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Biden, Pelosi and the Futility of Dual Containment



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First, there was containment—and then there was dual containment. George F. Kennan is credited with the design of containment to limit the geopolitical reach of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, too many U.S. leaders and strategists also used the idea of containment to support a moral crusade on behalf of the so-called free world. President Joe Biden, for example, has unwisely divided the world into authoritarianism and democracy. This kind of universalism rarely, if ever, succeeds in fashioning an effective alliance.

Dual containment is more problematic than any single-minded concept of containment. The Truman administration briefly found itself in a policy of dual containment in the late

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1940s and early 1950s, when it endeavored to stop any Soviet domination of the European theatre and then risked extending the Korean War into China. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, General Omar Bradley, called it the “wrong war, at the wrong place, in the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.” President Dwight D. Eisenhower became the first president to renounce the objective of victory in a war, which a series of U.S. presidents should have proclaimed much sooner in America’s losing ventures in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The Clinton administration practiced dual containment on a smaller scale in the Persian Gulf in the 1990s with similarly unsuccessful results. A member of Clinton’s National Security Council, Martin Indyk, officially announced the policy in 1994 to contain both Iran and Iraq, and to make sure Tehran and Baghdad could not interfere with the region’s oil supply or President Bill Clinton’s pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Eventually, President George W. Bush pursued “aggressive containment” against Iran and Iraq, which failed. The fact that Iran is the most influential actor in Iraq speaks to the U.S. failure. Our prolonged military involvement in the Persian Gulf testifies to this failure as well. After all, what happened to the “pivot” from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific that the Obama administration declared in 2011?

Unfortunately, President Biden has revived the idea of dual containment, this time against Russia and China, which have formed the closest and most cooperative bilateral relationship that has ever existed between these erstwhile adversaries. President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger understood the art of power-balancing with Moscow and Beijing and, as a result, advanced U.S. interests with both nations. The Biden team has shown no interest in using diplomacy with either Moscow or Beijing, and has been hemmed in by a bipartisan consensus for huge increases in military spending, particularly for unnecessary strategic modernization. As a result, the importance of arms control and disarmament has faded from America’s international agenda, particularly in the wake of the retreat from arms control by Presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump.

In supporting the idea of dual containment, Biden opened the door to politicians and pundits to support more aggressive containment of Moscow and Beijing, including Rep. Nancy Pelosi’s ill-conceived trip to Taiwan that serves no strategic purpose whatsoever. President Biden (and the Pentagon) opposed Pelosi’s trip so her decision to go ahead merely highlighted the weakness of the president and the confusion that exists in U.S. policymaking toward China. Meanwhile, the *Washington Post* editorializes that the “The

U.S. can confront both China and Russia,” and the *New York Times* boasts that “Pelosi Stood Up to Beijing. Good for Her.”

As far as the United States is concerned, Taiwan represents an indefensible island in the Pacific. Support for Taiwan would be a logistical nightmare. Fortunately, the fact that the Pentagon has postponed a routine intercontinental ballistic missile test of the Minuteman III, and has kept the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Ronald Reagan away from the entrance to the Taiwan Strait point to the Biden administration’s awareness of the need to avoid escalation by indulging in risky behaviors.

China’s Xi Jinping is facing his own domestic political and economic challenges, and presumably has no interest in a military solution to the problem of Taiwan at this time. But he has been given an opportunity to practice the air, naval, and rocket forces that would be used in any projection of power against Taiwan. And he can certainly complicate Biden’s decision making regarding Ukraine by increasing military and economic support for President Vladimir Putin’s brutal and senseless war just as the United States may be approaching its limits of support for Ukraine against Russia’s war.

Meanwhile, policy gurus and pundits alike are pushing for greater support for the military capabilities of both Ukraine and Taiwan. The current issue of *The Economist* has called for “Israel-style military aid” for Taiwan “to buy American weapons,” as if U.S. interests have been served by aiding and abetting Israeli militarism in the Middle East. Like the mainstream media in this country, *The Economist* believes that U.S. military aid will make Taiwan “more resilient.” As an intelligence analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency and a professor at the National War College, I played in various war games regarding Sino-American conflict over Taiwan; the United States was on the losing side in each and every one.

The very idea of containment of China is a dangerous illusion. Containment of the Soviet Union benefitted from the military and economic weakness of the Soviet state; the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was attributed to this weakness more than to U.S. military spending and Star Wars. China is a regional military power and a global economic power; it cannot be contained. In Europe, we had support from the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; in Asia, we have a series of good bilateral relations with countries that have no interest in being part of a Sino-American Cold War. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol’s unwillingness to meet with Pelosi last week was an indication of Seoul’s interests in placating China. In any event, the

containment principles that were used in Europe against the Soviet Union have no bearing whatsoever on any policy of containment of China.

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