Soviet leaders will see sinister motives behind these various phenomena—that they will conclude, in particular, that we have come to see war as inevitable and have put out of our minds all possibilities for the peaceful accommodation of our differences"; if so, "then they, too, will tend to put such possibilities out of theirs."<sup>89</sup> This later formed the basis for Kennan's criticism of the U.S. decision to pursue NATO expansion in the 1990s. He correctly anticipated that the inclusion of former Soviet bloc countries in NATO would fuel post-Soviet Russia's threat perceptions and the subsequent hardening of Moscow's approach to Washington.

Similar worries accrue to Chinese perceptions of the emphasis on military alliances and deployments in the post-Cold War U.S. approach to East Asia. Beijing perceives a range of U.S. policies in the region as military challenges to Chinese interests and security, whereas Washington perceives China itself as expansionist and routinely dismisses the notion that Chinese military behavior is a response to steps taken by the United States or other countries. Recognizing this as a classic security dilemma, Kennan would have advised that U.S. policymakers help mitigate it by focusing more on diplomatic and economic engagement than on military posturing in order to defuse regional tension.

Kennan, however, would not have sought to abandon the U.S. alliance network in East Asia. Despite his reservations about the alliances and the rationale for their establishment, which echoed his resistance to the original establishment of NATO, he would concede their utility as vehicles for shared interests and goals. At the same

time, he cautioned against taking allies for granted. Although he subscribed to and even pioneered the notion that Japan should be the centerpiece of U.S. policy in East Asia, he was always skeptical of the military aspect of the alliance. He correctly anticipated that the U.S. military presence in Japan would become a source of bilateral

interests, objectives, and threat perceptions and those of U.S. allies in the region. These fault-lines have been exacerbated by growing uncertainties about the substance and sustainability of Washington's commitment to the region, given the constraints on the resources the United States can devote there. These trends have prompted many countries in the region, including U.S. allies, to recalibrate their foreign and security policies, reinforcing their reluctance to choose sides between the United States and China.

## MAKING FOREIGN POLICY

Kennan's wisdom on some East Asian issues notwithstanding, there were flaws and inconsistencies in his approach to the region that would encumber his contributions to foreign policymaking today. Some of his ideas were short-sighted or unrealistic, such as his dismissal of China's strategic potential and his proposal for the neutralization of Japan. His ethnocentric and racist attitudes toward East Asian peoples' capacity for governance, although typical of his generation, marred his judgment and would be anathema in diplomacy today. Some of his ideas were not politically viable because he was often inattentive to the domestic political drivers of foreign policy. He believed that foreign policy should be insulated from the vicissitudes of public opinion. Kennan would no doubt be appalled by the influence of social media on foreign policy today, and by the role that the press and party politics play in constraining policy options or forcing decisions.

He would be particularly dismayed by the marginalization of expertise that often occurs in the politicized fog of the decision-making process. During the intense policy debates in the summer of 1950, when Washington was grappling to understand the motives and actions of the various players in the Korean War, he characterized the debate as "a labyrinth of ignorance and error and conjecture, in which truth is intermingled with fiction at a hundred points [and] in which unjustified assumptions have attained the validity of premis-

es." He complained that substantive expertise was being dismissed as too arcane to serve as the basis for crucial policy decisions, bemoaning the discomfort among policymakers with input from experts " to analyze the probabilities involved in your enemy's mental processes or calculate his weaknesses. It seems safer to give him the benefit of every doubt in matters of strength and to credit him indiscriminately with all aggressive designs, even when some of them are mutually contradictory." Kennan lamented that he and his fellow Russia experts were " inclined to wonder...whether the day had not

his opposition to extensive foreign military commitments almost certainly reflected an understanding that the United States' position in East Asia after World War II was a historical anomaly that could not be eternal. Almost 75 years later, he would see validation of this in the tectonic shifts in the balance of power both within East Asia and globally that have been wrought by globalization, technological change and the rise and fall of great powers. Washington needs to acknowledge the impact of power shifts on its relative capabilities and to recalibrate its foreign policy wish list to bring it into alignment with what is reasonable and achievable.

Kennan would offer one final word of advice. He observed in the X article that the Soviet challenge was "in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations" and that American success in meeting that challenge would depend in large part on "the degree to which the United States can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country that knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problem of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time."<sup>92</sup> He reiterated this theme in